

SEMINAR 3B – ARTICLES with COMMON NOUNS

- the indefinite article – the definite article – zero article

In discussing the use of the articles, we must distinguish between specific and generic reference:

e.g. *A lion* and *two tigers* are sleeping in the cage. (= specific r. – we have in mind something specific)

X

Tigers are dangerous animals. (=generic r. – not particular tigers, but tigers in general)

Note: generic ref. can be expressed in the following ways:

A tiger can be dangerous.

Tigers can be dangerous.

The tiger can be dangerous.

but not: ~~*Tiger*~~ can be dangerous. – **zero article is possible only with U nouns:**

Velvet makes an excellent curtain material.

I. THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE – A / AN

1) Classification

a) general statements

e.g. *An architect* is a person who designs buildings. / *A rose* is a flower.

b) definitions

e.g. *A cat* is a domestic animal. (or *Cats* are domestic animals. – is also possible)

c) origins

e.g. He's *a* Frenchman. / an American. (*compare*: He's French.)

d) occupation

e.g. She's *a* doctor. / My father is *an* architect.

e) religion

e.g. She's *a* Catholic. (also: She's Catholic.)

f) politics

e.g. He's *a* Republican.

2) Quantity – a / an is used to mean ‘only one’

- a) one – we are not specifying any particular thing or person
e.g. I’d like *an* apple.

!! b) when *st* is mentioned for the first time – since it hasn’t been mentioned before, it is unfamiliar to the speaker or hearer

e.g. I looked up and saw *a* plane. *The* plane flew over the trees.

Compare: I am just about to move into *an apartment* quite near where you live.
I am just about to move into *the apartment* directly above yours.

c) reference to measurement

- price – e.g. *80 p a kilo / per kilo*
- distance + speed – e.g. *40 km an hour / per hour*
- frequency – *twice a day / per day*

Other uses:

- *a / an* after **what / such** with C nouns

- exclamations – e.g. *What a* surprise! *What an* interesting story!
- to emphasize degree – e.g. My boss is *such an* idiot!
- *what a lot ...* in exclamations – e.g. *What a lot of* flowers! *What a lot of* trouble!

- **pairs of nouns**

- the nouns are considered to accompany each other naturally
- *a / an* is used before the first noun of a pair

e.g. *a cup and saucer*
a hat and coat
a knife and fork

- **body parts**

- if they are multiple, they can be individually referred to with *a*:

e.g. Jack has *a broken finger*. but Jack has bumped *his head*.

- illnesses / conditions

- 1) the use of *a / an* is compulsory with: *cold, headache, sore throat, broken leg, fever, temperature* – e.g. I've got *a cold*.
- 2) the use of *a / an* is optional with: *catch (a) cold; have (a) backache, stomach ache, toothache, earache*
- 3) in the plural – no article is used
e.g. *measles, mumps*
- 4) uncountable illnesses – no article is used
e.g. *flu, hepatitis, cancer, pneumonia, diabetes, appendicitis*

II. THE DEFINITE ARTICLE – THE

- **the** marks a phrase as definite – i.e. we refer to *st* that can be identified uniquely thanks to the knowledge of context or general knowledge shared by the speaker and hearer

e.g. immediate situation – the reference of 'the' is derived from the 'extralinguistic' situation

as in: *The roses* are beautiful. (= said in a garden)
 Have you visited *the castle*? (= said in a given town)
 Have you fed *the cat*? (= our cat)

or larger situation – the reference is based on general knowledge of the 'larger situation' that speaker and hearer share as in:

 the Prime Minister (in a particular country everyone knows who we mean)
 the Pope, the moon, the sky, the sun, etc.

