AGNIESZKA KRÓL-MARKEFKA
Jagiellonian University, Cracow
aga.krol-markefka@uj.edu.pl

# PEDAGOGICAL RULES FOR THE USE OF ENGLISH ARTICLES: AN EVALUATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

## Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyse the grammatical rules for the use of English articles which are offered to students of English as a foreign language and evaluate them from the perspective of their pedagogical effectiveness. The article highlights the most problematic issues and the potential weaknesses of the rules most commonly used in contemporary pedagogical/reference grammars. It is argued that some of the problems identified could be at least partially solved or avoided by the introduction of rules based on Cognitive Grammar. A brief outline of the Cognitive Grammar conception of articles is presented to show how the specific "uses" of articles can be subsumed under more general, broader, conceptually-based rules.

## 1. Introduction

Articles are considered to be particularly difficult for Polish learners due to a combination of two factors: their functions seem to be complex and they are not communicatively important, i.e. inappropriate use can rarely seriously distort the message. At the same time, the fact that the structure appears to be impervious to any form of teaching is another reason for its difficulty: articles are not only resistant to implicit learning, i.e. sub-conscious learning resulting simply from contact with the target language, but complete mastery of the structure is almost never fully achieved even under explicit learning conditions, i.e. when students' conscious attention is drawn to the structure and its functioning. The results of my diagnostic study (Król-Markefka 2007) involving 170 Polish university students show that

even the conscious application of grammatical rules in a written task often leads to inappropriate article choices. It has been hypothesised that the limited success of the explicit teaching/learning of English articles might be at least partially attributed to the quality (content) of the metalinguistic information and the way it is usually presented to students. The aim of the present article is to verify this hypothesis by analysing from a pedagogical perspective some of the reference grammars commonly used by students in Poland and, subsequently, to present some suggestions as to how the problems identified can be at least partially solved or avoided by the introduction of rules based on Cognitive Grammar.

## 2. Rules for the use of articles

### 2.1. Pedagogical rules

In language pedagogy, certain criteria for good rules have been defined, e.g. a good rule should i) be clear and simple, ii) be true, iii) have predictive value, iv) be productive and easily applicable, v) be consistent and cumulative, vi) enable discrimination, vii) be memorable (Hammerly 1982). The assumption underlying these requirements is that rules should be easy to understand, remember and apply. At the same time, the authors of pedagogical grammars have always faced the problem of the inherent discrepancy between the didactic demands and the complexity of both language and language acquisition. Fulfilling all of the above-mentioned criteria seems impossible for a wide range of linguistic phenomena; rules describing the usage of complex structures are often indeed difficult not only to explain but even to identify and verbalize in the first place. For that reason, rules describing complex structures cannot be easily formulated in simple terms. If they are, the structure's actual usage is usually distorted, simplified or limited only to their most common instances of use, which makes the rules incomplete and thus not entirely reliable. Bearing in mind the fact that the difficulties are probably unavoidable, I would like to analyse the rules taught to students and indicate their weak points. The criteria for good pedagogical rules formulated by Hammerly (see above) will be used as a framework of reference when evaluating the pedagogical grammars of English articles.

Nine publications offering grammatical rules for intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English have been analysed in detail:

1) Murphy R. 1994. *English grammar in use: A self-study reference and practice book for intermediate students*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2) Swan M. 1996. *Practical English usage: International student's edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3) Evans V. 1998. *CPE use of English: Examination practice*. Swansea: Express Publishing.
4) Mańczak-Wohlfeld E., Niżegorodcew A., Willim E. 1998. *A practical grammar of English*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
5) Thomson A.J., Martinet A.V. 2000. *A practical English grammar*. London: Oxford University Press.

6)  Foley M., Hall D. 2003. *Longman advanced learner's grammar: A self-study reference and practice book with answers.* Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

7)  Hewings M. 2005. *Advanced grammar in use.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

8)  Carter R., McCarthy M. 2006. *Cambridge grammar of English.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

9)  Yule G. 2006. *Oxford practice grammar: Advanced.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## 2.2. General observations

In all the pedagogical materials analysed, the use of articles is described in detail requiring between 4–8 pages. The meaning of the indefinite article is usually captured by references to the concepts of oneness and genericness (Mańczak-Wohlfeld et al. 1998), classification (singling out one example of a class, e.g. in Foley, Hall 2003, Yule 2006), the lack of a listener's (reader's) familiarity with the referent (Foley, Hall 2003), unspecificity (Hewings 2005) and first mention (Murphy 1994, Yule 2006). All accounts emphasise that the indefinite article is used only with singular countable nouns.

The definite article, if any generalisations are made, is described as an article conveying the idea of particularity (Mańczak-Wohlfeld et al. 1998, Murphy 1994), familiarity (Foley, Hall 2003, Murphy 1994), uniqueness (Hewings 2005), specificity (Hewings 2005), identifiability (Yule 2006), the referent's presence in the speakers' "shared world" (Carter, McCarthy 2006) and reference to a whole class of objects (Foley, Hall 2003). The criteria of identifiability and familiarity are often used as overriding principles which are manifested in a variety of typical uses, such as "a/an" for the first reference, "the" for referents which are unique (and thus familiar and identifiable), or "when the context or defining phrase makes it known" (Foley, Hall 2003: 272). The accounts which refer to the notions of familiarity and identifiability in order to explain the general meaning of the definite article stress that it is the listener who should be able to identify the referent, c.f.

