The Well Bred Sentence

Chapter 11: The Articles

Introduction

Traditional Grammar tells us that the English articles are:

- the indefinite article 'a' and 'an', and the definite article 'the'.

It tells us very little else, other than that:

- we usually, but not always, omit 'the' when we use a proper noun;

- 'an' is placed before a common noun or adjective that begins with a vowel or a mute 'h', and 'a' before a common noun or adjective that begins with a consonant.

- sometimes, no article accompanies a noun.

The when-and-why of the matter stumbles about in limbo, much to the consternation not only of learners of English but also of many native users. This Chapter proposes a procedure of reasoning that will enable informed and valid decision about whether to use 'a/an' or 'the', or neither. Central to this procedure of reasoning is the proposal that nouns are:

1. **natural genus nouns** that articles do not accompany*;*

2. **quasi-natural genus nouns** that 'the' but not 'a/an' accompanies*;*

3. **identifying nouns** that 'the' accompanies*;*

4. **particularising nouns** that 'a/an' accompanies*;*

5. **definition-structure nouns** and **genitive nouns** that the articles accompany as the intended meaning of a sentence dictates.

The attendant proposal is that, in order to know when to omit articles and when to use them as 'a/an' or as 'the', we must know whether a noun is:

- a naming genus noun;
- a particularising noun;
- an identifying noun;
- a generalising noun,
- a defining noun, or
- a noun acting in genitive relationship with another noun.

Not knowing which of these things a noun is doing, we are not in a position to make decisions about which article should accompany a noun, if either

The terms 'definite' and 'indefinite' articles

The distinction 'indefinite article' is very unhelpful. As this Chapter will demonstrate, 'a/an' can be very definite indeed. So, rather than live with the unsatisfactory distinction 'definite' and 'indefinite', this Chapter simply refers to the articles as themselves: 'a/an' and 'the'.

Particularisation and identification

One syntactic function of the article 'a/an' is to **particularise.** ('A/an' has other functions too. They will be discussed later.) The syntactic function of the article 'the' is to **identify**:

> The man came in with the letter.
>> The identified subject 'the man' came in with the identified object 'the letter'.

> A man came in with a letter.
>> The particularised but not identified subject 'a man' came in with the particularised but not identified object 'a letter'.

> The man came in with a letter.
>> The identified subject 'the man' came in with the particularised but not identified object 'the letter'.

'a/an' with the genus noun; 'the' with the identified noun

Once a noun is particularised, it becomes a unique item. In the foregoing sentences 'the man' and 'a man' each correspond to ' a unique item of the genus *man*. And 'a letter' corresponds to 'a unique item of the genus *letter*'.

So why does one 'man' have 'the' before it, and the other 'a'? This is why: 'the man', like 'the letter', is **identified.** That is, 'the man' and 'the letter' are (somehow) **known items**, not merely members of a genus. For example:

> 'The man gave the letter to a man in the room.'

Saying this, the speaker/writer distinguishes between 'the man', who is an identified man (the writer knows him from some source), and 'a man', who is a particularised but not yet an identified man (the writer knows nothing about him). In the sentence displayed above, 'the man' and 'a man' refer to different people. But'the man' and 'a man' can refer to the same person when the context of these nouns is larger than a single sentence. In a text of sentences, a person is 'a man' until he is identified, after which he becomes 'the man'. And an object is 'a letter' until it is identified, when it becomes 'the letter'. This process holds true for all common nouns.

'But how do we know whether the noun 'man' has been identified?' you ask. The answer is simple: The text in which 'the man' features has made him known. Observe this in the text of the following story:

Our friend Yuri entered the room purposefully, and immediately propelled us towards a man [*particularised but not yet identified*] in the thick of the crowd assembled there.

'This is Igor,' Yuri briskly introduced him to us. Then, waiving niceties, he addressed the man [*now identified as 'Igor'*] with: 'The girls [*common noun previously identified by 'us'*] will brief you oneverything we know to date.' He then pushed an enveloped letter [*particularised but not identified*] into Igor's pocket. Yuri about-turned, apparently meaning to leave.

