

Count, mass, definite, specific, generic?

*What determines the choice of articles in Standard English?*¹

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1. Introduction

The article system of Standard English is considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of the grammar to acquire, especially by learners whose language does not have articles (Butler 2002; Geng 2010; Han, Chodorow & Leacock 2006; Huebner 1985; Ko & al. 2008; Master 1997; Parish 1987; Robertson, 2000; Robinson 2010; Thomas 1989; Whitman 1974; amongst others). The English article system also poses problems for speakers whose language does have articles, but whose article system differs from that of English, such as Romance, where all common nouns in argument positions generally must occur with a determiner, while English allows bare nouns (i.e. zero article) with abstract nouns, non-count nouns, as well as plural count nouns.

The primary aim of articles in English is to mark the definite vs. indefinite contrast, and their use is also determined by such factors as whether nouns are countable or non-countable. Languages that lack articles do not overtly mark the (in)definite contrast, but there is evidence that speakers of these languages are sensitive to these semantic categories, which may be marked by other means, such as word order (see Li & Thompson 1976 for Chinese), or where meaning is simply derived from the context.²

Some languages have articles that serve to mark the (non)-specific contrast instead of the (in)definite contrast. Bickerton (1981) observes that creole languages mark referentiality (i.e. specificity) as opposed to definiteness. ‘Samoan distinguishes a ‘specific’ article *le* and a ‘non-specific’ article *se* (Lyons 1999:57), and a noun phrase (NP) introduced by the specific article *le* may be definite or indefinite. In Turkish, which lacks a definite article, specific objects are case marked with the accusative case marker (-*yu*) while non-specific direct objects are not marked (Eng 1991:4-5).

In English, both the definite and indefinite articles are used for both specific and non-specific entities. However, English does have the indefinite specific article *this* (Prince 1981), which is used instead of *a/an* when the speaker wishes to make absolutely clear that the referent is specific. Furthermore, bare plural count nouns can never be specific - for a specific interpretation, indefinite plurals must be modified by the quantifier *some*. This provides evidence that speakers of English are sensitive to the feature specificity though it is not necessarily marked in this language.

The semantic categories of definiteness and specificity are of interest because studies have shown that ‘L2 learners’ errors of article misuse are not random, but are traceable to an association of *the* with the feature *specificity* (Ionin 2006:253). Both article omission, and the use of the definite article for specific indefinites has been attributed to learners marking the [\pm specific] as opposed to the [\pm definite] contrast (Ko & Wexler 2004; Ko, Ionin & Wexler 2010; Ionin, Ko & Wexler 2004; Ionin, Zubizarreta & Philippov 2009; Yang & Ionin 2009; Ko, Perovic, Ionin & Wexler 2008; and more).

¹ I stipulate Standard English, bearing in mind that there are many new varieties of English emerging, where article systems may vary.

² Out of 620 languages surveyed by the World Atlas of Languages (WALs), 216 have a definite article distinct from a demonstrative; 69 languages use a demonstrative with definite NPs, 92 languages mark definiteness with an affix on the noun; 45 languages have an indefinite article, but no definite article; 198 have neither indefinite nor definite article (Dryer 2011).

Following Matthewson and Schaeffer (2000), Ionin (2003:247) proposes the Article Choice Parameter according to which a language that has two articles can distinguish them as follows:

- Setting I. Articles are distinguished on the basis of specificity.
- Setting II. Articles are distinguished on the basis of definiteness.

However, semantic features of definiteness and specificity are not the only factors that determine article choice in English. Other factors include the noun category, e.g. whether the noun is countable or non-countable, as well as the context, i.e. whether the sentence is generic, existential, or episodic. The count vs. non-count distinction of nouns is a grammatical distinction, which does not exist in many languages, but it is important to understand this concept, as it determines which article, if any must be used with a particular noun.

2. Noun category and the count vs. mass distinction

Nouns denote entities in the world. An entity can be an abstract concept, a solid object, an event or an individual (animal or human). The classification of nouns varies cross-linguistically, and different criteria are used to classify them.³ This paper is concerned primarily with nouns that occur with articles in English, namely common nouns, and their classification into countable and non-countable categories.⁴ Henceforth I will refer to the count vs. non-count distinction as the count mass distinction, as this is commonly used in the literature. These two categories can be further subdivided into tangible and non-tangible entities.

2.1. Count nouns

Typically, count nouns denote objects, or separable entities with discernible boundaries, which make it possible to count them. For this reason, they can occur with the singular article to denote 'only one', with numerals to denote an exact number, and with the quantifier *some* to denote an indefinite number. A definite article is used to denote a set of entities - in the case of the singular, we have a singleton set, and in the case of the plural, set membership is > 1 .

Count nouns include both tangible and intangible entities:

- Tangible: solid objects, such as *balloon, building, dog, mountain, pencil, train*
- Intangible: *contest, event, explosion, marathon, race, war*

Although they have no physical boundaries, intangible count nouns denote entities that have a beginning and an end, and this makes it possible to conceive them as separable entities that can be counted. Like the tangible count nouns, they can combine with the singular indefinite article, and they can be pluralized.