[1]  *The* is most commonly used to refer to things which are part of the speakers' shared world. It is a way of saying "You know which x I am referring to" e.g. *If you are going to paint the wall, we'll have to move the furniture* [speaker and listener know which furniture they are talking about] (Cater, McCarthy 2006: 364).

[2]  […] when we identify something, we are treating it as already known. We use "the" when we assume that people are familiar with the same ordinary things as we are in our daily lives and in the physical world outside (Yule 2006: 70).

In one account (Murphy 1994: 142), the use of "the" in sentences such as *I must go to the bank to get some money* is justified only by reference to the speaker's knowledge ("The speaker is usually thinking of a particular bank or post office").

The so-called zero article (lack of an article) is not usually treated uniformly, i.e. it is not presented as a feature of noun phrases conveying a particular meaning or

having a specific function. If generalisations are made, these usually distinguish between the use of "the" vs. the zero article before plural and uncountable nouns. In such cases, the criterion given pertains to the concept of "generality" vs. "specificity":

[3] With plural nouns we use either "the" or no article. We don't use an article when we want to refer to a group or class in general. Compare:

*Tourists are often blamed for changing the character of the place. (= all tourists)*

*Did you notice what the tourists in the cathedral were doing? (= specific tourists)*
(Foley, Hall 2003: 273).

[4] We use *the* for a specific meaning and no article for a general meaning before plural nouns such as *dogs* and uncountable nouns such as *money* (Yule 2006: 72).

[5] Plural count nouns are used with determiners when a specific meaning is indicated, but without determiners when a general meaning is indicated […]. When general reference is made to all members of a class of count nouns or all examples or manifestations of non-count noun, *the* is not used. (Carter, McCarthy 2006: 364).

As regards the cases when no article is used before singular countable nouns, they are usually treated as exceptions to the general principle that such nouns have to be preceded by an article. Often, a remark is made that singular count nouns used without any article have "special meanings" (Swan 1996, Foley, Hall 2003, see below).

## 2.3. Clarity and simplicity

Most of the pedagogical materials analysed are rather successful in formulating principles in a language that is clear and simple. Inevitably, some linguistic terminology is used (words such as *noun phrase, determiner, referent, reference, (un)countablility*), but the terms are used in moderation and generally do not hinder an understanding of the rules.

One of the greatest challenges for the authors of the pedagogical grammars is the explanation of the concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness. The problem is that none of the descriptive synonyms used (words such as *familiar* or *identifiable*) are fully equivalent to *definite*. At the same time, the most accurate definition of the definite and the indefinite article as words preceding noun phrases which are definite and indefinite respectively, is clearly tautological and cannot be effective without further specifications, as exemplified by:

[6] The definite article is used in a definite and particular sense

e.g. *The earth moves around the sun.* (i.e. 'obvious earth and obvious sun')

*The cats that Jane keeps are not for sale.* (i.e. 'those particular cats that Jane keeps')
(Mańczak-Wohlfeld et al. 1998: 38).

[7] *The* is used before a noun which is defined (Evans 1998: 183).

The expressions used to elaborate on the notion of definiteness, apart from familiarity and identifiability, include specificity and particularity:

[8]　We use "the" when we are talking of one particular thing (Murphy 1994: 142).

It is quite common, however, to use the same expressions to explain the meaning of the indefinite article, e.g.

[9]　We use "a/an" to talk about a particular but unspecified person, thing or event.

*I really need a cup of coffee* (Hewings 2005: 89).

The inadequacy of using words such as *particular* or *specific* to explain the notions of (in)definiteness stems from the fact that specificity/unspecificity is a dimension intersecting that which pertains to definiteness/indefiniteness. Indefinite noun phrases can have either specific or unspecific reference (which is made clear in Mańczak et al. 1998), and, as a result, the words *particular* and *specific* can be applied not only to definite, but also to some indefinite noun phrases. The confusion and lack of clarity in such descriptions can be illustrated by the following examples and accompanying explanations:

[10]　We use "the" when we are thinking of one particular thing. Compare **a/an** and **the**:

*Tom sat down on **a** chair.* (perhaps of many chairs in the room)

*Tom sat down on **the** chair **nearest the door*** (a particular chair) (Murphy 1994: 142).

The problem is that Tom sat on one particular chair in both the situations described, which suggests that the difference between "a" and "the" cannot be based on the criterion proposed by Murphy. In fact, it seems that learners tend to rely heavily on the particular/unparticular (specific/unspecific) distinction when deciding whether the definite or indefinite article should be used (Król-Markefka 2007). Predictably, this frequently leads them to inappropriate article choices.