In the same instance, the man [*now identified as 'Igor'*] gave the letter [*now identified as the enveloped letter Yuri had pushed into Igor's pocket*] to a man [*particularised but not identified*] in the throng [*to be identified by the next text*] that had pressed closely about him. Having seen this, Susan detained Yuri with:

'Who was that man?'
'What man?' Yuri faked bemusement.
'The man [*to be identified by the ensuing phrase*] Igor gave the letter to,' Susan disciplined his evasiveness

Natural identifier nouns

There are nouns that name exclusively by identifying *en masse*. Underpinning these nouns is the concept 'people of a certain kind'. Characteristically, therefore, these are plural nouns. As identifiers they can identify only the plurality 'people of a kind'. Hence the role of the identifying 'the'. Because these nouns can identify only 'people of a kind', they cannot particularise. They are therefore always accompanied by 'the', never by 'a/an'. Pronouns (italicised below) that refer to these nouns are always in plural forms:

> The illuminati [plural noun] inform us only on a need-to-know basis. We would rather that *they* were less secretive.

> The literati [plural noun] fought a war amongst *themselves* on the question of who deserves the Booker Prize.

> The self-styled innocenti [plural noun] took no responsibility for what had happened. *They* always wriggle out of punishment.

> The elite [plural noun] sometimes act as if the rest of us were invisible. We shall soon make ourselves known to *them*.

> The intelligentsia [plural noun] led the fight against censorship. *They* risked *their* lives for the freedom of the press.

The foregoing are all Latin-derived words (except the French-derived word 'elite') that English has adopted. But identifier nouns come as English

words too. They are nouns created from the past-participle forms of verbs. These are a few of them:

> The informed [plural noun: gerund] worked hard to describe the situation to the rest of us. *Their* effort was truly noble.

> The educated [plural noun: gerund] showed a willingness to accommodate our suggestions. *Their* co-operation was much appreciated.

> The dispossessed [plural noun: gerund] naturally resent *their* dispossessors.

Identifier nouns are created also from adjectives:

> The knowledgeable [plural noun: gerundive] thought little of the item I had mistaken for treasure. *They* smiled tolerantly at me.

> The weak [plural noun: gerundive] depend on the strong. *They*, being weak, have few resources of *their* own.

> The educated [plural noun: gerundive] prefer their own company.

It is important to note that natural identifier nouns are always plural nouns, and that they cannot particularise. So we CANNOT SAY 'He is a knowledgeable' or 'He is a literati' or 'He is an educated'.

The legal exception

Legal language provides us with an expression that appears to depart from the 'natural identifier' convention. That expression is 'the accused'. Unlike other natural identifier nouns, 'the accused' can be both singular and plural:

> The accused *was* ordered to take the stand. *He* complied.

> The accused *were* all ordered to take the stand.
> *They* complied.

'The accused' can also be particularised:

> That provision cannot protect an accused whose offence is a criminal one.

On reflection, one realises that 'the accused' is not a natural identifier noun at all. Rather, it is merely the abbreviation of the expression 'an/the accused person'.

The superlatives

When a noun phrase includes a superlative adjective, or it names some 'highest degree' concept, there is, logically, an identification: Only one entity can occupy the superlative (the 'top of the pile') position. Nouns and noun phrases that name by designating that the named item is in the superlative

position thereby identify that named entity. Those nouns and noun phrases are necessarily accompanied by 'the':

> We had <u>the best fun</u> in Paris.
> We had <u>the time of our lives</u> in Lisbon.
> He caught <u>the mother of all influenzas</u> there.
> <u>The worst</u> is yet to come.

The genus nouns

Genus nouns do nothing more than perform acts of naming. So they do not need to be particularised or identified. They name such that their denotation is 'all things that are that genus'. So the articles, **'a/an' and 'the', have no role here**. It is precisely because they perform only acts of naming, and because they have 'all' denotations, that they are genus nouns. This aspect of the naming habit of genus nouns is illustrated by the meaning-templates below each of the following sentences. We shall begin with the natural genus nouns.

Natural genus nouns

All natural genus nouns are singular nouns. They conceptualise many things. We shall begin with some of their 'people' conceptualisations: mankind, man, humanity, Everyman:

Whatever the times, it is never <u>mankind</u> that *is* the innocent victim.

<u>Man</u> is not born wicked.

He wants to save <u>humanity</u> from the scourge of dictatorship.

His audience is <u>Everyman</u>, not the specialist.

