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УДК: 811.111'367.632 ;
371.3::811.111(497.11);
81'243(497.11)
ИД БРОЈ: 203718156
Оригинални научни рад
Примљен: 25. марта 2013.
Прихваћен: 20. септембра 2013.

PERCEPTION OF DEFINITE ARTICLE USE BY THE LEARNERS WHOSE L1 IS SERBIAN

Abstract: This paper deals with the perception of definite article use by the learners of ESL, whose L1 is Serbian. The focus of the authors is the semantics of articles in English language, i.e. various ways in which definite descriptions relate to their antecedents and/or to the context. The methodological approach of the research is error analysis, and the research was conducted with the sample of 80 learners with different level of ESL proficiency. The results show that the use of the definite article for the specific situation use was the most difficult one for the participants to grasp, although not the only problematic use. Research results indicate that the learners of ESL make most mistakes when the “rules“ that they learn in school interfere with the semantics of definite article. Furthermore, L1 interference is one of the main sources for their mistakes.

Key words: error analysis, definite article, semantics, ESL, ELT, teaching methodology

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will deal with the semantics of articles in English language, i.e. various ways in which definite descriptions relate to their antecedents and/or to the context as well as the perception of articles and their usage by learners of English language whose L1 is Serbian, a language which does not have the category of articles. Our literature review will focus on classifications of definite description use that are proposed in the literature by Hawkins (1978), Clark (1974) and Löbner (1985 and 1996)¹. The methodological approach of the

¹ See also Heim (1982) and Prince (1981 and 1992)

research will be error analysis. The research was conducted with the sample of 80 learners with different level of ESL proficiency.

2. SEMANTICS OF ENGLISH ARTICLES

Definite descriptions are, simply put, noun phrases starting with the definite article. Usage types of the definite article can be found in many modern English grammars. These usages are derived from this article's status as an overt marker of definiteness, a semantic category which is viewed either broadly or narrowly in the literature (Wahid, 2013: 24). Broad sense implies determiners in general, like personal pronouns or demonstratives, whereas in its narrow sense, definiteness is marked by the usage of articles.

There are two types of definite articles: *weak* and *strong* articles. Weak article can be understood as a reduced form (in some sense) derived from the strong article either synchronically or diachronically. However, that reduction process cannot be a phonological one, primarily because there is a semantic contrast between the two forms and the choice between them is not optional in various syntactic environments. (Schwarz, 2009: 16). As Schwarz argued in his thesis, the *weak* article encodes uniqueness, whereas the *strong* article is anaphoric in nature.

There are numerous theories of definiteness that are based on principles of uniqueness and familiarity. As for the uniqueness principle, we should mention Russell, whose influential work (Russell, 1905; Russell, 1919) is the best known work in the uniqueness approach. According to these two approaches the referent of a definite description is required to be either uniquely identifiable or familiar to the hearer (Vieria, 1998).

In his dissertation, Schwarz argues that the *weak* article encodes Uniqueness, whereas the *strong* article is anaphoric in nature. Uniqueness approaches build on the intuitive insight that we use definite descriptions to refer to things that have a role or property that is unique – the Moon, the Sun, the king of France (Schwarz, 2009). One major challenge for both of these accounts is that something needs to be said about the extent to which uniqueness is supposed to hold, since there are clearly many felicitous and true examples involving definite descriptions whose descriptive content is true of more than one individual in the world. (Schwarz, 2009) Alternatively, we can say that uniqueness does not stand for the entire world, but only for the relevant part of the world, that is for a certain situation.

When it comes to familiarity principle, Hawkins provides one of the most prominent theories, which will be further discussed in this paper.

2.1. HAWKINS' THEORY

Hawkins offered one of the most successful and prominent analysis of the definite article, in 1978. In his analysis he “developed a number of usage types based on what was first proposed in Christophersen’s (1939) familiarity theory. This theory postulates that definiteness is established by association with some kind of previous knowledge or familiarity. Hawkins identified the following types of definite article use: anaphoric, associative anaphoric, immediate situation uses, larger situation uses, unfamiliar uses with explanatory modifiers and uses with unexplanatory modifiers.” (Wahid, 2013: 25).

According to Hawkins, the definite article may be used on the basis of a discourse antecedent (anaphoric and associative anaphoric uses) as well as independently from the previous discourse (situational, unfamiliar with explanatory modifiers and unexplanatory modifier uses).

From this differentiation ensues the following distinction:

1. *Anaphoric use* (definite descriptions that refer back to an antecedent in the discourse, both description and antecedent evoke the same entity (Vieira, 1998: 1).