## 2.4.　Predictivity and discriminatory power

The rule's predictivity is an important requirement, because it enables the principle to be productively and accurately applied by learners in new contexts. Predictivity is also related to the rule's discriminatory power, i.e. the degree to which the rule enables learners to determine when one structure should be used rather than another. A large number of the formulations presented to students in the pedagogical grammars do not score very highly on these criteria, usually due to their limited range and a failure to describe the functional dimension of the structure, cf.:

[11]　[A/an is used] when a singular countable noun is mentioned for the first time (Mańczak-Wohlfeld et al.1998: 32).

[12]　[A/an is used] before an uncountable noun when it is qualified by an adjective (Mańczak-Wohlfeld et al.1998: 33).

[13]　[The is used] before a noun which is qualified by a phrase or clause (Mańczake-Wohlfeld et al. 1998: 38).

[14]　When a noun is used as an adjective (before other noun), the first noun's article is dropped. Lessons how to play *the guitar* are *guitar lessons* (Swan 1996: 70.3).

Reliance on such superficial criteria as the first mention or the presence of a preceding adjective or a following phrase or clause not only creates confusion upon encountering numerous counterexamples, but it also offers rather unreliable guidance in situations when the students are to choose articles themselves. What additionally aggravates the situation is the apparent memorability of these formulations, which is probably due to their simplicity and salience – first and second mention are often the critical principles to be introduced in lessons and discussed in pedagogical grammars when considering articles (Michońska-Stadnik 2007: 328). As a result, such simplified and incomplete principles tend to persist in the learners' memory as the most important rules concerning article usage. The results of the previously-mentioned diagnostic study (Król-Markefka 2007) confirmed that learners tend to overuse the rules concerning first vs. second mention or the presence of an *of*-phrase, which naturally has negative effects on accuracy.

## 2.5. Consistency and cumulativeness

The use of most grammatical structures, including articles, is too complex to be imparted to students all at once. Usually, the rules are adjusted to the students' needs and capabilities at various proficiency levels and taught cyclically. For that reason, it is important that the more fine-grained distinctions presented at subsequent stages should not belie the rules learnt earlier. By the same token, in grammars for advanced learners, rules presented in the initial stages, which are usually understood as being more basic and general, should not be at odds with the usually more specific rules presented later. On the other hand, because the use of articles is so complex and multifaceted, it seems that no generalisations are without exceptions. It is therefore highly desirable from the pedagogical perspective to formulate rules in such a way that they require the fewest possible exceptions, and, if exceptions are unavoidable, to explain and justify their usage.

To ensure consistency and not to contradict the previously formulated rules, most of the pedagogical grammars under discussion explain the departures from the rules as "special uses", "other common uses" or exceptions. This, in particular, is the most common way of accounting for those cases when singular count nouns are preceded by the zero article, e.g.

> [15] Plural nouns and uncountable nouns can be used with no article (*cats, water),* but singular countable nouns cannot.
>
> *A very important point*: singular countable nouns must always have an article (or another determiner like *my, this*); we can say *a cat, the cat, this cat,* but not *\*cat*.
>
> (There are some exceptions in expressions with prepositions like *by car, in bed*) (Swan 1996: 66).

If no attempt is made to provide a meaningful justification for the seeming "oddity" of such exceptions, the rules become arbitrary and, as such, more difficult to memorise. An attempt to explain the "special uses" is made, for example, in Foley,

Hall (2003), who try to use the specific/general criterion to describe the contrast between "the" vs. the zero article in plural and uncountable nouns (see below) as a framework of reference to explain the difference between the use and non-use of articles before nouns such as *church, hospital, school.*

The use of "the" vs. the zero article before plural and uncountable nouns is actually another point which weakens the unity and consistency of the rules concering the use of the definite article. The problem is that different explanations are offered as to the function of the definite article when it precedes i) singular count nouns and ii) plural and uncountable nouns. In the first case, the meaning/function of "the" is often captured by notions of identifiability or familiarity. Rules and examples associate the rule only with singular count nouns. The use of "the" before plural and uncountable nouns is usually treated separately and based on the distinction between general and specific reference, with no attempt to relate the rule to the indentifiability/familiarity criterion, e.g.

> [16]  We use a/an when the topic (noun) is not known to our listener/reader;
>
> we use "the" when it is known (Foley, Hall 2003: 272).
>
> […]
>
> With plural nouns we use either "the" or no article. We don't use an article when we want to refer to a group or class in general; Compare:
>
> *Tourists are often blamed for changing the character of the place (= all tourists)* (Foley, Hall 2003: 273).

Although the principles quoted above are clear and reliable, they are not cumulative and, as such, suggest to the learner that the definite article does not have any single, unified meaning, with its interpretation depending on the type of noun (singular, plural or uncountable).

## 2.6. Memorability

The rule's memorability is a feature that interacts with most of the above-mentioned aspects: generally, memorability is enhanced when the rule is clear, simple, consistent and cumulative. However, the fact that rules which are clear and simple are better remembered may in the case of articles have negative consequences for student accuracy. This is mainly due to the reasons mentioned above: because a semantically and functionally complex structure such as the (in)definite article cannot be easily explained in simple terms, attempts to formulate clear and simple rules either run the risk of oversimplification or end up as lists of numerous, meaningfully unrelated and rather limited rules.