Jackendoff notes that 'One hallmark of a count noun, say *apple*, is that one cannot divide its referent up and still get something named by the same count noun, i.e. another apple' (1991:18-19). Similarly in the case of intangible count nouns - once they are divided, they no longer comprise an entity that can be denoted by the noun - if you only run half a race, you have not run a race, and

³ 'Distinctions such as masculine/feminine and human/non-human are well known in setting up subclasses of nouns, because of their widespread use in European languages. But many Indo-Pacific and African languages far exceed in the number of noun classes they recognize. In Bantu languages, for example, we find such noun classes as human beings, growing things, body parts, liquids, inanimate objects, animals abstract ideas, artefacts, and narrow objects' (Crystal 2010:95). Bantu uses a system of classifiers to distinguish the various categories of nouns.

⁴ English does not use articles with proper nouns such as names of individuals (*Amy, Harry*), names of days of the week, and months (*Monday, June*), names of planets (*Jupiter, Neptune*) etc. Some geographical place names occur without an article, e.g. *Beijing, Darwin*, while others occur with the definite article: *The Caribbean, The Czech Republic*. Names of mountains, oceans and rivers also take the definite article: *The Andes, The Indian Ocean, The Nile*, etc.

there's no such thing as half an explosion. 'By contrast, with a mass noun such as *water*, one can divide its referent up and still get something describable as *water*' (Jackendoff 1991:18-19).

2.2. Non-count nouns

As the term suggests, non-count nouns cannot be counted, i.e. they cannot combine with the singular indefinite article or numerals, and they cannot be pluralized. Like count nouns, they too can be further subdivided into tangible and non-tangible categories, namely mass and abstract nouns:

- Tangible: mass nouns, which comprise the following:
 - liquids - *milk, oil, tea, water*
 - materials - *leather plastic, rubber, wood*
 - powdery substances - *flour, rice, sand, sugar*
 - homogeneous masses - *butter, cream, glue, mud*
- Intangible (abstract concepts): *anger, fear, happiness, intelligence*

Whilst it is possible to individuate objects denoted by count nouns, it is not possible to single out their individual minimal parts of mass nouns. For example, the atoms of water are too small to be visible to the naked eye, so we cannot conceptualize the individual parts of water. Similarly, grains of sand or sugar for example, as too small for us to easily count them, hence these substances being categorised as mass nouns. In order to refer to an amount of a mass noun, a measure term is used, such as *a glass of water, three packets of sugar*.

Abstract nouns are generally subsumed under the mass denotation in the grammar because they share some of their distributional properties with respect to the use of articles. However, there will be shown to be an important difference between abstract nouns and mass nouns in the sections that follow.

2.3. The count vs. mass distinction

When we say that languages differ with regard to the count mass distinction of nouns, we refer to the different means by which quantification over objects and substances is expressed in their grammar. It is a grammatical distinction that does not exist in all languages.⁵ Furthermore, the count mass distinction, cross-linguistically, does not necessarily apply to the same nouns. For example, nouns like 'cutlery', 'footwear', 'fruit', 'furniture', 'hair', 'information', 'knowledge', 'luggage' and 'research' are treated as mass in English, but count in Italian and French. 'Pavarotti's hair is some kind of atomless substance in English, but turns into an atomic one in Italian. If we don't want semantics to start looking like magic, we have to say that that in the real world 'hair' and 'capello' obviously denote the same stuff and what grammar is about is something like 'intended atomicity' or 'presupposed atomicity'" (Chierchia 1998: 86).

It is assumed that the solid object vs. substance dichotomy is a universal one, and that we are all able to distinguish solid objects that retain their shape, from homogenous substances that don't, even if the grammar of our language does not make this distinction. In languages that make the count mass distinction, count nouns differ from mass nouns in the following respects:

- Count nouns, but not mass nouns can be pluralized;⁶

⁵ Of 400 languages surveyed for the World Atlas of Language Structures, 260 make the count mass distinction, while 140 don't (Dryer & Haspelmath 2011).

⁶ There are some count nouns in English cannot occur with numerals, but they are exceptions, e.g. *cattle, scissors, trousers*. These nouns must occur with a classifier phrase, namely, *head of cattle, pair of scissors/trousers*.

- The denotation of mass nouns can be measured, but not directly counted - therefore mass nouns generally do not combine with numerals, and a classifier or measure phrase is required to denote quantity, such as *a bucket of mud*, *two bottles of oil*, *some cups of tea*. The measure term is pluralized, but not the head noun.
- When the indefinite article or a numeral combines with a non-count noun without a classifier phrase, it yields a measure or kind denotations, e.g. '*A/ one coffee*' means *one cup of coffee* or *a type of coffee*.

