

## WHY YOU SEE IT AND WHY YOU DON'T: English article usage and the Informativeness Principle

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### 1. ARTICLE VS. NO ARTICLE

In Chesterman (1991) I argue that English has five articles. Three are visible 'surface articles': *the*, *a*, and (unstressed) *some*. Additionally, there are two kinds of 'no article', i.e. two distinct reasons why 'no article' is used: one is the indefinite 'zero article' before plural and mass nouns (*mice*, *cheese*); and the other is the definite 'null article' before count singular proper nouns, and also before count singular common nouns in some contexts (*John*, *in bed*, *a new kind of squash-racket*).

Furthermore, these five articles seem to line up on a scale of definiteness, thus:

Maximally indefinite <-----> Maximally definite  
zero — *some* — *a* — *the* — null

Why is it that 'no article' occurs at each extreme of the scale, and not in the middle? I have suggested (1991:200) that the underlying reason is a pragmatic one: overt, surface forms are used only when the speaker deems it necessary to specify a given degree of definiteness. At the extremes of the scale, context alone (including situational and general knowledge) is normally sufficient for the hearer to identify the referents appropriately, so overt marking would be redundant.

One way of explicating the pragmatic principle operating here is Levinson's (1987) definition of the Informativeness Principle: Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (Compare e.g. the basic Minimax strategy of the human mind: maximum benefit for minimum effort, otherwise known as Zipf's Principle of Least Effort; Grice's Maxim of Quantity; Kasher's (1986:109) Rationality Principle:

"Given a desired end, one is to choose that action which most effectively, and at least cost, attains that end, other things being equal"; Leech's (1983) Economy Principle: Be quick and easy.)

The 'omission' of articles at the extremes of the definiteness scale thus follows directly from this principle.

With this in mind, let us now look more closely at the article choice that seems the most problematic one to advanced learners of English: the contrast between *the* and zero. It is problematic in that such learners typically over-use *the* and under-use zero — evidently an instance of hypercorrection; they precisely do *not* follow the Informativeness Principle.

## 2. THE VS. ZERO

I take the following texts to be acceptable and grammatical English:

- (1) He had nothing now to read and so stared from the window at the telegraph wires, the tarred wood gables of the farmhouses, the orchards, the cows in the fields of buttercups, and the parties of blond-haired children who clung to the barriers of the level-crossings and waved their satchels.
- (2) The truth of the matter was that during the Sixties, the passion for automation and the automatic control of industrial and social processes, including the collection and the storage of information, had far outrun the capacity of the concerns subjected to their installation to handle them.
- (3) Mathematically inclined biologists of the twentieth century built a discipline, ecology, that stripped away the noise and the color of real life and treated populations as dynamical systems. The ecologists used the elementary tools of mathematical physics to describe life's ebbs and flows. Single species multiplying in a place where the food is limited, several species competing for existence, epidemics spreading through the host populations — all could be isolated, if not in the laboratories then certainly in the minds of the biological theorists.

These texts, I claim, are all right (although the end of the second one is syntactically somewhat awkward — irrelevant to the present argument). But they are not original. They contain a total of 12 additional definite articles, in places where the original had ‘no article’ (i.e. zero). (Readers may care to see if they can identify these — answers below.)

What does this show? For a start, it of course shows that there is often very little difference between the generic sense of zero and the ‘total’ or ‘inclusive’ sense of *the* (see Hawkins 1978). But I think it also shows the effect of the Informativeness Principle. One realization of this Principle is to be seen in speakers’ preferred degrees of specification: if a speaker specifies more than is pragmatically necessary, time and effort are wasted and the hearer’s attention span may be exceeded. The Principle implies, in effect: Be no more specific than you need be; or, Be as general as you can.