Oversimplified rules, unfortunately, tend to persist in the learners' memory precisely because of their simplicity. An example of such a rule is "Use 'a' before singular and no article before plural nouns" – a rule often quoted by students to justify the absence of an article before plural nouns (Król-Markefka 2007). Although

pedagogical grammars usually make it clear at some point that "the" can also be used with nouns in plural, the simplicity of the initial formulation apparently makes it more memorable and thus more readily used in practice.

Circumscribed rules, though usually easy to apply, refer to a very limited context, which forces pedagogical grammar writers to produce long lists of such rules, usually accompanied by detailed descriptions of the rules' conditions of use. For example, if a grammar treats all occurrences of the zero article before singular count nouns as "special uses", the only way to explain their use is by explaining each meaning individually, as in the section "Omission of *the* before *home*, before *church, hospital, prison, school*, etc. and before *work, office*" in Thomson and Martinett (2000: 21–22). The advantage of such pedagogical descriptions is that they provide detailed, exhaustive and relatively reliable information about the usage of various phrases. The problem is that in spite of the fact that they are clear and simple in themselves, the amount of information, especially if one also adds other rules concerning the omission of "the" and the omission of "a", places a considerable cognitive burden on the learners' memory. The low memorability of such rules is best illustrated by the imprecision of student formulations tapped during conscious rule application ("Było coś z posiłkami / There was something about meals" (Król-Markefka 2007)).

Sometimes, when the criteria used to highlight article usage rely on structural rather than functional basis (such as the presence of a specific preposition), the explanations, which again in themselves are clear and understandable, might actually be confusing, mainly because in fact they seem to quote "exceptions to exceptions" and then "exceptions to exceptions to exceptions", cf.

> [17]  In a number of common expressions, an article is dropped after a preposition:
> *in/at/from/to school, in/to class, to/in/into/out of prison/hospital/bed, to/at sea.*
>
> […]
>
> When the above expressions are used with articles, they have special meanings. Compare:
>
> > *He is in **prison*** (as a prisoner).
> >
> > *He's in the prison* (perhaps as a visitor).
>
> When *with* or *without* is followed by a singular countable noun, an article is normally necessary. We say *You can't get there without **a car**,* not *\*… without car.* However, articles are often dropped in double expressions with prepositions, like *with knife and fork, with hat and coat, from top to bottom, on land and sea* […] (Swan 1996: 70.1).

The overview of certain selected pedagogical grammars that present the rules for the use of articles in English shows that the grammars are generally well-written, they are understandable and they provide exhaustive guidelines concerning the use of articles. Most importantly, they abound with functional and contextual information which illustrates how the articles are typically used in contemporary English.

However, the rules – perhaps inevitably – have certain weaknesses, which may make them fallible. These include:

1)  lack of consistency, which is confusing and hinders meaningful learning;
2)  numerous "uses" and exceptions, which makes the rules less memorable;
3)  lack of unity and meaningful justifications, which makes the rules and their functions not so easy to understand; in consequence, the learners cannot make their own contextually-dependent decisions when using articles.

I suggest that the problems discussed above can largely be avoided or remedied by the introduction of more general rules which would present not only the functions and "uses" of the structures, but also explain what "a", "the", or the so-called zero article mean, i.e. what concepts are created in the language user's mind when they encounter each of the structures. As the main Cognitive Grammar assumption is that grammatical structures are meaningful, i.e. each grammatical morpheme, structure or pattern can be given a conceptual, notional definition, Cognitive Grammar analyses could be potentially helpful in formulating such rules. Indeed, providing students with general, conceptually-motivated rules, prior to giving them a list of "uses", would allow an understanding of articles which would:

1)  provide a general framework of reference for a meaningful discussion of article use,
2)  aid the memorisation of specific sub-rules,
3)  ensure consistency,
4)  ensure a meaningful integration of explicit knowledge (cf. Ellis 2005).

Below I will present some ideas on the meaning and the use of articles as discussed by cognitive linguists which could potentially be used to design pedagogical rules.

## 3. Some solutions from Cognitive Grammar

### 3.1. Articles in CG

At the heart of a Cognitive Grammar (CG) analysis of articles is the assumption that articles, like other grammatical structures, are mainly responsible for establishing the so-called parameters of scene construal,[1] i.e. for shaping those aspects of the conceptualisation which show how a particular entity/situation is viewed. The fundamental difference between the definite and the indefinite article is thus explained in CG in terms of their different conceptual content and the different construal imposed on a scene as a result.

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[1]  Scene construal – a particular way of viewing an object/situation as a result of our capacity to portray the same object or situation by means of different images (Verhagen 2007: 48–49); CG claims that the meaning of a semantic structure can be adequately described only if it takes into account the way a particular conceptual content is conceived of (construed); several dimensions (parameters) are identified, along which the scenes construed may vary: specificity, prominence, perspective, dynamicity (Langacker 2007).