Natural genus nouns are always singular, and take the singular copula when they are the subjects of the copula sentence. **The articles, 'a/an' and 'the', never precede them.**

There are also the non-geographical-territory kinds of genus noun, such as: academia, nirvana, individuality: peace, anger, solitude, treasure, rubble:

It is mostly in <u>academia</u> that we find a genuine pursuit of truth.

When you no longer feel your <u>individuality</u>, you are close to attaining <u>Nirvana</u>.

The novice miner mistook <u>rubble</u> for <u>treasure</u>.

There is nothing like <u>solitude</u> to restore mental <u>peace</u>.

The articles, 'a/an' an 'the', cannot accompany natural genus nouns.

Common nouns that take natural genus noun roles

We would certainly not say of 'duck' or 'rabbit' or 'ice-cream', etc. that they are natural genus nouns. However, they certainly can play the role of natural genus nouns:

> We eat <u>duck</u> but we do not eat <u>rabbit</u>.
>> We eat all things that are 'duck'. We decline to eat all things that are 'rabbit'.

> We eat <u>ice-cream</u> after <u>dinner</u>.
>> We eat some things that are 'ice cream' after all things that are 'dinner'.

> He travels by <u>bus</u>.
>> All things by which he travels are 'bus'.

> The hostess served <u>fish</u> for <u>breakfast</u>.
>> The hostess served some things that are 'fish' for all things that are 'breakfast'.

In the following sentences the genus nouns have plural forms:

> <u>Western European males</u> at some time abandon <u>short pants</u> for <u>trousers</u>.
>> All things that are 'European males' abandon all things that are 'short pants' for all things that are 'trousers'.

> <u>Good governments</u> represent the people who elected them.
>> All things that are 'good government' are all things that represent all who are 'the people who elected them'.

Neither 'the' nor 'a/an' can accompany a genus noun. Adding 'a/an' or 'the' to that denotation is logically impossible: genus nouns, by nature, cannot be particularised or identified, for they correspond to a class, not to an item of a class.

Quasi-natural genus nouns

Quasi-natural genus nouns have undergone a process that turns genus nouns into collective nouns. That process consists of qualifying the genus noun with an adjective phrase. (The qualifying adjective phrases are rendered in italics in the sentences that follow.)

> The novice miner mistook <u>the rubble</u> *[that was] in the cave* for <u>the treasure</u> *[that] we were seeking*.

> The <u>academia</u> *[that] I know* is committed to the defence of free speech.

Quasi-natural genus nouns can be identified but they cannot be particularised. (What sometimes looks like particularisation is in fact enumeration. Enumeration will be discussed later in this paper.)

A very important thing to note is the role of the identifying 'the' that accompanies the quasi-natural genus noun. In such cases 'the' simply isolates an instance of the named genus.

'The' with the quasi-genus noun and the adjective phrase

In sentences that call upon 'the' to accompany a quasi-natural genus noun there is always an adjective phrase, either explicitly or implicitly, that describes them, and thereby identify an instance of the genus that noun names. (The adjective phrases in the following sentences are rendered in italics.)

In this sentence, the adjective phrase is explicit.

Everyone admired the glassware *[that]we bought at theexhibition.*

But in this sentence, the adjective phrase is implicit:

'The milk has gone sour,' he grumbled when his wife joined him for breakfast.

We guess that his meaning not that the meaning that all the milk in the world has gone so. Rather, the speaker is referring to the milk in his home. So we assume that the unspoken adjective phrase would have run along these lines:

The milk *that was left on the table* has gone sour.

When we speak of 'the milk'', there is always an identifying adjective phrase, and it is always a relative-adjective phrase, even when it is only implicit.

We demand the justice *[that] we deserve.*
The mathematics *[that] we were taught* was really just arithmetic.
The ideology *[that] he propounded* was not to my taste.

The quasi-genus noun cannot be particularised

Quasi-genus nouns cannot be particularised. This is so because collective nouns by nature name a class of items, not a particular items of that class. It would be illogical to treat them as if they named particular items. So 'a/an' cannot accompany them.

The appearance that it is possible to particularise genus nouns (i.e., let 'a/an' accompany them) is created by sentences such as this one:

They found a treasure where they were expecting only rubble.

However, there is no particularisation here. Rather, there is enumeration:

'a treasure' = 'one treasure'.