1) Classifying

a) general statements

e.g. *The cobra* is dangerous. (= a certain kind of ... / as a species)

also: *Cobras* are dangerous. (= the whole class)

A cobra is a very poisonous snake. (= as an example of the class)

b) the group as a whole – the + nationality adj.

e.g. *The British* prefer staying at home. (= the British people in general)

The Japanese admire the traditions of *the Chinese*.

c) the group as a whole – the + plural names

e.g. *The Price sisters* have opened a boutique.
The Europeans are a long way from political unity.
The Liberals want electoral reform.

d) specified groups – the + collective noun or plural C

e.g. *the police, the public, the unions*

e) the + adjective

e.g. *the blind, the rich, the unemployed*

2) Specifying

- we use *the* when the listener or reader can already identify what we are referring to, i.e. *the* shows that the nouns has been specified by the context / situation or grammatically (anaphoric and cataphoric reference)

a) anaphoric reference – ‘anaphora’ (=back reference)

e.g. Singleton is a quiet village near Chichester. **The** village has a population of a few hundred people. ←

In the first sentence the village was mentioned for the first time – a quiet village
In the following sentence we already know which village we are talking about – we have already specified it in the first sentence. (=direct anaphora)

the anaphoric ref. can also be indirect as in:

e.g. I lent Bill *a valuable book* but when he returned it, *the cover* was filthy and *the pages* were torn. (= we didn't mention *a cover* and *pages* before, but we know that a book has a cover and pages)

b) cataphoric reference (is ‘the opposite’ of anaphoric = the identity will be established by what follows the head noun, i.e. an *of*-phrase, a relative clause or non-finite clause:

e.g. I am trying to find **the** book that I wanted to show you.
Where's **the** magazine I brought this morning?
The letters on the shelf are for you.
The girls sitting over there are my cousins.

c) specifying with a limited context

- the context is limited enough for the listener (or reader) to identify who or what is referred to

e.g.

people: Who's at the door? – It's *the* postman.

places: Where's Jenny? – She's gone to *the* butcher's / to *the* supermarket.

things: Pass me *the* salt, please.

parts of a whole:

a human body – He has a pain *in the* chest. / I grabbed her by *the* arm.

a room – *the* ceiling, *the* door, *the* floor

an object – *the* back, *the* centre, *the* top

a town – *the* shops, *the* station

an appliance – *the* on/off switch

Note: We also use *the* when we do not refer to a specific place or thing:

e.g. go to *the* cinema / theatre / doctor's

the country / mountains / seaside

the paper (=newspaper) as in *You'll probably see it in the paper tomorrow.*

te news / *the* radio / *the* press

Locations which are 'one of a kind':

e.g. *the* earth / sky / sun / moon / solar system / *the* galaxy , *the* universe

Uniqueness:

e.g. *the* Pope, *the* President , *the* government, *the* Equator

Other uses:

- *the* in time expressions – e.g. *the* beginning, *the* middle, *the* end, *the* first / last, *the* next, *the* following day, *in the* morning / afternoon / evening
- seasons – *the* is optional – e.g. We usually have a holiday *in (the) summer.*

But: if we refer to a particular season – *The spring of last year* was cold.

- dates – *the* is spoken but not written

e.g. I'll see you on May 24th. (spoken as *May the 24th*)
I'll see you on 24th May. (spoken as *the 24th of May*)

- fixed time expressions

e.g. *all the while, at the moment, for the time being, in the end, etc.*

- superlatives

e.g. It's *the worst* play I have ever seen.

- musical instruments – I play *the piano*.

- fixed phrases – *The sooner the better*.

- fixed expressions – *do the shopping*

- restrictive items – e.g. sole, only, same – She was *the sole survivor*

- the + adjective – *the blind, the unemployed*

- ordinals – *the first*

III. ZERO ARTICLE

- with plural countables: *Girls* do better than *boys* at school.

- uncountables – *Butter* makes you fat.

- proper nouns – *John* lives in *London*.

The class as a whole – general statements

a) zero article + plural C nouns

people: *Women* are fighting for their rights.

places: *Museums* are closed on Mondays.

food: *Beans* contain a lot of fibre.

occupations: *Doctors* always support each other.

nationalities: *Italians* make delicious ice cream.

animals: *Cats* do not like cold weather.

insects: *Ants* are found all over this area.

plants: *Trees* don't grow in the Antarctic.

products: *Watches* have become very accurate.

b) zero article + U nouns (always singular)

food: *Refined foods* like sugar should be avoided.
drink: *Water* must be pure if it is to be drunk.
substances: *Oil* is essential for the manufacture of plastic.
collections: *Money* makes the world go round.
colours: *Red* is my favourite colour.
activities: *Smoking* is bad for the health.
other activities: *Business* has been improving steadily this year.
sports, games: *Football* is played all over the world.
abstract: *Life* is short.
politics: *Capitalism* is by-product of free enterprise.
languages: *English* is a world language.