A definite noun phrase evokes the concept of a thing that is definite, which can be roughly paraphrased as particular, specified, unique, known, familiar or identifiable. The indefinite noun phrase builds an image of any arbitrary member (instance) of a specific category (type), which is specified by the noun. What is characteristic of the CG-based conception of articles is that definiteness does not entirely depend on the hearer's familiarity with the referent. In contrast to most linguistic descriptions of the definite article (e.g. Hawkins 1978), in choosing an article, the speaker, rather than predicting what may be familiar/identifiable to the hearer and adjusting the linguistic devices to the assumed hearer's knowledge, gives the hearer guidelines as to how to conceptualise the referent (Epstein 2001: 43). The use of the definite article instructs the hearer to construe the referent as definite (familiar, specified, identified, known to the speaker), while the indefinite article is used to evoke an image of any arbitrary instance of the given type. To understand the definite reference made, the hearer usually tries to identify the referent, but the hearer's ability to "pick out" the particular entity is not necessary for the felicitous use of "the". At the same time, an entity which is definite (specified, familiar, known) to the speaker might be referred to by means of the indefinite noun phrase if the speaker wishes that the hearer thought of the entity as one, indefinite instance of a specific type.

Below I will try to show that the overriding principles presented above account for a considerable range of definite and indefinite article use. The cognitive approach is not at odds with the identifiability-based rules (such as, for example, Hawkins 1978), but, because of its broader scope, it can also account for the use of articles when the criterion of the hearer's identifiability seems to be breached. I will also argue that the general semantic differences between the conceptualizations evoked by "a" and "the" respectively obtain in a wide range of uses and with all noun phrase types, which allows to link meaningfully various seemingly unrelated rules and built a unified framework of reference for discussing the structure.

## 3.2.  The indefinite article

The use of the indefinite article is an indication for the hearer to think about any instance of the type specified by the noun. This principle, when describing the use of the indefinite article, covers both referential and non-referential uses and so can be successfully used to explain a whole set of contexts in which "a" is conventionally used.

### 3.2.1.  Referential first-mention uses

Using the indefinite article is a typical way to set the scene/situation and introduce new elements to the discourse because it instructs the hearer to think of any example of the relevant category, as in [18]:

[18] *We read a story about a man, a young Irish girl, a princess and a diamond ring* (Yule 2006: 70).

[19] *So you were at Eton, were you? Then you are certain to know a chap called Bill Snoop* (Hawkins 1978: 98).

The noun phrase in [19] is often quoted as being problematic for frameworks based on hearer identifiability. The difficulty stems from the fact that the referent is identified and the context of the sentence demonstrates the assumed hearer's familiarity with the referent. The case, however, can be explained when one sees it as an instance of a typical first-mention use of "a", where the speaker chooses to construe the referent as an indefinite example. The fact that the instance is further specified so that it refers to one particular example does not deny the possibility of construing the referent as one example of the type "chap". The example shows that the criterion of familiarity/identifiability is not primary, but rather that it is subject to the speaker's freedom to impose on the hearer a particular conceptualization.

### 3.2.2. Non-referential uses

Many pedagogical grammars, when introducing the indefinite article, say that "a" is used for classifying. Examples usually include predicative constructions such as:

[20] *It's a mouse.*

*His film is a comedy.*

*I'm a socialist* (Murphy 1994: 142).

In CG terms, the predicative constructions in [20] profile the relationship of class inclusion, where the predicative nominal indicates an arbitrary member of a given class and the whole structure aims at identifying the subject with any member of this class (Langacker 1991: 67). From this perspective, one can easily treat these examples as prototypical uses of the indefinite article.

The use of articles in noun phrases with a generic meaning is usually treated separately, both in theoretical and pedagogical grammars. Sometimes, though, generic uses are treated as examples of the "classifying" function of "a", e.g.

[21] *A dolphin isn't a fish, it's a mammal* (Murphy 1994: 142).

The indefinite articles in [21] can be seen as devices evoking the concept of any member of the relevant classes, which allows the generic reference to be seen as another case where the typical conceptualisation behind "a" needs to be created (other generic uses of articles will be discussed below).

## 3.3. The definite article

### 3.3.1. The conceptualisation

As I mentioned, the most significant difference between the traditional accounts of definiteness based on the notion of the hearer's familiarity with the referent and the cognitive explanation lies in the shift from perceiving this structure as hearer-oriented to speaker-oriented (Epstein 2001): it is the speaker who decides on the construal and chooses the linguistic means which will establish its parameters most accurately. This, however, does not mean that the hearer is not taken into account.

Firstly, the conceptualization created is usually shaped in a particular way precisely in order to evoke a specific image in the hearer's mind (cf. the first mention uses of "a" quoted above); and secondly, the hearer's identification of the referent is what is often expected both by the speaker and the hearer, as, for example, in:

[22] *Has Edward arrived yet? Yes, he's in the dining room* (Foley, Hall 2003: 272).

In this way, the CG approach to the use of the definite article does not invalidate the traditional accounts enumerating the sources of definiteness (e.g. Hawkins 1978). It only suggests that such considerations do not constitute the fundamental, underlying principles for article usage, but are derivative and secondary to the more general conceptual distinctions based on the differences in meaning between the two articles.

### 3.3.2. Subsequent mention

The opposition between the first and the subsequent mention(s) is one of the most frequently-quoted principles concerning the differences between the use of "a" and "the".