In languages that do not make the count mass distinction of nouns, as in many languages of Southeast Asia, numerals cannot combine with nouns, but a classifier phrase must be used. For example, Greenberg (1972) explains that for the English equivalent of *five books*, 'The kind of literal translation often supplied in grammars of such languages might be something like 'five flat-object book' (1972:5).⁷

It is important for all L2 learners of English to understand the count vs. mass distinction, as it is one of the factors that determine the choice of article, if any.

3. Semantic definitions

3.1. Definiteness

Both Definiteness and Specificity have been shown to be distinct universal categories of meaning that must find expression in natural language (see Guillemin 2011 Chapter 4). However, whilst there is an abundance of literature of definiteness dating back to Aristotle, research on specificity is relatively new and sparse by comparison.

The contrast between definiteness and indefiniteness has been most commonly defined in terms of 'familiarity': a definite expression is said to denote or refer to an entity which is familiar to both the speaker and hearer, while an indefinite expression denotes or refers to an entity which is known only to the speaker. Christophersen (1939) notes that when the definite article is used, 'the speaker must always be supposed to know which individual he is thinking of; the interesting thing is that the *the*-form supposes that the hearer knows it, too. For the proper use of *the*, it is necessary that it should call up in the hearer's mind the image of the exact individual that the speaker is thinking of (1939: 28).

The definite article has also been analyzed as a quantifier that binds noun variables, yielding quantified expressions that assert existence and uniqueness. The Familiarity theories of Definiteness (Christophersen 1939; Karttunen 1971; Heim 1983, 1988), and the quantificational theories (Russell 1905; Hawkins 1978) in fact overlap in their definition of Definiteness in terms of 'identifiability', i.e. a discourse referent that is 'familiar' to all speech participants, or one that belongs to a set that the hearer must be able to identify for clear interpretation.

Guides to the use of English articles commonly claim that an indefinite article is used with the first mention of an entity, and the definite article with subsequent mentions. However, there are many instances when the use of the definite article with the first mention of an entity is grammatical; the feature definiteness does not relate to the sequence in which an NP appears in the discourse, but on whether the hearer is able to uniquely identify the referent(s). A necessary and sufficient condition of the use of the definite article is for the hearer to be able to identify some set of elements in discourse, and to locate a referent in it, and if sufficient information is given in the context, this condition is met.

⁷ Greenberg notes that 'other word orders are possible' (1972:5 fn 6).

The question is thus: ‘How does the hearer acquire familiarity with the referent?’ There are various means by which this can be achieved, resulting in different categories of definiteness, all of which require a definite article in English, even with the first mention of an entity.

Hawkins (1978) builds on the work of Jespersen (1933) and Christophersen (1939) to identify eight categories of familiarity for which the definite article is used. These are discussed below.

I. Anaphoric definiteness, or ‘direct anaphora’: When a new entity is introduced in the discourse, and is assumed to be unfamiliar to the hearer, an indefinite article is used, as in (1a). Following this first mention, the hearer becomes familiar with the entity, and a definite article can be used with a subsequent mention of the entity as in (1b):

- (1) a. Fred was discussing **an interesting book** in his class. (Hawkins1978: 86)
b. I went to discuss **the book** with him afterwards. (Hawkins1978: 86)

In (1b) ‘the book’ is understood as a singleton set, co-referential with the preceding indefinite description ‘an interesting book’. We have here a case of direct anaphora.

II. Associative anaphora: When there is no discourse antecedent, there must be a ‘trigger’ (Hawkins 1978: 123) to license the use of the definite article, in which case, it has ‘associative anaphoric’ use, as in *a book...the author*, where *book* is the ‘trigger’ which licenses the use of the definite article with the noun *author*. Our shared knowledge of the association between these entities and their various parts contributes to the familiarity effect. Sentence (2) provides another example of associative anaphora, which licenses the use of a definite article even with the first mention of the noun *beginning*, because it is general knowledge that a war has a beginning and an end:

- (2) I remember **the beginning of the war** very well ... (Hawkins 1978: 139)

In the case of ‘direct anaphora’ the antecedent of the definite NP must be relatively close in the discourse. In the case of ‘associative anaphora’, where there is no discourse antecedent, the use of the definite article is licensed by shared knowledge of the relationship between the newly mentioned NP and its ‘trigger’.

III. Immediate situation use: When something is visible to both the speaker and hearer, a definite article is used, on the condition that the entity is uniquely identifiable by the hearer. For example, looking at a bowl of fruit where there is only one orange, several bananas, and some apples, a speaker wanting the orange would say:

- (3) Please pass me **the orange**.

The use of an indefinite article would be quite odd, given that the orange is uniquely identifiable. However, if the speaker wanted an apple or a banana, an indefinite article would be used as in (4), and the meaning would be ‘one of the apples’ or ‘one of the bananas’:

- (4) Please pass me **an apple / a banana**

In this case, the use of a definite article would be confusing to the hearer, who would need to ask: ‘Which one?’ as the use of the definite article implies that the speaker has uniquely identified one of the apples/bananas.