→ I saw a girl in the street. The girl was wearing a red coat.

– *Associative anaphoric use* (this kind of anaphora is formed when definite NPs are used based on the speaker’s and hearer’s exploitation of the knowledge they have regarding objects evoked in the discourse and their related features or attributes) (Wahid, 2013:25). The speaker and the hearer have some kind of shared knowledge of the relations between the certain objects.

→ I am going to a wedding tomorrow. The groom is my colleague.

2. As for the *situational uses*, there are several types of this usage:

– *Visible situation use* (when the object in question is visible to both speaker and hearer).

→ Can you give me the phone?

– *Immediate situation use* (These are definite descriptions whose referent is a constituent of the immediate situation in which the use of the definite description is located, without necessarily being visible.)

→ Beware of the dog.

– *Larger situation uses*- Hawkins lists two classes of definite descriptions that are used in situations in which the speaker appeals to the hearer's knowledge of entities existing in the non-immediate or larger situation of utterance, for example, knowledge they share by being members of the same community. (Vieira, 1998:3).

– *Specific knowledge in the larger situation*, where a specific knowledge should be a part of the meaning.

– *General knowledge in the larger situation*, no specific knowledge is necessary

– (e. g. in the context of a birthday party)

→ Have you seen the birthday boy?

3. 'Unfamiliar' uses in NPs with explanatory modifiers

Definite NPs that do not belong to the above categories are those that Hawkins classifies as 'unfamiliar', simply because they are obviously opposite to familiarity. There are four types of explanatory modifiers that form this category:

– *Referent establishing relative clauses* (when the relative clause refers to something that both speaker and hearer know)

→ Why are you so nervous? The paper that I wrote last week is not going to be published.

– *Associative clauses*- These clauses incorporate both the trigger and the associate found in a sequence indicating an associative relationship between two objects.

→ I remember the beginning of the war very well. (Wahid, 2013:26).

4. Unexplanatory Modifiers Use

There are also certain modifiers (although a few), that Hawkins refers to as "unexplanatory", which requires the use of the definite article. There is nothing in the modifier that informs the hearer what is being referred to; that is, they do not introduce the unknown to the hearer.

→ The first person to walk on the Moon was Neil Armstrong.

2.2. LÖBNER'S THEORY

First of all, Löbner asserts that definiteness is not tied to the occurrence of the definite article. In German, for example, certain prepositional phrases in which the preposition and the definite article are contracted to a reduced form (as in *zur* < *zu der*, *beim* < *bei dem*, *fürs* < *für das* and others) are also definite (Löbner, 2009: 1)

Löbner adopts Christopherson's (1939) view according to which the fundamental property of definite NPs is that they refer unambiguously. Löbner claims that the definite article indicates that the noun is to be taken as a functional concept (FC). Functional nouns (if they refer at all) always identify a referent. Attributes, for example, are functional concepts. Löbner based his idea on the distinction between sortal and relational nouns – sortal nouns identify a class (e.g. woman), while relational nouns describe objects as standing in a certain relation to others (e.g. wife). (Vieria, 1998: 6). Sortal nouns only classify their referents. Under certain circumstances it may happen that there exists exactly one object which fits the classification. But this would be accidental. Functional

concepts, e.g. *mother of John*, do not allow for more than one referent (Löbner, 1985: 15).

Löbner lists semantic and pragmatic definites. Semantic definites are those cases in which the interpretation is independent of what is previously said in an utterance, conversation, or immediate context of the utterance. The semantic definites Löbner lists correspond to Hawkins' larger situation and unfamiliar uses, whereas pragmatic definites are essentially dependent on the particular context of an utterance (at least for their non-ambiguous interpretation).

2.3. CLARK'S BRIDGING REFERENCES

In 1977, Clark wrote a paper about “bridging”, which deals with the construction of implicatures as part of the comprehension process. In this paper he observed the relation between the referring expression and its antecedent (with the focus on semantic relation). We can draw a parallel between Clark's and Hawkins theory, because Clark is concerned with implicatures derived from textual relations, which correspond to Hawkins' anaphoric and associative anaphoric uses.

As for the definite descriptions, he made following distinctions:

1. *Direct reference* (when a description makes a direct reference to an entity previously mentioned)

– I saw a girl. The girl was carrying a red coat.