(Enumeration is discussed further below, under that sub-heading.)

In the same way, the next sentence apparently particularises the genus noun 'ideology':

<blockquote>An ideology I cannot stand is his favourite.</blockquote>

But this sentence is not actually doing any particularising. In it, 'an' is not functioning as an article: It is representing the numerical concept 'one':

<blockquote>One ideology I cannot stand is his favourite.</blockquote>

The quasi-natural genus noun in abbreviated expressions

A habit of abbreviation has enabled what, at first glance, appears to be a particularisation of the collective noun 'injustice':

<blockquote>He was the victim of <u>an injustice</u>.</blockquote>

In fact, there is no particularisation of 'injustice' here. What has happened is that the expression 'an act of injustice' was abbreviated. This is the version of the sentence with the abbreviated element restored:

<blockquote>He was the victim *of an act of* injustice.</blockquote>

'An' in this context actually accompanies 'act', not 'injustice': 'of injustice' here functions adjectively to describe 'an act'. And it enumerates 'act': it does not particularise it.

What happens when a noun is neither a natural identifier noun, nor a genus noun, nor a quasi-genus noun?

Nouns that are not natural identifier nouns, nor natural genus nouns or quasi-natural genus nouns, are either identified or particularised nouns. So either 'the' or 'a/an' must accompany them. But which? Fortunately, there is a simple answer available:

A noun that is described by an implicit or explicit adjective phrase is identified by it. Because it is identified, 'the' necessarily accompanies it. (Adjective phrases in the sentences below are italicised):

<blockquote><u>The panic</u> *[that] we were in* prevented us from thinking clearly.</blockquote>

<blockquote><u>The no-win position</u> *in which she found herself* was the source and cause of her depression.</blockquote>

<blockquote><u>The daze</u> *[that] the girl was in* was due to <u>the surprise</u> *that had been sprung* on her.</blockquote>

<blockquote><u>The poet</u> *[that is] in me* refuses to bend to grammar rules.</blockquote>

<blockquote><u>The London</u> *[that] I knew* was a foggy city.</blockquote>

Generalisation and the articles

The syllogism is the procedural model of the generalisation. The sentence form of the syllogism is the copula sentence.

It is an axiom of logic that all propositions (the premises and conclusion of the syllogism) have a singular form and a plural form. Thus the singular form:

I am old

has the plural form:

All things that are 'I' are some things that are 'old'.

It follows that when the plural form of a generalisation is

All apples are fruit,

its singular form must be

An apple is a fruit.

The article 'a/an', therefore, accompanies not only nouns with a particularising function but also nouns with a generalising function.

When 'a man' has a generalising function, 'a/an' does not reference a particular man. When 'a toy' has a generalising function, 'a/an' does not reference a toy. When 'an apple' has a generalising function, 'a/an' does not reference a particular apple. Rather, 'a/an' references the genus 'man', the genus 'toy', and the genus 'apple':

A man prefers a blonde.
Men prefer blondes.

A toy pleases a child.
Toys please children.

An apple is a fruit.
Apples are fruit.

The generalising relative-adjective phrase

When there is a generalising relative-adjective phrase (rendered in italics in the following sentences), the noun subject of the verb (underlined) can be accompanied by either 'the' or 'a/an', or that noun can be left without an article if it has a plural form:

i) <u>A mother</u> *who abandons her children* **injures** also herself.

ii) <u>The mother</u> *who abandons her children* **injures** also herself.

iii) Mothers *who abandon their children* **injure** also themselves.

We make exactly the same meaning no matter which construction, (i) or (ii) or (iii), we choose to use. And curiously, the relative adjective phrase does not identify the noun subjects it describes. Instead, in all of them, it is the relative-adjective phrase itself that achieves the generalisation that each of these sentences makes independently:

All mothers who abandon their children injure also themselves.

Definition and the articles

In classic definition structure, the subject (the definiens) is defined in terms of the complement (the definientia).

When the definiens is a plural or compounded noun, the definientia takes the plural-noun form and omits 'a/an', which, of course, is logical, given that 'a/an' are inherently singular forms:

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
<u>John and Mary</u>	are	<u>doctors</u> of considerable standing.
<u>Those women</u>	have been	<u>scientists</u> on a humble level.

When the definiens is a singular noun, the definientia takes the singular-noun form, so 'a/an' precedes it.