IV. Familiar entities (situational uses): When referring to entities whose existence is shared knowledge, a definite article is used with the first mention of the entity, even when it is not visible. For example, when speaking to a member of your family about the household pets, you would use a definite article even with the first mention:

- (5) a. Let’s take **the dog** for a walk.
b. I forgot to feed **the chickens**.

There are many entities that form part of our existence and which we assume to be shared knowledge by members of our community. This familiarity licenses the use of a definite article even when they are first mentioned in the discourse, so long as they are assumed to belong to a singleton set. Such examples in a small community could include for example *the post office*, *the town hall*, *the soccer field*, and *the primary school*, etc.

V. Unique entities: In (6) we have a case of what Hawkins (1978) refers to a ‘larger situational use’, where the speaker appeals to the hearer’s general knowledge about entities whose existence is shared knowledge, as for example, *the sun*, *the moon*:

- (6) a. **The earth** in one of **the planets**.
- b. **The president of the US** has recently visited Australia.

We say *the earth* to mean the planet that we live on, and *the planets* to refer to the unique set of planets that revolve around the sun in our universe, and their existence is part of our general knowledge. It is also part of our general knowledge that at any one time, there is only one *President of the United States*. In this sense, they are all unique entities and the use of an indefinite article with these entities would deprive them of their uniqueness:

- (7) a. ***An earth** revolves around **a sun**.
- b. ***A President of the United States** will visit Australia

A sentence like (7a) implies that there one earth out of several which revolves around one of several suns. This could be true in another universe, but it is not the case in our universe, as we know it. Similarly, sentence (7b) implies that there is more than one President of the US at any one time.

A definite article is also used with nouns that are modified by a superlative adjective, as these are assumed to be unique (whether they are a singleton set, or a set of membership > 1 - it is the set that is unique):

- (8) a. The is **the best mango** that I have tasted.
- b. These are **the best mangoes** that I have tasted.

VI. Information given in the context: A definite article is also used with the first mention of an entity when enough information is given in the context to make the entity uniquely identifiable (even if the hearer cannot see it), as in (9a-b), where the modifying relative clauses limit the reference the nouns:

- (9) a. The book **(that) I bought yesterday** is about marsupials.
- b. The possums **that keep peeping at us** are ringtails.

The additional information that the speaker gives about the entities makes it possible for the hearer to uniquely identify them, and a definite article is used even with the first mention of these entities

3.2. Specificity

The distinction between specific and non-specific lies in the notions of denotation vs. reference. Denotation is the relation that exists between a lexical item and a set of potential referents, while reference is the relation that exists between some expression and actual referents in a particular world. Non-specific expressions serve to denote, while specific expressions serve to refer, as in (10a) and (10b) respectively:

- (10) a. A/the cat purrs. (Non-specific)
- b. A/the cat purred. (Specific)

Sentence (10a) is a generic sentence, which asserts a general truth about all cats, and does not refer to any specific cat. The episodic sentence (10b) asserts the existence of a cat such that it purred. The non-specific vs. specific interpretations of the NPs in these two sentences is equivalent to what Strawson (1950) and Donnellan (1966) term the ‘attributive use’ and the ‘referential use’, respectively.

The feature Specificity has been more commonly associated with indefinites when these occur in sentences with opacity inducing predicates, such as intensional transitive verbs (e.g. *hope*, *want*, *wish*), where the interpretation of the direct object is ambiguous between [\pm specific] readings, as for example:

- (11) a. I want to read **a book**. I’ll go and look for **one**. [-definite] [-specific]
 b. I want to read **a book**. **It’s** about possums. [-definite] [+specific]

Only the context can disambiguate the interpretation. In (11a), the indefinite *a book* simply denotes a ‘type of object’; it does not presuppose or assert the existence of any book - in fact the speaker may not find one. The indefinite pronoun *one* is used in lieu of the NP in the subsequent clause. In the case of a specific indefinite in (11b), the referent exists, and the 3rd singular pronoun *it* can be used to refer back to the referent.

In English, indefinite *this* can be used instead of the indefinite article *a/an* in the case of specific referents only, as shown in (12a-b):

- (12) a. ??I want to read **this book**. I’ll go and look for **one**. [-definite] [-specific]
 b. I want to read **this book**. **It’s** about possums. [-definite] [+specific]

While *a/an* can be ambiguous with respect to Specificity, indefinite *this* is unambiguously specific (Prince 1981: 233), and always carries existential presupposition. It can substitute for the indefinite article when the NP is specific as in (12b), but not otherwise. Diessel claims that ‘the unstressed *this* is a particular indefinite article, strictly distinct from the adnominal demonstrative from which it is descended’ (1999:139). He observes that ‘... in colloquial English, unstressed *this* and *these* are commonly used to mark specific indefinite information that will persist in the subsequent discourse’ (1999:138).

