

THE APPLICATION OF THE ARTICLE IN ENGLISH

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THE fact that many languages are alike in using two alternative forms of the article suggests that they probably express a certain basic antithesis in every case. The purpose of this paper is to discuss this antithesis as it has been formulated, tentatively and as a working hypothesis for English, by members of the Centro di Cibernetica e di Attivita Linguistiche dell' Univer-
sita di Milano.

In outline, our analysis is this.

Among the many possible ways of regarding a thing, we find two which are opposed and complementary. One (A) regards the thing in isolation, the other (B) regards it as a thing among other things; at least together with one other thing.

We regard a thing in isolation, when we are interested in presenting it in its own temporal continuity, its history past or future. The function of the definite article is to present a thing in this way. The indefinite article, on the other hand, presents the article as one among others, not singled out by its particular history.

Clearly this opposition will only be relevant with things which do not admit the alternative singular/plural; not, for instance, with things designated by abstracts, nouns of material, or proper names, in their ordinary uses. Abstracts are not pluralisable, because they consider a thing in respect of the internal relations which hold between its constitutive elements. Materials are not pluralisable, because they are not single objects with limits in time or space. And proper names are not pluralisable, because they carry with them their own spatio-temporal situation. In order for a thing to be capable of singularity and plurality, it must stand in relation to a frame of reference, to something outside itself. The choice of article for things which do not admit the singular/plural alternative is made on a different basis, as I shall show, from the choice for things which do admit the alternative.

A language without article, as Russian is, refrains from semantising this distinction except in special cases. Though the material for the

distinction may be there in the pre-linguistic situation, there is no guarantee that the text will always provide the information needed to make the distinction, and so to choose the article. For example in the sentence "The next time I went to the house the door was opened by the maid", it is very clear how the situation differs from that in "The next time I went to the house the door was opened by a maid". Although a Russian speaker would not make this distinction normally, because the mechanism for it is not to hand (if it were important to the story, he might say "one maid", i.e. among others), nevertheless the material for it is part of the situation he is describing; the information needed to choose an article is available in his thought. But it is very possible that this information will not appear anywhere in the Russian text, and a translator, however skilled, will have no clue as to which situation corresponds more closely to that envisaged by the writer. In such a case, however, the fact that no indication is given is evidence that the distinction is not important to the story; and since either article is correct English here, the translator may make a semi-arbitrary choice. In this instance the indefinite article would be preferable, since it merely does **not** state that the maid is the only maid.

Because no text in any language can be completely informative about the thought it semantises, it is not possible to take the principles which determine the choice of an article in passing from thought to speech and apply them as criteria to a text without articles which is to be translated into English. Nevertheless a human translator is in fact seldom entirely at a loss for an article. This is partly because in many cases only one article is possible on formal grounds, that is, only one is correct English, and the decision is not directly dependent, as it was in the last example, on the content of the passage.

These formal criteria could be set out by themselves as rules-of-thumb for the use of the machine. But they are not sufficient, as we have seen; and they are not arbitrary. They are based on those differences in function which we have suggested, and which we can see acting directly in cases where 'correct English' is not decisive; each such rule indicates a situation in which the function can be relied upon to remain constant in conjunction with some formal element. For example; we may lay it down as a rule that when a singular noun is qualified by an inflected superlative adjective, such as "best", "tallest", etc., they must both be preceded by the definite article - unless the noun is also qualified by a possessive adjective or Saxon genitive; "your best plan". But this rule holds because the superlative, by its meaning, must always refer to one single instance of the nominatum of the noun; its function is to specify which instance, in a way not compatible with the indeterminacy implied by the indefinite article. "A tallest man

in the room" conflicts with the rule, and looks bad English, because there can only be one 'tallest man' in the room at one time, and the indefinite article conflicts with this by its *meaning*.

Those rules whose criteria can be laid down entirely in terms of English form, then, are of one system with those rules whose criteria derive from content; and since this is so, we can deal with them more effectively by displaying their derivation from the fundamental significative functions of the articles themselves than by simple codification as empirical rules. Nevertheless, our systematisation must be checked constantly by reference to usage, and has usage as its only material and evidence.

The definite article presents the nominatum in, and with reference to, its history. It either calls upon our knowledge of the same nominatum, a knowledge derived either from previous reference, direct or indirect, in the same discourse, or from general culture; or it explicitly gives the nominatum a univocal individual specification, for example by relative clause, that is, it *provides* a history, as in "the hat which I bought is too small".