2. *Indirect reference by association* (in this case, the description may be closely related to antecedent, rather than having an antecedent which is directly mentioned)

Here, Clark gives us three levels of predictability of the associated information:

1. Necessary parts-I saw the car. The wheel is huge;

2. Inducible parts-I saw the car. The windshield was broken.

3. Probable parts- I will go for a run. The exercise can help me.

3. *Indirect reference by characterization*, where a description may characterize a role played in an event or in a situation mentioned earlier. Two options are possible:

1. Necessary roles- John was robbed. The robber escaped.

2. Optional roles-John was murdered. The gun was never found.

2.4. ERROR ANALYSIS

Error analysis is one of the relatively modern approaches in ELT and teaching methodology, as well as in applied linguistics. The aim of this approach

is to study the types of errors students make, in order to analyze the causes of these errors and try to prevent them.

As a method, error analysis was developed in 1960s, by S.P. Corder and his colleagues. A key finding of error analysis has been that many errors learners make are produced by learners making faulty inferences about the rules of the new language, i.e. their mother tongue interferes with the language they learn. Error analysis distinguishes between errors, which are systematic, and mistakes, which are not.

In ELT, a mistake is based on knowledge that the students have, but fail to apply properly. A mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a “slip of a tongue”. Mistakes can be corrected by learners themselves.

Errors are different, for they reflect that the student does not possess the necessary knowledge to make merely a mistake. An error is a noticeable deviation from the grammar or from the right form, and the can not be self-corrected by learners.

3. THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

This research was designed to analyze the mistakes learners make concerning the usage of definite articles. The participants were elementary school students, from fifth to eighth grade. All the participants had already learned about the usage of definite and indefinite articles prior to the research. The research took place in elementary school “Sveti Sava”, in Kragujevac and was conducted in one phase, during which the students completed the test designed to determine their level of knowledge concerning definite article use. The students knew it was anonymous and would not affect their grade in any way. We believe this created an atmosphere where learners felt more relaxed and less afraid to make mistakes, but also that this affected their judgment in certain way (they did not think long enough, they wanted to finish as soon as possible, etc.) and resulted in several invalid tests that were not taken into consideration.

The sample consisted of 80 students. Unfortunately, as already stated above, we had to discard 7 tests due to their irregularity. The research was conducted in April, 2013. The main instrument was the test, whereas the method was error analysis.

In our research, we have analyzed the errors learners make when they use articles. The classification of articles we used was based on classification of definite article uses according to Hawkins. The students were given a test, which consisted of 30 sentences in which an article was omitted. Their task was to fill in the gaps by using the appropriate article – definite or indefinite.

The structure of the test was as follows: there were six examples of indefinite article use; six examples of situational uses – two sentences for visible

situational use, two for larger situational uses (one sentence for general, and one for specific use), and two sentences for immediate situational use; there were also six examples of bridging, that is three sentences for each bridging use-associative anaphoric or anaphoric use. As for the unfamiliar uses, there were six of those examples in the test- three for referent clauses and three for associative clauses. In the test, three examples for the uniqueness were given, as well as three examples for the familiarity, but those examples were not taken into consideration for the results of the research. There were thirty sentences in the test, and the learners were given 45 minutes to complete the sentences.

Our hypotheses were that the greatest percentage of learners will err with examples that illustrate situation use of the definite article (both immediate and larger situation use) and bridging, i.e. associative anaphoric use, since these uses fall under more complex definite article use, and Serbian language has no such category whatsoever. Namely, anaphoric use of the definite article can easily be substituted by demonstrative pronouns. For example, in the sentence *The girl was wearing a purple hat* (example taken from the test: *Tom saw a girl in the supermarket. The girl was wearing a purple hat*) the definite article can be replaced by the demonstrative *that* (*That girl was wearing a purple hat*²). Unlike this example, with bridging and situation use, there is no equivalent in Serbian sentences³.

4. THE RESULTS

First of all, we noticed that they made very few, if any, mistakes concerning uniqueness and unexplanatory modifiers use, at least in grades 6, 7 and 8. Fifth graders made more mistakes concerning these usages, but this was mainly because they had not practice articles as much as the older learners had. What is interesting is that those few mistakes that were made showed no regularity. For example, they knew that there was an article in the phrase “the King of France”, whereas significant number of them did not know that they should use the definite article in front of the noun *president*.

² Tom je video (jednu) devojku u prodavnici. Ta devojka je nosila ljubičastu kapu.

³ He has a red car. The tyres are red, too. On ima crveni auto. *Te gume su takođe crvene. Beware of the dog. *Čuvaj se tog psa (natpis).

The small break is in five minutes. *Taj/naš mali odmor je za pet minuta. Have you seen the birthday boy? *Da li si videla tog slavljenika?