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
Tom	is	<u>an engineer</u> in France.
Fido	was	<u>a dog</u> worth knowing.

However, when the sense 'the only' is required, the definientia must be preceded by 'the':

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
Drink	is	the curse of the working class.
Drink is the only curse of the working class.		

If the definientia is constructed with 'a/an', another meaning is achieved:

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
Drink	is	a curse of the working class.
Drink is one of several curses of the working class.		

Identification and the copula sentence

The copula construction does not only generalise or define. It can also identify. That defining and identifying are two distinct functions is obvious in the following sentences.

Definition is performed by the highlighted sentence:

I know you have two women in custody, Mary and Susan. One *is* a doctor, the other a painter.

Identification is performed by both the following phrases (highlighted):

'I want to know which *is* the doctor, and which *is* the painter!'

'Susan *is* the doctor, and Mary *is* the painter,' someone answered.

Defining and referencing

When we wish to define the subject and say something else about it, we do not have to define it first then say something else about it later. We can reference the subject with alternately-naming nouns instead. (The referencing nouns are italicised in these sentences, and the verbs are rendered in bold italics):

(i) John, *doctor, artist and rogue*, ***arrived*** later than everyoneelse.

(ii) John, *a doctor, an artist and a rogue*, ***arrived*** later than everyone else.

Referencing with 'a/an' can land us into difficulty. For instance, according to sentence (ii), above, how many people arrived later than

everyone else: only John, or also a doctor, an artist and a rogue? Ambiguity of this sort will arise only in a sentence where the verb is such that it does not reveal whether the subject is singular or plural; 'arrived' in the foregoing sentences is such a verb. If the sentence had been worded thus::

John, a doctor, an artist and a rogue, ***was*** the last to arrive,

the ambiguity would not have arisen.

A further point is that when we define by referencing, we can chose to use 'a/an', or we can omit it if the referencing noun is a phrase, or if there is a list of referencing nouns:

Referencing noun phrase

John, _veteran_ *of many difficult situations*, was nevertheless nervous about this one.
John, _a veteran_ *of many difficult situations*, was nevertheless nervous about this one.

Rebel *without a cause*, John often picked pointless fights.
A rebel *without a cause*, John often picked pointless fights.

A list of referencing nouns (in italics)

Sailor, poet and dairy farmer, Muriel churned out verses at a great rate of knots.

But we must use the article 'the' when the referencing noun is noun:

The girl, an actress, found it easy to speak in public

unless a foreshortened sentence (*underlined*) precedes the noun:

Actress by nature, the girl produced tears easily..

Nouns that define by referencing have this in common: all of them carry a sense of 'Person X , who is ...'. That is, nouns that reference are really foreshortened-sentence versions of relative-adjective phrases (*initalics*):

John, *who is a rebel without a cause*, often picks fights pointlessly.

A rebel *without a cause*, John often picked pointless fights.

The girl, *who is an actress*, found it easy to speak in public.

The girl, an actress, found it easy to speak in public.

Defining and identifying

Sometimes an identification process runs alongside the defining process. The definition is achieved by the relative-adjective phrase (*italicised*), and the identification by the article 'the'. In such cases, both the definiens and the definientia are accompanied by 'the'.

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
The Mary Smith who raised the alarm	is	the teacher, not the nurse.

There are two people called 'Mary Smith'. One is a teacher, the other a nurse. The one who raised the alarm is Mary Smith the teacher, not Mary Smith the nurse.

Defining and particularising

If the clarification we are seeking to offer is not to do with which Mary Smith raised the alarm, but instead, with whether Mary Smith is a teacher or a nurse, or some other sort of professional, then we need the particularising 'a/an' in the definientia, and the identifying 'the in the definiens:

> The Mary Smith who raised the alarm *is* a teacher, not a nurse.

Definition by apposition

Definition results when a common noun (*highlighted in blue*) and a proper noun (*highlighted in yellow*) are juxtaposed such that the proper noun is second in their sequence. Nouns in this sequence are said to be 'in apposition':

> Teacher Mary Smith *raised* the alarm.

> Teachers Mary Smith and Peter Jones *raised* the alarm.

Nouns in apposition are never accompanied by the articles.

