

## Articles in English and Arabic

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### Abstract:

This research is a contrastive study of definite and indefinite articles in English and Arabic. It discusses the different functions of those articles in each of the two languages. The research occurs in three main parts, the first and the second parts deal with articles in English and Arabic respectively, while the third part deals with aspects of similarities and differences that may be found out between the two languages as far as articles are concerned.

### دراسة مقارنة لأدوات التعريف والتنكير في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية

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#### ملخص البحث :

يتضمن البحث دراسة مقارنة لأدوات التعريف و التنكير في اللغتين الإنكليزية و العربية. فهو يناقش الوظائف المختلفة التي يمكن أن تؤديها هذه الأدوات في كل من اللغتين. يقع البحث في ثلاثة أقسام رئيسية و يتناول القسم الأول و الثاني الأدوات في اللغة الإنكليزية و اللغة العربية على التوالي، في حين يتناول القسم الثالث جوانب التشابه و الاختلاف التي قد تظهر بين اللغتين في موضوع الأدوات.

## **1. Introduction:**

Articles is an important and interesting area of research in English and in nearly all languages and they might be a problematic subject for learners, foreigners in particular, in that articles are of different types. In English, it is often necessary to use an article in front of a noun. Articles are of two kinds: definite article (the) and indefinite article (a or an). In order to use English correctly, it is important to know how articles are used which mostly depend on whether the noun is countable or not, and whether we are talking about things in general or particular. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1990: 50). So the use of one type instead of another depends on the reference of the noun used. Articles differ from one language into another which makes it a good area of comparing languages with reference to. It remains to say that any change in the use of articles will mostly lead to a change in the semantic implication of the sentence where the article is used.

## **2. Aim of the Research:**

This paper aims at investigating articles along with their usage in both English and Arabic. Points of similarity and difference will be tackled and discussed thoroughly through giving examples in both languages as the need arises.

## **3. Articles in English:**

### **3.1 Form:**

The notion of “definiteness” in English is, generally, shown by the article “the” which is used for both singular and plural nouns and it reflects no change when used with the two genders, for example:

**the boy****the boys****the girl****the girls**

English “indefiniteness”, on the other hand, is shown by the indefinite article (a/an) which is used only before singular count nouns to refer to one individual thing (Thomson and Martinet, 1988: 15). The form “a” is used before a word beginning with a consonant, or a vowel with a consonant sound:

**a man a hat**

The form (an) is used before words beginning with a vowel, viz. a, e, i, o, u:

**an apple an island an uncle**

The concept of zero article is also used in English, like “cats are nice animals”. The article is not often used as Crystal (1990; 115) states in idiomatic usage when talking of:

- A. Routines e.g. go to bed.
- B. Means of transport e.g. travel by car.
- C. Periods of time e.g. at dawn.
- D. Meals e.g. have lunch.
- E. Illness e.g. got flu.

### **3.2 USE:**

In explaining the use of the articles, Quirk et al, (1985: 265) discuss them in terms of two kinds of reference<sup>1</sup>:

1. Specific reference.
2. Generic reference.

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<sup>1</sup> Other terms might be used to refer to the same topic like “theme” and “retheme” or “given information” and “new information”, c.f. (Quirk et al, 1985).

### 3.2.1. Specific Reference:

What is meant by “specific reference” is that the speaker has a particular object in his mind and that the hearer is presupposed to have a form of knowledge of the things being referred to in the sentence. On the other hand, what is meant by “non-specific reference” is that the speaker does not have any particular object in mind; thus the identity of the object being referred to in the sentence is vague for the hearer (Hawkins, 1978: 204), as in the two examples below:

**1. I saw a cat and a dog.**

The speaker in {1} does not have a specific dog and cat in his/her mind, and the hearer does not know which cat and dog is referred to, while in {2}:

**2. I saw a cat and a dog. I liked the cat more.**

The speaker is necessarily referring to a particular cat: the cat that has just been mentioned before. That is why “the cat” has a specific reference.

### 3.2.2. The Definite Article and Specific Use:

Forder and Sag (1982: 85) argue that the specific definite article is used when the speaker intends to refer to “a unique individual” as in the following example:

**3. Bill didn’t eat the large cake.**

By using the definite article here, the speaker is intending to the hearer that there is a particular unique cake being referred to, i.e. the identity of the object [the cake] falls under their shared knowledge. This point is also asserted by Quirk et al (1985: 265); they illustrated that the definite article is used specifically to refer to “something which can be identified uniquely in the general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer”. So in the following example:

#### 4. Minna wants to meet the Norwegian.

the hearer is supposed to know exactly which Norwegian is being referred to or denoted. There is a specific unique Norwegian in the speaker and hearer's shared experience. Thus, the definite article has obligatory-specific reference.