Sentences such as [23] and [24] are usually cited to illustrate the rule:

[23] *Do you remember the story about the man who tried to steal the ring from the Irish girl*? (Yule 2006: 70, a continuation of [18])

[24] *I have found a coin. The coin is worth 50 p* (Mańczak-Wohlfeld et al. 1998: 38).

Despite being simple and seemingly true, the rule (and its illustrations) are problematic in that the examples seem to be composed precisely to illustrate the rules (and not the other way round): in [23], the sentence would be equally possible, if not preferable, if "the story" alone was definite; and in [24], "a coin" is more likely to be cross-referred by the pronoun "it". Example [23] is also interesting because of the introductory phrase "Do you remember", whose role, supposedly, is to emphasize that the referents have already been mentioned to the hearer. Under a closer scrutiny, one can discern a certain inconsistency between the rule and the example sentence: on the one hand, the definite noun phrases in [23] are to illustrate the rule about the hearer's familiarity with the referents; on the other hand however, if one assumes that "the" can be used when the hearer is able to identify the entity (in this case because the entity has already been mentioned), the definite articles in [23] would not be felicitous if the hearer's answer was "No, I don't remember". The fact that "the" is possible regardless of the hearer's answer shows that the rule might be potentially confusing for learners. A more consistent explanation for the use of "the" in [23] is that the speaker wants to inform the hearer that he is thinking about a definite story, as well as a definite man, ring and girl and wants the hearer to construe the entities as definite as well. As I previously mentioned, the hearer might be expected to (or may want to) identify the referents, but his/her ability to do so is not the major factor sanctioning the use of "the".

### 3.3.3. Unique referents

"The" is commonly said to be used for entities which are unique in the "shared set" (Hawkins 1978) or in the current discourse space (Langacker 1991), or – more generally – in the context of the speech act. The uniqueness condition is usually linked to the identifiability principle: if an entity is unique (in the shared set/current discourse space/context), the hearer can identify the referent. Hawkins's "sources of definiteness" describe in detail the pragmalinguistic mechanisms ensuring the fast and unambiguous identification of the set and of the referent.

Within the CG-based framework presented here, the use of "the" with unique referents can be explained by the incompatibility of the images evoked by a unique referent on the one hand and the indefinite article on the other. In other words, when there is only one possible referent in a given context, there is no possibility to construe the referent as "any" instance of the type. The remarks above cover a whole range of instances which are "uniquely identifiable" owing to their status in the so-called immediate ([25]) and larger situation ([26], [27]) context or due to the meaning specifications provided by the sentence ([28]), cf.:

[25] *Where's the phone? I left it beside the radio on the table in the corner near the window.*

[26] *Meet me in the café next to the underground station near my house.*

[27] *We are in danger of permanently damaging the Earth.*

[28] *Muhammad Ali is the greatest heavyweight boxer ever*

(Foley, Hall 2003: 272).

Because the status of being unique is not absolute but always relative to the context (shared set), some entities usually referred to as unique might not be construed as such if the shared set/current discourse space/context contains a number of instances of a given type. For example, in science fiction novels, it might be justified to talk about "a moon" or "a sun".

### 3.3.4. First-mention uses: perspective[2] and prominence[3]

Some of the first-mention uses of the definite article have always been most problematic in accounts based on familiarity or identifiability because, in many cases, the hearer's knowledge of the referent was not guaranteed. Also in a number of the pedagogical grammars discussed above, the authors mention examples of definite article use which can, but need not, involve the hearer's identifiability, e.g.

[29] I *must go to the bank to get some money* (Murphy 1994: 142).

[30] *I have to go to the dentist* (Yule 2006: 70).

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[2]    Perspective – a parameter of scene construal which indicates the point of view from which a scene (a thing or a situation) is described.

[3]    Prominence (salience) – a parameter of scene construal which indicates the degree of importance of an entity in the scene; related to the amount of attention paid to particular elements of the construal.

While Murphy, commenting on [29] explicitly states that "the bank" is definite for the speaker (and not the hearer), Yule (2006: 70) uses the example as an illustration of the rule that "the" is used when "we identify people by their jobs". The problem is that both authors, perhaps inadvertently, omit the hearer and the alleged requirement that the referents should be identifiable. This is possibly due to the fact that typically in such contexts the hearer is not expected to identify the referent, but merely to accept that there is one specific and definite referent familiar to the speaker.

Some first-mention uses of the definite article can be linked with the article's role as a device establishing perspective: as a consequence of the fact that definiteness is inherently linked to the concept of familiarity/identifiability, by using "the" the speaker not only indicates that the entity is definite for him/her, but s/he imposes upon the hearer her/his own perspective in viewing the entity (Tabakowska 1993). The use of the definite article to mark a point of view and its shifts has long been recognized as a common literary device. Good examples of such uses are the opening sentences of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* [31] and *Big Two-Hearted River* [32] (qtd in Epstein 2001: 35):

[31]  *In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across* **the river** *and* **the plain** *to* **the mountains**.