Enumeration and the articles

Sometimes our intention is not to name genus nor to generalise, particularise, identify or define. Instead, our intention is to enumerate. The numerical concepts 'one' and 'some' are central to the expression of that intention. When the concept is 'one', 'a/an' precedes the noun:

> I have an uncle [*one uncle*] in Paris.

> I have a flat [*one flat*] in Paris.

The article is omitted when the tacit operative numerical concept is 'some':

> The girl has family [*some* family members] in Paris.:

> We has [*some*] fun in Paris.

Enumerating or naming genus?

When we use a genus noun, the associated numerical concept is 'all' or 'some', or 'one':

> The guests were served <u>whisky</u> before dinner.
>
>> The guests where served one or some things that are 'whisky'.

> <u>Milk</u> is a good source of '<u>calcium</u>'.
>> All things that are 'milk' are a good source of all things that are 'calcium'.

> The children asked for <u>ice cream</u>.
>> The children asked for all things that are 'ice-cream'.

>> She asked for <u>coffee</u>.
>> She asked for all things that are 'coffee'.

We engage the numerical concept 'one' when we do certain things. For instance, when we place our order with a waiter in a restaurant, we can say:

> Please bring me <u>a whiskey</u>, <u>a milk</u>, an <u>ice-cream</u> and <u>a coffee</u>.

But we cannot say:

> Please bring me a calcium,

for 'calcium' does not lend itself to the concept 'one': it is intrinsically innumerable. 'Whisky', 'milk', 'ice-cream', 'coffee', etc. are numerable, for the simple reason that they associate with some kind of container, such as a glass, cone, cup, etc.:

> a [one] *cup* of coffee, a [one] *glass* of milk, etc.

Quantifying

When we speak of someone's 'having' a commodity, we comment on the level at which that person possesses that commodity. So when we say:

> She has <u>money</u>

we mean that 'She' is in possession of money at a high level. But by:

> She has <u>little money</u>

we mean that *'she'* is in possession of money at a low, or insufficient, level. And by:

> She has <u>a little money</u>

we mean that 'she' has a significant amount, if not a large amount, of money. The same meanings obtain when we quantify other attributes or possessions:

> The plan has <u>merit</u> [level of merit: substantial].
> The plan has <u>little merit</u> [level of merit: very low].

The plan has <u>some merit</u> [level of merit: some but not much].

We have <u>a few</u> <u>friends</u> [a number of friends].
We have <u>few friends</u> [a very small number of friends].

She has <u>patience</u> [a commendable level of patience].

She has <u>little patience</u> [not enough patience].

She has <u>a little patience</u> [some but not much patience].

Idiom and the articles

There are a few uses of the article that do not fit into the pattern of the uses outlined above. But they are not a great number, and they are easily learnt. Here are a few of them:

Tacit agreement and the omission of articles

When 'town', by tacit agreement among a group, is used to signify 'a particular town', it functions as if it were the proper name of that town.

So: He went to town yesterday is equi-meaning, in the given context, with: ,He went to London yesterday if 'town' tacitly signifies 'London' in that context.

It should be noted here that this arrangement works only for 'town'. It does not work for 'city' or 'village': We CANNOT SAY 'He went to city' or 'He went to village'.

There is also a 'town' eccentricity: The expression 'to go to town' is used to mean 'to do something in an extravagant, or somehow unrestrained, way. For example:

'They really <u>went to town</u> when they designed their new house'

remarks that 'They' were quite unconventional/unrestrained in what they put into the design of their house.

More tacit agreement in group usages

The 'tacit agreement among a group' factor works also for nouns other than 'town'. For instance, 'He is <u>at school</u>' means that 'He' is at, or has gone to, *his* habitual school. The common noun 'school' references the proper name of 'his school', e.g. Tonbridge School.

Other expressions that omit the articles locate the subject in activity zones:

He is <u>at church/at services.</u>
>　He is attending (or conducting) a church service.

He is <u>at practice.</u>
>　He is practising a piece on the piano/participating in a
>　sports training event, *etc*.

'The' and body-parts nouns

When we speak of someone's contact with another person's body part, 'the' always accompanies the noun that names it.

> He tapped the girl on the shoulder.
> His false friends stabbed him in the back.
> He took the punch on the chin.

Metaphorical locations and the articles

'The' almost always accompanies nouns than name metaphorical locations

> The man knew he would be in the doghouse for what he did.