Table 1. Results of the tests administered within the research

Definite article usage			5th grade	6th grade	7th grade	8th grade
Visible situation use			58.8%	61.7%	50%	50%
Situational use	Immediate situation use		64.7%	55.8%	63.1%	55%
	Larger situation use	General	64.7%	64.7%	63.1%	40%
		Specific	94%	82.3%	42.1%	40%
Associative anaphoric use			45%	52.9%	42.1%	25%

As far as other usages of definites are concerned, the most common mistakes made are shown in Table 1. Therefore, these are the errors that will be analyzed in more detail in this paper.

4.1. FIFTH GRADE

In fifth grade, we had 17 valid tests.

As we can see from the Table 1, when it comes to visible situation use, out of 34 occurrences of this usage, 20 were incorrect, i.e. 58.8% error. As for the immediate situation use, out of 34 examples, 22 were done incorrectly (64.7 % error). When it comes to larger situation use, 11 examples out of 17 were incorrect for the general use (64.7 % error) and, astonishingly, 16 out of 17 for the specific use (94% of examples were incorrect). Finally we had three examples in each test that were part of associative anaphoric use, i.e. bridging.

In fifth grade, out of 51 occurrences of this type, 23 were wrong – 45%.

4.2. SIXTH GRADE

In sixth grade, there were also 17 valid tests. The results were slightly different. Namely, for visible situation use, out of 34 examples, 21 were not correct (61.7% incorrect answers). As for the situational uses, immediate situation use was not that complicated for the sixth graders, at least not for the half of them, since 19 out of 34 did those examples incorrectly (55.8 % of incorrect answers). In general situation use, 11 examples out of 17 were incorrect (64.7%), and, as was the case in the fifth grade, the percent of students that did not understand the specific use of definite article was very high – 82.3% of the usages were done incorrectly. Finally, bridging was a problem for half of the students – out of 51 examples, 27 were incorrect (52.9%).

4.3. SEVENTH GRADE:

Seventh grade was significantly different from the previous two. Here, we had 19 valid tests.

Firstly, in visible situation use 50% sharp was the percentage of those students who made mistakes (19 out of 38). Immediate situation use was also a problem – there were 24 incorrect examples, out of 38 (63.1%). The results were surprising when it comes to other situation uses, especially in the larger situation use. When completing the sentences that illustrate the general use of the definite article, 12 examples out of 19 were done incorrectly, and when completing the sentences that illustrate the specific use (which was, to remind you, the use with the highest number of mistakes in 5th and 6th grade) only 8 out of 19 examples were done incorrectly – 42.1%. Of course, this is not an insignificant number of mistakes, however, it is considerably smaller than in the previous two groups. Bridging was also not that complicated for the seventh graders – the percentage of their mistakes was 42.1 % (24 mistakes out of 57 examples).

4.4. EIGHTH GRADE:

Eight graders' results were likewise a surprise in certain aspects. All the tests that were given were valid, so we have 20 tests for our analysis.

Firstly, visible situation use was a problem for half of the students (20 mistakes out of 40 examples). Immediate situation use was slightly more complicated – 22 out of 40 examples were not correct (55%). As for the larger situation uses, it is interesting that these uses were difficult for them in the same amount – 40% of them did those examples wrong, that is 8 examples out of 20, for both the general and the specific use. Finally, for the associative anaphoric use the examples were also very surprising. Only 25% of the examples were not correct (5 out of 60).

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

When discussing the results given above, we have to take into account several things. Namely, certain rules learners are taught in school may interfere and have influence on the answers given by the participants of our research.

For example, the use of the noun *bartender* for the immediate situation use (*The bartender is not serving drunk guests*) may have confused the students, since they all knew that with the nouns that stand for professions and occupations usually go with the indefinite article. The other example for immediate situation use (*Beware of the dog*) had significantly fewer numbers of errors.

Furthermore, for the visible situation use, our example was *Please, give me the salt*, where a large number of learners made mistakes partly because they had learned that we do not use any article before structural nouns. Similarly to the situation described above, learners made notably fewer mistakes when it comes to the other example for visible situation use (*Can you move the chair, please?*).

If we know that an error is systematic if it is likely to occur repeatedly and not recognized (known) by the learner, we can claim that these errors that the subjects of this research made were systematic, because none of them recognized them as errors, nor did they correct themselves.

When analyzing the results of the tests, it can be seen that the use of the definite article, that proved most difficult for the participants of this research, is specific situation use, on average 64.6%. Likewise, another larger situation use, the general situation use, presents a problem for the learners – on average 58.12% of sentences were done incorrectly. When it comes to immediate situation use the average percentage of mistakes was 59.65%.