Thus, although there are many cats in the world, I may say unambiguously "the cat is hungry" because of conventions permitting the hearer to add restrictions which effectively limit the application of the noun to a single cat. In this case the hearer understands "our cat" or "the cat now present"; under other circumstances other restrictions apply: in "I went to a house and I knocked on the door", we understand "the door" or "the front door" or "the door which confronted me" "of the house in question"; in "John is the man", we understand "the man you mean", "the man you are looking for", "the man for the job", etc., according to context. That is, in every case where it is not common knowledge that only one of the things designated exists, the hearer is called upon to choose the nominatum most plausibly relevant to the context or the circumstances of the discourse. In doing this he necessarily applies to the nominatum his knowledge, variously derived, of its history. He does this also in cases where he knows independently that there is only one of the things designated in existence. A "history", in the sense in which I am using the word here, is the succession of appearances of, or references to, a thing regarded as one and the same thing.

The indefinite article, on the other hand, functions as an indication that the single nominatum is arrived at merely by singularisation from the class of possible nominata, not by the introduction of any external criteria. This process is not the same as arbitrary choice of one possible nominatum with its additional idiosyncrasy; the use of the indefinite article actively excludes the importation of any information about the nominatum other than what is true of all members of the class given by the noun, or is explicitly stated in the discourse.

Let us see how this distinction figures in the thought of the speaker. "I met a cat". We do not here consider the cat as specified, that is, we do not consider it in its history; either because we know of none, or because only the fact that the cat was a cat is relevant to our story. But if we say "I met a cat and recognised it as the Vicarage cat", on the second mention of the cat we have added to it a time-dimension, a history, as a specified individual; we no longer regard it only as it figures in the meeting.

Now consider the similar change of article in "I met a cat and the cat bit me". At first, as before, the cat is without history; it is any cat. But this mention of it is sufficient point of reference to give the cat on its next appearance a specification and a history; in this case the history is internal to the discourse, where in the previous example it was external. Either enables us to answer the question 'which cat?'; the first explicitly, 'the Vicarage cat', the second implicitly, 'the cat which I met'. (It is to be remembered however that if there are several cats at the Vicarage we may say "I met a cat and recognized it as a Vicarage cat"; previous reference does not guarantee the definite article).

Let us consider next the special case of the ordinal numbers used as adjectives. Here the choice of article makes a very real difference to the sense of a sentence, as can be seen in the examples: "will you have a third meringue?" and "will you have the third meringue?". In the first case, whichever meringue you have next will be a third, if you have already had two; its thirdness depends upon its intersection with your progress through the plate of meringues. But in the second case, the third meringue is the third meringue, whether you eat it or not; its thirdness depends on the order in which the meringues are eaten, whoever eats them, or on the order in which they are arranged in space, or the order in which they appeared from the oven, etc. (I must point out that the article governs the numeral and not the noun; for "the third meringue" is the same thing as "a meringue; the third". The definite article makes the third meringue a specified individual *qua* third. The hearer is asked to give effect to the specification by assuming 'third from the left', 'third to arrive', etc; any applicable scale which will allow to the meringue a history as third meringue, independently of the event in which it is now figuring. In "will you have a third meringue?", however, the thirdness of the meringue has no history; the category 'third' is only applied to the meringue in respect of my taking it. Thus, since any meringue I take now will be a third, it does not serve to specify an individual.

The two articles, definite and indefinite, display their antithetical functions clearly when they appear in a situation where something is used as a standard of comparison, or a universal, or a class, and as a thing

compared, or a particular, or a specimen of a class. The definite article indicates of course the standard, and the indefinite the thing compared to it; but the situation is in either case that of making a comparison, referred to either in terms of the standard: "The cat is a hunting animal", or in terms of the thing, indefinitely repeatable, which can be compared with the standard: "A cat is a hunting animal".

The nominata of the 'material nouns', such as "butter", "water", "air", "silk", etc., as we have said, are not susceptible of the categories of singular and plural. The definite article then will designate a piece of the material, because only a piece can have a temporal or spatial history - "the butter is rancid" - in the ordinary way; we can do this because the definite article makes no statement about singularity or plurality; being common to both; but we cannot use the indefinite article because that would imply a single discrete individual. We must say "I bought *some* butter", or "butter goes rancid if not kept cool", according as we speak of an unspecified piece of butter or of butter in general. When the indefinite article is used with such nouns, it overrides their non-pluralisability and forces us to take them as pluralisable, as in "a very well-flavoured tea". In order to regard it as a tea among other teas, we have to move to the level of "kinds of tea". In such cases the differentiating factor which justifies the pluralisability of the noun must be a real one, a difference of kind as here between species of one genus; not merely a spatiotemporal difference between items which are alike, as may be the case with cats.

The abstracts, designated for example by nouns like "felineity", "redness", "flexibility", etc., in one respect resemble materials. The definite article can be used with them in the same way as with nouns of substance, to attach an individual specification to the nominatum; but with abstracts the specification must be explicit, it must not rely on the hearer to supply the history from context. That is, we cannot say "the courage was remarkable", but we can say "the courage he displayed was remarkable." And the indefinite article, with its singular and plural, treats them as species of a genus.