> (The man knew he would be shunned, cold-shouldered, etc.)

He was put into *the* cooler after he attempted to escape.

> (He was put into a punishment cell.)

He led us up *the* garden path.

> (He misled us.)

We knew he would go on *a/the* rampage as soon as he heard the bad news.

> (We knew he would behave wildly.)

I am always on the defensive when people criticise him.

> (I always fend off people's criticism of him.)

Metaphorical activity

The 'a/an' always accompany nouns that metaphorical activities:

> He went on a bender on New Year's Eve.
> > He drank an excess of alcohol on new Year's Eve.

> He led us a merry dance.
> > He misled and confused us.

Native speakers and the articles

Native speakers of English, not only ESL learners, should study article usage. There is a tall story in broad circulation to the effect that native English speakers do not make errors when they use articles, because they are blessed with 'received knowledge' of their use. In fact, it is quite common even for well educated native speakers to lose track of what their articles are doing. Here is an example of this, extracted from a doctoral thesis writer's text.

> Criminal liability of the corporation is determined by the estimate of its state of mind. For the purposes of this procedure, the corporation's state of mind is a state of mindof its directors. Unlike

the civil law, the criminal law considers the directors to be a personification of the corporation, not its agents.

The wrongly used articles are struck out in the text below, and the appropriate articles are added in blue font:

The ~~C~~ criminal liability of ~~the~~ a corporation is determined by ~~the~~ an estimate of its state of mind. For the purposes of this procedure, ~~the~~ a corporation's state of mind is ~~a~~ the state of mind of its directors. Unlike ~~the~~ civil law, ~~the~~ criminal law considers ~~the~~ directors to be ~~a~~ the personification of ~~the~~ a corporation, not its agents.

The writer's dual problem in the text above is manifest in his very first sentence. He meant to generalise about 'corporations':

Criminal liability of corporations is determined ...
[article omitted wrongly]

For some reason, he cast his generalisation in the singular form: *is determined*. In itself, that is fine. But he simply did not know that when one is generalising with the genitive case, the nouns must be preceded by 'a/an' or 'the'. He should have written:

A corporation's criminal liability…

or

The criminal liability of a corporation ...

The article and genitive nouns

It seems that this writer thought he could obtain a generalising effect by using 'criminal liability' as a genus noun. He therefore omitted the article. However, when one is using the genitive construction, an article must precede both nouns in the genitive relationship.

A further fact about the 'of' construction of the genitive relationship is that the component of it that would carry the apostrophe (if it were expressed as the apostrophe construction) is the dominant noun. The other noun identifies a property of it. The identifying 'the', therefore, always precedes the noun that names the property owner. So this writer's *Criminal liability of the corporation* should have been rendered thus:

The criminal liability of a corporation ...

If the dominant noun names to identify, the nouns in genitive relationship are preceded by 'the' in the 'of' construction, and in the apostrophe ['s or s'] construction:

The corporation's criminal liability was measured in terms of its directors' guilty minds ...

The criminal liability of the corporation was measured in terms of the guilty minds ...

The writer's problem with the articles and the genitive recurred in the second sentence:

~~a~~ the state of mind of its directors,and

in the last one:

~~a~~ the personification of ~~the~~ a corporation.

His last sentence contains two further errors: 'The' wrongly precedes the names of disciplines. The text he constructed makes itclear that *his intention was to name disciplines, not to identify them*. There is, therefore, no role for 'the' in this naming. He should have used these names of disciplines as genus nouns, and omitted the article:

Unlike ~~the~~ civil law, ~~the~~ criminal law considers ... .

(In another text, we can identify these nouns such that they cease tobe genus nouns, and become nouns identified by adjective phrase:

<u>The civil law</u> *in this jurisdiction* is unlike <u>the civil law</u> *in mine*.)

Finally, 'the' wrongly precedes a generalising/collective pluralnoun:

... criminal law wrongly expects ~~the~~ <u>directors</u> to be ...

So much for native-speaker infallibility in the use of articles.

Conclusion

The ambition of this Chapter was to illustrate that, contrary to the common perception, the use of the English articles does not defy description. (Admittedly, the necessary description is long and fiddly!) The English system of the articles is actually highly logical, and the eccentricities of idiom have only a minor role in it.

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