[32]  **The train** *went on up* **the track** *out of sight, around one of* **the hills** *of burnt timber. Nick sat down …*

The definite article's function as a perspective-setting device is also noticed outside CG analyses. For example, Chesterman (1991: 13), when discussing the difference in meaning between [33] and [34], observes that "the definite article seems to do no more than place "the cry" rather more clearly within the deictic context, relating it to "we" and the relevant time and place":

[33]  *We heard the cry of a jackal.*

[34]  *We heard a cry of a jackal.*

The definite articles in sentences such as [31], [32] or [33] show that the hearer, in constructing the conceptualization, may be instructed to create an image of a definite instance although he may not be in any position to "single out" the referent that is in the speaker's mind. In such cases, the identification of the referent, in contrast to sentences such as [25], [26], [27] and [28], is neither intended by the speaker nor expected by the hearer.

Some of the "troublesome" first-mention uses of the definite article can also be seen as examples of the article's function to establish another parameter of scene construal – prominence. Epstein (2001: 19), analysing language data from the press, observes that the entities which enter into the discourse "with an initial mention definite description […] signal that they will be topics in the subsequent portion of text" and thus they "trigger the interpretation that a discourse entity is highly prominent, i.e. that the entity plays an important part in the broader discourse context" e.g.

[35] *Hall has been thinking about god, psychiatry, analysis, fairy tales, dreams and **the monkey trap**. As a boy he saw a picture of a monkey trap in a book, and he has used it as a basis for a theory of human behaviour. A monkey trap is a hollowed gourd with bait inside. The monkey reaches in and wraps his fist around the bait but can't remove his hand unless he drops the bait. The monkey never does. Hall believes the stroke got him out of the monkey trap in his life and freed him to do what he really wanted to do-read and write and think* (NYTmag 8/18/96 pp. 22, 24, qtd in Epstein 2001: 19).

[36] *Environmental impact regulations applied in Antarctica fill in books double the thickness of the Manhattan telephone book and cover everything from junked tractors to condoms…*

*Regulations are obeyed when possible but are breached in emergencies. There was the case of **the ice pier,** for example …* (what follows is a detailed description of the case)

(NYT 2/7/95 p.B6, qtd in Epstein 2001: 7).

The definite article's functions of setting the perspective and giving special prominence to the entity can be seen as extensions of the article's prototypical meaning and function: as already mentioned, the concept of definiteness encoded by "the" allows the speaker to construe the conceived entity as definite (for the speaker), which, at the same time, signals to the hearer the perspective from which the entity is viewed. Typically, speakers introduce new entities into the discourse by means of the indefinite article. This principle, however, may not be obeyed if the speaker's specific communicative intention is to make the hearer think about the conceived entity as definite. As observed earlier, one reason for this may be to emphasize that the perspective taken is not that of the hearer. At the same time, breaking with the usual way of introducing new referents draws the hearer's attention to the entity. Attention gives the entity special prominence (salience), which might signal to the hearer that the conceptualization is (or will be) in some way important because, for example, it is going to be the main focus of attention in the subsequent discourse.

## 3.4. Generic statements: specificity[4]

Finally, I would like to show how articles help to shape another parameter of scene construal, namely the degree of specificity/schematicity with which a conceptualisation is to be created. The relationship between various article choices and different levels of abstraction is not new to linguists or EFL teachers/learners: many pedagogical grammars use the criterion of the level of generality to account for a number of contrastive uses of "the zero article" vs. "the" or the use of "the" vs. "a". The aim of this section is to bring together some of the most common instances in order to show how the basic (conceptual) meaning of the articles affects the specificity level

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[4]   Specificity – a parameter of scene construal which indicates the degree of detail or schematiticty with which a scene (thing or situation) is described.

of the construal. I would like to emphasize that the articles' ability to influence specificity is a direct consequence of the prototypical meanings of "a", "the" and the zero article.

The contrast between bare nouns and nouns preceded by an article (either definite or indefinite) is often explained – not only by cognitive linguists – as pertaining to the distinction between the abstract and the particular (cf. Guillaume 1919, Hewson 1972, Langacker 1991). The CG interpretation of the zero article is that it carries the most schematic,the most general meaning specifications, and, as such, is used only in cases when the image evoked is that of the type in general, and not of any of the type's instances. Such construals are rare and usually limited to certain specific, conventionally-used contexts and expressions.

The indefinite article, because it is used to evoke the image of an arbitrary instance of a type, construes the entity with greater specificity. However, the concept of a "typical member", is still relatively schematic, since it has to disregard those specifications that may differentiate between particular members of a given type. The most specific construal is created by definite noun phrases, which refer to particular instances of a given type.

The definite article, however, is also used to build another type of conceptualization, which does not profile a definite instance of a type but rather a definite category. Such conceptualizations are sometimes used to make generic statements:

[37] *The wombat is a mammal* (Langacker 1991: 69).