Contrary to what was expected, instances of bridging did not represent the greatest difficulty for the participants, although the percentage of the mistakes made when it comes to bridging uses was notable, but not over 50 %.

6. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the participants of our research made mistakes (and errors) when there were some “unexpected” uses of definite article (such as the example with the bartender). The rules that they learn in school interfere with the semantics of definite article, which is very important to note here, since this fact can be helpful when improving the teaching methodology when it comes to articles in English language. Furthermore, one of the main reasons for making errors is L1 interference, as was already discussed in Chapter 3. Namely, Serbian language has no equivalent structural or semantic representation for all uses articles can cover in English language.

Another important fact to be considered is that the students made most mistakes in situational uses, in larger situational use, to be more specific, whereas unexplanatory modifiers use and uniqueness was not a problem for them. Our hypotheses were that the greatest percentage of learners will err with examples that illustrate situation use of the definite article (both immediate and larger situation use) and bridging, i.e. associative anaphoric use. The first hypothesis was proved, whereas the second was only partially proved.

The number of errors was significantly lower in eighth grade, probably because they had more experience and more practice than their younger fellow students. This proves that learning and mastering the correct usage of English articles can be achieved over time.

To sum up, we can conclude that interferences that disable or at least hinder the proper usage of articles in English language, can be of different origin. Namely, on one hand, the way in which articles are taught can significantly affect the understanding of more difficult familiarity usages (such as situational or visible situation use). On the other hand, their mother tongue is an obstacle when learning articles, since there are no articles in Serbian language, and the learners have no habit of giving definite description to nouns. The authors hope that these results offer an insight on how to enhance teaching of definite and indefinite articles to learners whose L1 is Serbian in the light of the conclusions drawn in this paper.

APPENDIX 1:

Put a/an/the where necessary:

1. Your sister is ___ beautiful girl.
2. I found ___ key to your room.
3. ___ fastest person to sail to America was very famous.
4. ___ King of France has brown hair.
5. He has ___ red car. ___ tires are red, too.
6. Tom saw ___ girl in the supermarket. ___ girl was wearing a purple hat.
7. Can you move ___ chair, I can't pass.
8. ___ man I saw last night was your friend.
9. I forgot ___ headset for your phone.
10. He is ___ doctor.
11. ___ president gave a speech yesterday.
12. Please give me ___ salt.
13. I took ___ book from the library. ___ book was very old.
14. Beware of ___ dog.
15. I need ___ pencil.
16. ___ Earth goes around the Sun.
17. ___ bartender is not serving drunk guests.
18. I am having a party. ___ guests will come at eight.
19. ___ small break is in five minutes.
20. ___ first person to sail to America was an Icelander.
21. I found ___ key. ___ key opens the front door.
22. My wife and I share ___ same secrets.
23. I saw a house yesterday. ___ roof was green.
24. ___ book I am reading is very interesting.
25. ___ jacket I bought yesterday is too small.

26. I remember __ questions from the test very well.
27. (In a classroom) __ blackboard is not clean.
28. I need __ cup of coffee.
29. Have you seen __ birthday boy?
30. (at school) __ projector is broken, we need another one.

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ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈА УПОТРЕБЕ ОДРЕЂЕНОГ ЧЛАНА ОД СТРАНЕ УЧЕНИКА ЧИЈИ ЈЕ МАТЕРЊИ ЈЕЗИК СРПСКИ

Резиме: Предмет овог рада је перцепција одређеног члана од стране ученика којима је енглески страни језик, а чији је матерњи језик српски. Главни фокус аутора је семантика чланова у енглеском језику, тј. различити начини на које се чланови односе на претходни реченични члан, и/или на сам контекст. Што се тиче методолошког оквира истраживања, као главни метод је коришћена анализа грешака, а истраживање је спроведено на узорку од 80 ученика различитог нивоа знања енглеског језика. Резултати истраживања су показали да је највећи проблем ученицима употреба члана у *specific situation use* (употреба члана у тачно одређеном контексту), али и друге употребе су представљале потешкоће. Резултати истраживања указују и на то да ученици енглеског као страног језика највише греше у употреби члана када се правила која они науче у школи не поклапају са семантиком самог члана. Такође, важно је напоменути да интерференција са матерњим језиком представља један од главних узрока грешака када је члан у питању.

Кључне речи: анализа грешака, одређени члан, семантика, ESL, ELT, методика наставе