The feature specificity, or ‘referentiality’, is associated with both definite and indefinite NPs. In the case of definites, it is discourse related (Pesetsky 1987; Ishane & Puskás 2001; von Heusinger 2000, 2002). This means that either the entity has been previously mentioned in the discourse, or the speaker gives enough information in the discourse for the hearer to uniquely identify the referent(s). In the case of indefinites, specificity relates to a ‘presupposition of existence’ (Bickerton 1981; Prince 1981; Fodor & Sag 1982; Farkas 2002), or an ‘assertion of existence’ (Ionin 2006). Ionin identifies two fundamental properties of Specificity as expressed by indefinite *this*, namely *speaker intent to refer* and the concept of *noteworthy property*. These claims are not new. In his analysis of the use of indefinite *this* in American English, Perlman observes that indefinite *this* serves as a signal for additional information; it leads the listener to expect to hear more about the NP (1969: 78). Furthermore, he notes that indefinite *this* is used in contrast to the indefinite article *a*, which is used when there is nothing *noteworthy* to signal about the NP (1969: 80). An example follows, with an indefinite NP first introduced in the discourse, and its noteworthy property described in the ensuing clause:

- (13) Everything seemed normal, when **this guy** walked in. He wore nothing but a scarf around his waist.

4. The function of articles in Standard English

Articles are a sub category of determiners, the class of which also includes demonstratives (*this, that, these, those*)⁸, possessive adjectives (*my, your, his, her, our, their*, etc.), and quantifiers (*all, each, every, many, no, some*, etc.). Articles are classified as quantifiers because they serve to quantitatively delimit the number or amount of the entity mentioned.

In order to make a proposition, you pick out something in the world and say something about it, and the nature of your proposition determines the type of sentence that is uttered, e.g. generic, existential, or episodic, etc. Other factors that determine the choice of article include:

- Is the noun countable or not?
- If countable, is it singular or plural?
- Is the entity known to the speaker only (indefinite), or to both the speaker and hearer (definite)?
- Does the NP denote or refer?

Figure 1 illustrates how the article quantifies over the totality of entities to denote sets of entities:

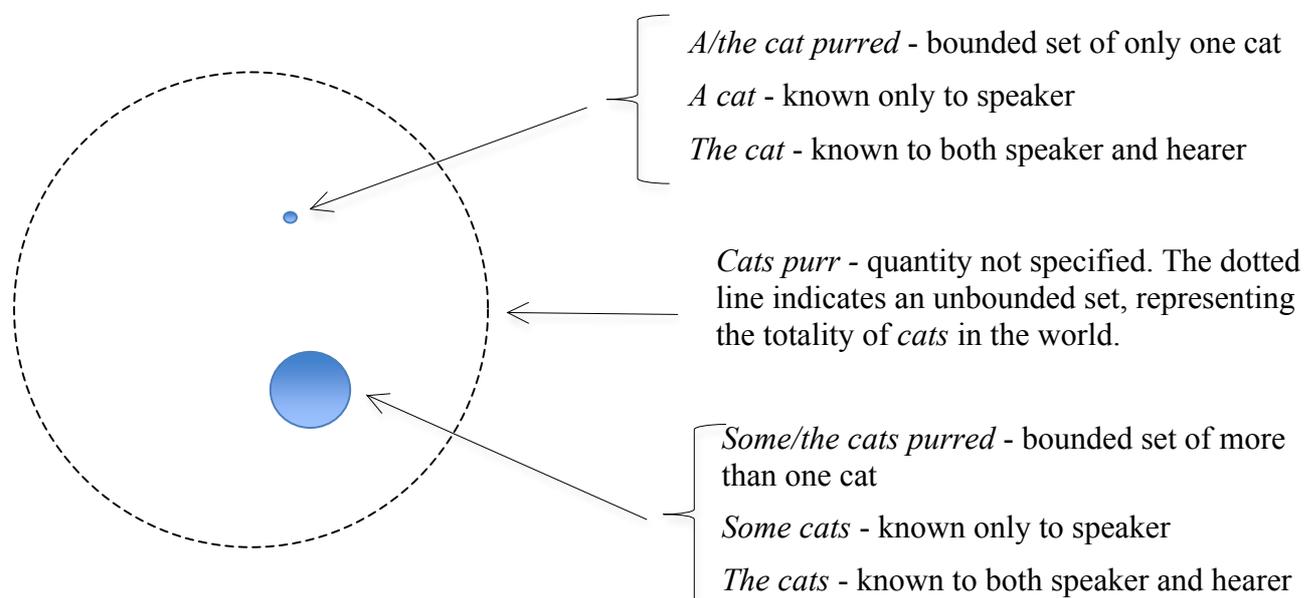


Figure 1: *A, some and the* create sets

4.1. Generic sentences

A generic sentence asserts a universal truth, and the predicate in a generic sentence generally denotes permanent or enduring properties of the subject.

- (14) a. Cats purr.
b. A cat purrs.
c. The cat purrs.

Even though singular NPs and bare plurals can be used in generic contexts, the number of cats is irrelevant, and sentences (14a-c) have an equivalent meaning, namely:

- (15) Generally a cat purrs /For all cats, if x is a cat, then x purrs / That kind of animal purrs.