According to Langacker (1991: 63), the use of the definite article in [37] does not crucially differ from other uses of "the": the article indicates the designated entity pertains to an instance which is definite. However, in this construal, the instance does not "exist" in a physical space, but in a higher-order domain, in this case in the type space /mammal/. Schematically, the difference can be depicted as in Figure 1:
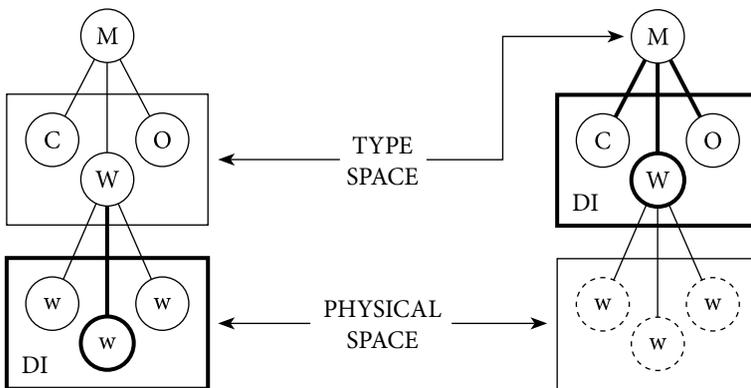


Figure 1.  Conceptualisations behind generic reference: 'a' and 'the'.
**M** – mammal, **W** – wombat, **C** – cat, **O** – okapi, **w** – a physical, single wombat, **DI** – domain of instantiation
Based on Langacker (1991: 70)

Additionally, generic statements are also made by means of indefinite plural nouns, which evoke the concept of the totality of all group members (as in Figure 2).
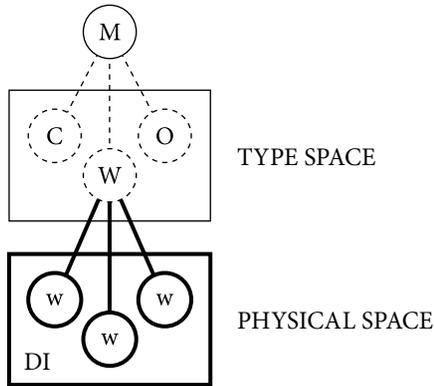


Figure 2.  Conceptualisations behind generic reference: plural number. Based on Langacker (1991: 70)

Figures 1 and 2 show why the indefinite article "a" is used in generic statements that are compatible with the image of a single, arbitrary member or the group, while "the" is used only in contexts in which reference is made to the whole category.[5] Examples of sentences in [38] (Lyons 1999: 182) show how the incompatibility of the image conveyed by the whole sentence with the image evoked by the article results in the unacceptability/ungrammaticality of the sentence (or the article in particular):

[38]  *a. The squid lives on seaweed.*
      *b. Squids live on seaweed*
      *c. A squid lives on seaweed.*

      *d. The dodo is extinct.*
      *e. Dodos are extinct.*
      *f. *A dodo is extinct.*[6]

      *g. The lion hunts the antelope.*
      *h. * The lion hunts antelopes.*[7]
      *i. A lion preys on an antelope.*

The examples above illustrate one of the major CG tenets, namely that "the judgements of well-formedness often hinge on the interplay and compatibility of images, and are influenced by subtle shifts in context, intended meaning, or how a speaker chooses to structure and interpret a situation" (Langacker 1996: 12–13). In fact,

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[5]  These basic observations have already been made by most linguists (cf. Chesterman 1991, Lyons 1999).

[6]  [38f] makes an assertion about the category as a whole and so the conceptualization is not compatible with the image of one class member profiled by "a dodo".

[7]  [38h] does not profile the category as a whole, but rather its members; the image of "the lion" (category) clashes with that of "antelopes" (individual members).

the quote captures the crucial difference between the CG and the traditional approach to grammar, which lies in the greater flexibility of the cognitive "rules" that are subordinate to the conceptual and contextual distinctions and not merely to "the principles of the syntax".

## 4. Final remarks

The main purpose of the present article is to highlight the major shortcomings of the pedagogical rules for the use of articles and indicate those aspects of Cognitive Grammar structural analyses, which could potentially be used to remedy the existing problems. In particular, it has been argued that Cognitive Grammar may provide information that could potentially be useful in creating a unified conceptual framework of reference to describe the function of the definite, indefinite and zero article. It also seems that grammatical rules based on CG principles, by stressing the speaker's role in choosing articles, would help students to be more autonomous and creative when using the English language.

Such optimistic claims, however, would not be fully justified if one failed to recognize two important facts about L2 grammar learning which allow the role of rules to be put into perspective. Firstly, it is worth remembering that no grammatical rules on their own can ensure language acquisition. Explicit grammatical knowledge can only be useful when it is used to supplement linguistic input and output: rules can only be helpful when they are used to organize the linguistic data encountered during meaningful communication. Secondly, rich linguistic input is also essential to ensure that students are familiar with both the typical conceptualisations usually chosen by native speakers and the conventional ways of constructing a discourse in English. Also the cognitive rules themselves and the examples illustrating them, apart from explaining the concepts and images conveyed by grammatical structures, should emphasize which choices are most likely in particular contexts. Otherwise, by attributing the selection of linguistic structures solely to the speaker, the cognitive rules might lead to choices not typically encountered in actual language use, and, consequently, contribute little to improving communication and language acquisition in general. A detailed discussion of the both issues indicated here can be found in Król-Markefka 2010.

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