Unique items

- first names – e.g. *Elizabeth* was my mother's name.
- surnames – e.g. These tools are made by *Jackson and son*.
- full names – e.g. *Elizabeth Brown*
- titles – e.g. May I introduce you to *Captain / Colonel / Major* Rogers?
- days, months, seasons, holidays (Christmas)
- subjects – e.g. Biology, Physics, Geography

Other uses of zero article

- **times of day and night**, esp. after the prepositions *at, by, after, before*

e.g. *at dawn / daybreak, sunrise, noon, midnight, dusk*
by day, night
before morning

- **meals** – *breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner, supper*

e.g. *Dinner* is served. / Michael's *at lunch*. / Let's have *breakfast*.

But! When a meal is specified, we use articles as in:

The breakfast I ordered still hasn't arrived.
That was *a very nice dinner*.
We had *a nice dinner*, just the two of us. (= a particular meal)

- **man** – as the 'human race' or 'mankind'

e.g. This book is an attempt to trace the history of *man / mankind*.

- **nouns like school, hospital, etc.**

: **bed, church, class, college, court, hospital, market, prison, school, sea, town, university, work**

- these nouns have the zero article when we refer to their primary purpose (= the activity that is associated with them – we do not refer to actual buildings or places but to the ‘institutions’)

e.g. He was sent *to prison* for 7 years.
The children went *to school*.
He had an accident and was taken *to hospital*.
It's time to go *to bed* now.

But! When specified, we use articles as in:

Ken went *to the prison* to visit his brother.
Alison's mother went *to the school* to see her daughter's teacher.
Jill has gone *to the hospital* to visit Jack.
I sat down *on the bed*.

- **means of transport and communication**

e.g. *travel by bicycle, bike, boat, bus, car, coach,*
travel by land, air, sea
go on foot

But! When the means of transport is specified, we use articles as in:

I came here *on the local bus*.
You won't go far *on that old bike*.

communicate by radio / phone **but** *be on the phone / talk on the radio*

- **fixed phrases – parallel structures** – two nouns placed together in a parallel structure

e.g. *arm in arm*
face to face
side by side
hand in hand
eye to eye
inch by inch
day by day
man to man

also: *from top to bottom*
in case of
keep in mind
by reason of
in turn
by heart
come to light

- 'pairs' joined by 'and'

e.g. *day and night*
father and son
husband and wife
light and dark
pen and ink
sun and moon

- **what / such + plural nouns or U**

e.g. *What freedom* young people enjoy nowadays!
We had *such problems* getting through Customs.

- unspecified quantity

e.g. I have news for you.
I have presents for children.

Zero article with definite meaning

- **when a phrase specifies a unique role or task, e.g. only one person holds the particular position**

e.g. Mary is *(the) captain* of netball this year.
As *(the) chairman*, I declare this meeting closed.
John F. Kennedy was *(the) President of the United States* in 1961.

Compare: *Prime Minister Blair* v. *the Prime Minister*

- **articles are usually omitted in headlines or on official forms**

e.g. 'Crew deserts *ship* in harbour'
Please state *reason* for application and give

Compare:

<i>be in town</i>	v.	<i>The town</i> is very old.
<i>be in bed</i>	v.	<i>It's on the bed.</i>
<i>go to church</i>	v.	How far is <i>the church</i> ?
<i>go to sea</i>	v.	<i>The sea</i> looks calm.
<i>travel by bus</i>	v.	She was <i>on the bus</i> .
<i>send it by post</i>	v.	<i>The post</i> is late today.

- abstract nouns

e.g. She is studying <i>European history</i> .	X <i>the history of Europe</i> .
..... <i>human evolution</i>	X <i>the evolution of man</i>
..... <i>medieval art</i>	X <i>the art of the Middle Ages</i>