⁸ The proximate demonstrative *this* is not to be confused with the indefinite article *this*.

When an indefinite singular NP is used in a generic context, it denotes the property associated with the kind; a definite NP stands for an individual as representative of the kind, and a bare plural stands for the kind, or genus. All the NPs in generic contexts are non-specific, i.e. the propositions do not assert the existence of individual members of the kind.

Following Carlson (1978, 1999), the English bare plural (BP) is analysed as a kind denoting term, not specified for number. He proposed that: 'a question like *Are there holes in the wall?* is truly answerable with *Yes* under the circumstance where just one hole is in the wall and no more. If this is so, it argues that BPs are not indefinite plurals that stand in contrast to the indefinite singular, but rather forms that instead encompass both' (Carlson 1999: 4).

In generic sentences, English admits BPs, as well as singular indefinite NPs, and singular definite NPs, but not plural definites, as shown by the oddity of (16) when uttered out of context:

(16) ??The cats purr.

While (16) is not ungrammatical per se, this sentence does not assert a universal truth about cats. It yields a contrastive meaning, as for example, if reference is being made to a known set of cats as opposed to a known set of dogs, and the following sentence is uttered: *When their owners turn up, the cats purr and the dogs bark.*

4.2. Existential sentences

Existential constructions are used to assert the existence of some entity/entities. Since English bare plurals are kind denoting terms, an existential sentence with a BP has the equivalent meaning as shown:

(17) There are cats on the roof = There are those kinds of animals on the roof.

If you wish to assert the existence of instances of cats on the roof, the singular indefinite article is used for a singleton set, and the quantifier *some* is used when the number of cats in the set exceeds one:

- (18) a. There is **a cat** on the roof.
b. There are **some cats** on the roof.

Carlson (1978) proposed that the plural of *a/an* N is not the bare plural (as is often assumed in the literature), but *some* N, where the indefinite quantifier *some* indicates that reference is being made to a set of cats whose set membership is > 1 .

Since BPs are kind denoting terms, they can never be used to refer, i.e. they are never specific. Conversely, given that *some* quantifies over a set of entities, it cannot be used in a generic context as shown by the pragmatic oddity of (19):

(19) ??Some cats have four legs.

Existential sentences generally admit only indefinites (Milsark 1979), as shown by the ungrammaticality of (19a-b):⁹

⁹ There are sentences starting with *There is/are* which admit definite NPs. However these are 'presentational' sentences that introduce lists not existential sentences. For example:

- (1) *What will we see at the sanctuary? Well, there's **the koalas, the hairy wombats, the kangaroos, the wallabies, the platypus, and all the birds.***

Note that the singular form *There's (There is)* is acceptable in this case instead of the plural form *There are*, despite the NPs being in the plural.

- (20) a. *There's **the cat** on the roof.
 b. *There are **the cats** on the roof.

4.3. Episodic sentences

The predicates in episodic sentences denote properties of the subject which hold at a particular point in time, i.e. they denote temporary properties, e.g. *Sam is drunk*, as opposed to enduring properties e.g. *Sam is tall*. Sentences (21a-c) are episodic sentences, where reference is being made to instances of cats that exist in the world such that they have purred:¹⁰

- (21) a. A/ the cat purred.
 b. Some cats purred.
 c. The cat/s purred.

Note that the definite article has the same form for the singular and the plural - *the* quantifies over the totality of a set, and when membership of that set exceeds 1, it is the noun that has a plural form:

- (22) a. The cat is on the roof.
 b. The cats are on the roof.

In the next section, I show how articles combine with different categories of nouns to yield varying interpretations in different contexts.

5. The use of articles with different categories of nouns

Since English makes the count mass distinction of nouns, it uses different means of quantification to denote sets or amounts of count and mass nouns respectively. Generally:

- Abstract nouns, mass nouns and plural count nouns can occur with zero article, but singular count nouns must occur with a determiner.
- The singular indefinite article *a/an* is used only with count nouns.
- The definite article *the* can be used with all categories of nouns.
- The indefinite quantifier *some* can be used with all categories of nouns.

These are general rules, and there are exceptions, as well as certain conditions that license the occurrence of articles with the various categories of nouns, as discussed in the subsections that follow.

5.1. Using articles with count nouns

We have seen that plural count nouns can occur without an article. Bare plurals (BPs) are kind denoting terms that are not specified for number. Singular common count nouns are the only category of nouns in English that cannot occur without an article, i.e. a singular common count noun requires a determiner in all argument positions, as shown by the ungrammaticality of (23a-c):

- (23) a. *Cat purrs - A/the cat purrs
 b. *There is cat on roof - There is a cat on the roof
 c. *Cat is on roof - The cat is on the roof

¹⁰ The past tense triggers the episodic interpretation. For a habitual reading in the past 'used to' is used e.g. *The cats used to purr*.