Now, one primary means of specification in English is via the use of the articles. I have argued in detail (1991) that the overall semantic difference between the surface articles (*the, a, some*) and ‘no article’ is precisely one of generality (more strictly, extensivity; extensivity is one component of definiteness): adding any surface article limits the generality of the reference of the noun, in the sense of making the noun more actual, concrete, specific, quantitative rather than categorial (for this last formulation see Quirk et al. 1985:275). Using *the* when a general zero would do thus goes against the Informativeness Principle by introducing an unnecessary degree of specificity — unnecessary, that is, from the speaker’s point of view of what the hearer needs to be told.

Notice what is not being claimed here. I am not claiming that there is *no* difference between zero and *the*: of course different articles make a difference of some kind. The point here is that this difference may not be pragmatically relevant, it may be superfluous to the hearer’s adequate understanding in a given situation.

To illustrate the point further, here are some more examples where the writer could have used *the* but didn’t — the added articles are in brackets.

- (4) At the cemetery, from which the snow had almost melted, the priest ... began to suffer from a fit of (the) shivers. (Bruce

Chatwin: *Utz*, 1988:10)

- (5) A month after the surrender ... Utz succeeded in disavowing his German passport and obtaining Czech nationality. He had a harder time dispelling (the) rumours that he had helped in the activities of Goering's art squad. (Ibid.:24)
- (6) Attempts were made from time to time to authorize the presence of television cameras in the House of Commons, to bring the sight of the legislature at work into the homes of (the) voters and (the) voted-for, to the lasting benefit of both. (Bernard Levin: *The Pendulum Years*, 1970:176)
- (7) Among the arguments ... used against the modest proposal was the contention that (the) members conscious of the television cameras would tend to 'play to the gallery'... (Ibid.:176)
- (8) Without help from cues such as haziness, a cloud twenty feet away can be indistinguishable from two thousand feet away. Indeed, (the) analysis of satellite pictures has shown an invariant fractal dimension in clouds observed from hundreds of miles away. (James Gleick: *Chaos*, 1988:107)

### 3. THE VS. NULL

Most such examples are of plural or mass nouns, often with a restrictive modifier of some kind, so that the original article is zero. We also find a few similar examples with the null article (i.e. the 'no article' before singular count nouns), where *the* is likewise possible but not chosen (see also (*the*) *color* in (3), where the article has been ellipted after its occurrence in the previous NP):

- (9) He noted with approval the first signs of (the) spring. (*Utz*, 7)
- (10) Stealthily the computer advanced, (the) vanguard of the technological revolution, hailed as the cure for all mankind's ills ... (*The Pendulum Years*, 178)

It seems that it is by no means as easy to delete definite articles from a text (preserving grammaticality and intended sense) as it is to add them, as illustrated above. If a surface article is indeed present, this is because the Informativeness Principle has thus determined its use. The same Principle provides a good explanation for the omission of such articles. Native speakers are evidently more sensitive to the application of this Principle than even advanced learners. The pedagogical conclusion seems to be: if *the* and 'no article' are both grammatically possible, prefer 'no article'.

#### 4. PS

Here are the first three passages in their original form; places where the definite articles were added are marked by Ø.

- (1) He had nothing now to read and so stared from the window at the telegraph wires, the tarred wood gables of the farmhouses, the orchards, the cows in Ø fields of buttercups, and Ø parties of blond-haired children who clung to the barriers of Ø level-crossings and waved their satchels. (*Utz*, 65)
- (2) The truth of the matter was that during the Sixties, Ø passion for automation and Ø automatic control of industrial and social processes, including the collection and Ø storage of information, had far outrun the capacity of the concerns subjected to their installation to handle them. (*The Pendulum Years*, 180)
- (3) Mathematically inclined biologists of the twentieth century built a discipline, ecology, that stripped away the noise and Ø color of real life and treated populations as dynamical systems. Ø Ecologists used the elementary tools of mathematical physics to describe life's ebbs and flows. Single species multiplying in a place where Ø food is limited, several species competing for existence, epidemics spreading through Ø host populations — all could be isolated, if not in Ø laboratories then certainly in the minds of Ø biological theorists. (*Chaos*, 59)

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