Attributes, of possession or of mode, are in the same way not subject to the singular-plural alternative. Thus, even when they are presented as nouns, e.g. "elegance" from "elegant", they take the article in the same way as abstracts.

The definite article is used with plural nouns, as with singular to indicate that the individuals nominated have, and are specified by, a history; either as individuals or as a group. As individuals, they may be all the possible nominata, where these are of a limited number - e.g. the elements - or, of the possible nominata, those for which the context provides a specification, as in "the cats are hungry", in the same way as in the singular.

With a certain type of plural noun whose nominatum is a group which in some respects can function as a unit, the definite article may be used to indicate not each of the individuals, but the group so functioning: "the Belgians have a new Queen"; while the omission of the article indicates the individuals separately: "Belgians are either French-speaking or Flemish".

With plural nouns, the indefinite article is replaced by "some" or the article is omitted altogether. The absence of the article conveys only plurality; the adjective "some" brings in the idea of a number of differentiated items, even where the number neither is nor could be specified. Consider the sentences: "there are caterpillars in this salad" and "there are some caterpillars in this salad". The difference in meaning is small, but I think it can be isolated. "There are some caterpillars" means that I have found more than one, and refers to these, leaving aside the possibility that there may be others as well. "There are caterpillars" on the other hand has some claim to be a judgment rather than an observation; I have evidence that there are caterpillars in the plural and am referring to them in general, whether I have apprehended them all singly or not. "Some", since it implies differentiation of the items making up the plural, cannot be used in statements which are to be taken as true of every possible nominatum of a plural noun, such as: "cats do not like to be pulled by the tail". "Some cats" in such a sentence, because of its meaning of differentiation, could only mean "some and not others".

The antithesis between the two articles which we have suggested, and its applications and consequences which we have here partially examined, provide a working basis for the problem of establishing criteria for the insertion of articles when translating from Russian to English. In the majority of cases, given the principles we have proposed, there is little ambiguity as to the appropriate article when translating from Russian; and it remains to formulate our criteria in such a way that they can be applied by the machine. The situations where this is not possible are largely those where a human translator would also be in doubt.

These criteria can be divided into three phases: first the formal criteria or rules of thumb; then a classification of nouns; then another group of criteria, partly formal, partly based on context chosen by the machine according to the result of this classification.

I will give a very few examples of each level. Among the first formal criteria, applicable whatever the noun, we find the rule before mentioned that an inflected superlative adjective qualifying a noun is always preceded by the definite article; and the rule, overriding this, that a possessive pronoun or Saxon genitive replaces any article which would normally accompany the noun it qualifies. We have also the list of idiomatic omissions of the article after a preposition, as "at school", "in hospital".

If no criterion at this level is relevant, the next step is to classify the noun. We have isolated eight types of noun for this classification, including a class of *nomina actionis* which are peculiar in that they cannot take the indefinite article, and the class of proper names, which never take an article unless they are being used as descriptions of something else, e.g. "the Athens of the North", or in such forms as "the younger Pitt". One group, that of the nouns like "danger", "industry", which may be either non-pluralisable, or ordinary concrete singulars, can be entirely divided up, when we are dealing with output numbers instead of English words, according to which sense is relevant.

Of the remaining five groups, that of singular discrete observable things is the largest. A noun in this group, unless it has already been dealt with under the first phase, must have an article, if it is explicitly uniquely qualified, as "It hit me in **the** left eye", it takes the definite article. Certain types of relative clause also have this effect; research is under way into the possibility of setting up a formal criterion for these. Similarly if the noun has been mentioned immediately before and the nominatum is the same; or if something else which uniquely implies the nominatum of the present noun has been mentioned just before, as in "I went to a house and I knocked on the door". This is a matter for the notional sphere. If none of these conditions is satisfied, and the notional sphere gives no indication that only one of the things in question can possibly be meant - as would in many cases be true of such words as "Queen" - then it is reasonable, as we decided before, to opt semi-arbitrarily for the indefinite article; the human translator can do little more.

A similar process of elimination, but differently structured, applies in each of the other classes. In the class of 'abstract' nouns, for example, context alone, as we saw earlier, is not enough to justify the definite article; the specifying clause must be explicit. The indefinite article is only used here under special circumstances, recognisable if at all only from the notional sphere. If the conditions for neither article are satisfied, we omit the article. The same applies in the class of material nouns, save that here the definite article may be called for by previous reference or notional sphere without explicit specification. With plurals, the indefinite article is never used; the criteria for the definite article are similar to those in the singular and the choice between no article and "some" is made according to the notional sphere. And so on; the same kinds of condition are relevant in different classes, but differently combined.

This schema, incomplete as it is, at least provides a basis for further research and an indication of the directions in which that research is most necessary.