In the case of singular count nouns, the indefinite vs. definite contrast is marked by the use of *a/an* vs. *the*. In (24a-b) *a cat* and *the cat* are also specific, given that reference is being made to instances of cats that are on the roof:

- (24) a. She saw **a cat** on the roof.
b. She saw **the cat** on the roof.

In the case of plural count nouns, the indefinite vs. definite contrast is marked by the use of *some* vs. *the* and, in both cases, the NPs are specific. When used with count nouns, *some* means ‘a few’, ‘several’. If zero article is used, number is irrelevant, and the bare plural is non-specific:

- (25) a. She saw **some cats** on the roof. (An indefinite number of cats)
b. She saw **the cats** on the roof. (A set of cats known to speaker and hearer)
c. She saw **cats** on the roof. (*cats* denotes ‘those types of animals’)

Indefinite NPs can also be used predicatively, to denote membership to a class, or group, or to denote a role or profession:

- (26) a. I am **a student**.
b. Paul is **a carpenter**.

Note that when plural count nouns are used predicatively, they occur with zero article:

- (27) a. We are **students**.
b. Paul and Sam are **carpenters**.

In each case, the nominal predicates denote properties of the subject.

Non-tangible count nouns pattern like tangible count nouns. They can combine with the indefinite and definite articles, and with the quantifier *some*:

- (28) a. He called **a race** this morning.
b. We heard **some explosions** just then.
c. **The celebrations** went on for a long time.

Like tangible count nouns, intangible count nouns can also be used predicatively:

- (29) a. This sound was **an explosion**.
b. These sounds were **explosions**.

5.2. Using articles mass nouns

When mass nouns are used without an article, there is no indication of quantity, and the noun has a kind denotation:

- (30) a. I bought **meat** at the supermarket = I bought that kind of food at the supermarket.
b. There is **milk** in the fridge = There is that kind of liquid in the fridge.
c. We need **sand** for the concrete = We need that kind of material for the concrete.

All the indefinite NPs in (30a-c) are non-specific. In order to denote an indefinite quantity, *some* is used:

- (31) a. I bought **some meat** at the supermarket.
b. There is **some milk** in the fridge.
c. We need **some sand** for the concrete.

For an exact quantity, a measure phrase must be used. The NPs can be definite, indefinite, singular or plural. When in the plural, it is the measure term that is pluralized, and not the mass noun:

- (32) a. I bought **a kilo of meat** at the supermarket.
b. I bought **the kilo of meat** at the supermarket.
c. There are **some bottles of water** in the fridge.
c. **The bottles of water** are in the fridge.

In general, the indefinite article cannot occur in direct construction with a mass noun, except to derive a measure or kind denotation, as in:

- (33) a. We ordered **a coffee** and **a wine**. = one cup of coffee and one glass of wine
b. This is **a rice** from Pakistan - denotes a 'type of' rice

The definite article can be used with mass nouns without a measure term. In (34a-c), *the meat*, *The milk*, and *the sand* are all definite and specific, as they refer to amounts of meat and milk whose existence is shared knowledge:

- (34) a. I bought **the meat** at the supermarket.
b. **The milk** is in the fridge.

5.3. Some nouns can be both count and mass

Note that in English a number of nouns can function both as count and mass, especially food denoting nouns.¹¹ Both can combine with the quantifier *some*, but only the count denoting nouns take plural morphology:

Count denotation

- (35) a. She put **an apple** in the pie.
b. She put **some apples** in the pie.
c. She put **the apple/s** in the pie

Mass denotation

- (36) a. She put **apple** in the pie.
b. She put **some apple** in the pie.
c. She put **the apple** in the pie.

In the case of fruit, the mass nouns denote a substance like *mashed banana*, *stewed apple*, or simply any fruit that has been cut up. In the case of animals, the count noun denotes the live animal and the mass noun denotes the meat of the animal.

Count denotation

- (37) a. Mary kept **a lamb** in her garden.
b. Mary kept **some lambs** in her garden.
c. Mary kept **the lamb/lambs** in her garden.

When an animal name is used as a mass term, it denotes the meat of the animal, e.g.:

Mass denotation

¹¹ Not just food denoting nouns - e.g. paper

- (38) a. Mary had **lamb** for dinner.
 b. Mary had **some lamb** for dinner.
 c. Mary had **the lamb** for dinner.

5.4. Using articles with abstract nouns

The term ‘abstract’ is used for nouns that denote concepts, properties, or states. Abstract nouns are not tangible. They lack physical attributes like shape, colour or form, and thus cannot be counted. Examples of abstract nouns include *anger, beauty, freedom, happiness, intelligence, kindness, jealousy, love, sincerity, thought, wisdom*, etc.

Unlike concrete nouns that denote discernible entities with conceptual boundaries, abstract nouns name things that do not consist of visible separable entities, and they have no discernible boundaries. Abstract nouns are a sub-category of non-count nouns, and, like mass nouns, they generally cannot combine with the indefinite article as shown by the ungrammaticality of (39):

- (39) *A happiness and a peace.

Abstract nouns are generally used with zero article, the indefinite quantifier *some*, and the definite article *the*. When used with zero article, the noun is non-specific, and has a kind denotation (just like BPs):

- (40) a. **Happiness** cannot be measured = That kind of emotion cannot be measured.
 b. Dogs can sense **fear** = Those kinds of animals can sense that kind of emotion.

An unmodified abstract noun cannot occur with an indefinite article, as shown by the ungrammaticality of (41a-d):

- (41) a. *This cat displays **a curiosity**
 b. *She has **a fear**.
 c. *These children show **a wisdom**.

Abstract nouns can be used with an indefinite article *a/an* **only** when they describe a certain ‘type of’ emotion or abstract concept, in which case, the noun must be modified by an adjective, a prepositional phrase, or a relative clause, as shown in (42a-c) respectively:

- (42) a. This cat displays **a strange curiosity**.
 b. She has a **fear of spiders**.
 c. These children show **a wisdom which is beyond their age**.

Although abstract nouns are a sub-category of non-count nouns, which are subsumed under the umbrella of mass nouns for the sake of simplicity, they differ from mass nouns in some respects. Unlike mass nouns, unmodified abstract nouns cannot occur with a definite article - whilst you can say *the meat, the mud, and the sand*, you cannot say *the fear, the joy, or the wisdom*. The definite article can be used with abstract nouns only when these are modified by a prepositional phrase or relative clause, which limit the reference of the noun, as shown:

- (43) a. ***The fear** can be conquered - **The fear of spiders** can be conquered.
 b. *We are inspired by **the wisdom** - We were inspired by **the wisdom of the elders**.
 c. *We occasionally experience **the wish** - We occasionally experience **the wish to be good**.

Unmodified abstract nouns can be used with the indefinite quantifier *some*, to mean ‘a little of’, ‘a degree of’:

- (44) a. You should credit him with **some intelligence**.
 b. **Some generosity** on their part would be welcome.
 c. These puppies need **some love and care**.

6. Marking Definiteness and Specificity in Standard English

The claim that ‘Specificity is not marked by the Standard English article system, which encodes only definiteness, so that *the* is used in all definite and *a* in all indefinite contexts regardless of specificity’ (Ko & al. 2010: 219), is not entirely correct. The distribution of articles with count nouns in various contexts provides evidence that this semantic feature has reflexes in the grammar of English. Despite the fact that the indefinite singular article can be used for both specific and non-specific entities, the specific vs. non-specific contrast can be marked if the speaker so wishes. For example, the indefinite article *this/these* can only be used to introduce specific referents, i.e. that are known to exist, that have some notable property, and to which the speaker intends to refer again in the ensuing discourse.

Bare plurals are kind denoting terms that cannot be used to refer to specific instances of an entity, and therefore can never be specific. The indefinite quantifier *some*, which can be used with all categories of nouns has the equivalent meaning of ‘a few’, ‘several’ when used with count nouns, and when used with mass nouns, it means ‘a little of’, ‘an amount of’. Since it denotes a subset/subcategory of the noun, it can never be used in generic contexts, which admit only non-specific NPs.

Whilst the [\pm specific] contrast can be marked in the case of indefinites, it is not marked in the case of definite NPs in English. However, definite NPs are always specific, except in generic contexts, where a singular definite expression *The N* singles out an individual as representative of the kind, as in *The cat is a mammal*. Definite plurals are ungrammatical in generic contexts **The cats are mammals*.

The tables below illustrates how articles in English mark the [\pm definite] and [\pm specific] contrasts on count nouns in English:

Table 1: Marking the [\pm definite] and [\pm specific] contrasts on count nouns in English

		[-definite] [-specific]	[-definite] [+specific]	[+definite] [-specific]	[+definite] [+specific]
count nouns	singular	a/an N (generic contexts & predicative uses)	a/an N (existential & episodic contexts) this N	the N (generic & episodic contexts)	the N episodic contexts only)
	plural	Bare plural (generic & existential contexts, & predicative uses)	some + plural N (existential contexts) these N	the + plural N (episodic contexts only)	the + plural N episodic contexts only)

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed some of the factors that determine the use of articles in Standard English, namely the count vs. mass distinction, and the semantic features of definiteness and specificity. Whilst languages vary with respect to which features they mark, there is evidence that speakers,

regardless of their L1, are sensitive to both categories of meaning. It is important to understand the distinction between these semantic universals, as they have been shown to be responsible for the misuse of articles by L2 learners.

I have examined generic, existential and episodic contexts and discussed the distribution of *a/an*, *some*, *the* and zero article to show the various interpretations that they derive with different categories of nouns. In conclusion, it must be noted, that despite the lack of articles (as well as auxiliary *be*) in many spoken varieties of English, speakers can nevertheless make themselves understood. However, so long as 'Standard English' is required for academic writing, L2 learners of English will have to learn the article system, and this paper is intended as a reference guide for teachers and learners.

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