### 3.2.3. The Indefinite Article and Specific Use:

As for the indefinite article, it is generally used with a non-specific reference in which, as it is said earlier, the referent of the object is unknown for the hearer and consequently it does not exist in any of the speaker-hearer shared sets (Hawkins: *ibid*), for example:

#### 5. Bill did not eat a large cake.

In this sentence, the speaker does not have a particular cake in mind and the hearer knows nothing about the large cake in question. The same interpretation could be found in:

#### 6. Minna wants to meet a Norwegian.

This sentence reveals that Minna does not have a particular Norwegian in her mind. As such, the hearer does not know exactly which Norwegian is being referred to.

Forder and Sag (*ibid*: 88) further argue that the indefinite article could also be used to indicate a specific reference. "A specific indefinite is used if the speaker intends to refer to a unique individual X, where X is in the restrictor set denoted by the NP".

This means that when a speaker aims at referring to a particular object, the indefinite object, then, will be specific, as in the following example:

#### 7. John has a weird purple telephone.

Maclaran (1982: 90) proposes that the structure (a + noun phrase) here draws the attention to the fact that the speaker has a particular

referent in mind, about which further information may be given ; the speaker intends to draw attention to a particular telephone.

As such, the indefinite article is used to indicate a specific and non-specific reference.

However, Hawkins (ibid.) and Ionin (2003: 237) differentiate between specific and non-specific indefinite in that they put the word “scope” as a clear cut between specific indefinite and non-specific indefinite. They spell out that when the indefinite description has a wide scope or semantic indication, the reference is specific as in {7}, but when the indefinite description has a narrow scope or semantic indication, i.e. it occurs under the scope of at least one operator, the reference is then non-specific as in:

**8. I want to read a book about butterflies.**

Ionin [ibid.] explains that “any book”, here, about butterflies will do in that the speaker has no particular book in mind.

### **3.2.4. Specific Usage Possibilities for Articles:**

In their discussion of “articles”, Quirk et al (ibid: 266) limit the specific usage of articles to the definite “the” and exclude the indefinite “a/an”. They explain several ways of expressing specificity by using the definite article. Hawkins (1978) states that the indefinite article could be also used along with the definite one to express specificity.

The first specific use of the definite article as in “immediate situation” and “general knowledge” where the identity of referent exists in the shared knowledge of both hearer and speaker e.g.:

**9. The roses are beautiful. (Immediate situation, said in a garden).**

**10. The Prime Minister. (General knowledge).**

**11. The moon. (general knowledge).**

Hawkins (ibid., 177) argues that the indefinite article could be also used to refer to a particular object in the immediate situation, as in:

**12. Pass me a bucket.**

“a bucket” here could refer to a particular one in the immediate situation of the utterance. He assumes that it is the context which determines the speaker-hearer’s shared knowledge, as it follows:

**13. A Prime Minister has just died.**

This could be understood as referring to a situationally particular one, i.e. “the speaker and the hearer’s Prime Minister, has just died”. This means that the reference is unique or of one direction since both the speaker and hearer know there to be only one “Prime Minister” in the immediate situation.

The second specific use of the definite article is in anaphoric reference which is a term used “where the uniqueness of reference is supplied by information given earlier in the discourse: (Quirk et al, ibid), e.g.:

**14. John bought a TV and a video recorder, but he returned the video recorder.**

The object (video recorder) here has been introduced in the discourse (i.e. mentioned before), so it is treated as “contextually known” and can be referred to by means of the definite article. But there is a possibility of using the indefinite article in anaphoric reference too:

**15. Fred bought a book from Huffer’s. He was dismayed to find that a page was torn.**

Hawkins (ibid.) discusses that “a page refers back to the pages of that book. It is used anaphorically to refer to “the book” which is an object in the speaker-hearer’s shared knowledge.

The third specific use of the definite article is in cataphoric reference: “a context where what follows, rather than what precedes enables us to pinpoint the reference uniquely” (Quirk et al: 268).

**16. The girls sitting over there are my cousins.**

The modification of the noun phrase “my cousin” restricts the reference of the noun “the girls”.

The indefinite article may also be used cataphorically as in the following example:

**17. Fred bought a car last week, and then he sold some tyres to his friend.**

Hawkins (174) states that “some tyres” refers to “a car” just mentioned before. The use of “some tyres” here restricts the reference of the indefinite noun “a car”. The fourth specific use of articles is with reference to body parts, e.g.:

**18. They pulled her by the hair. (Quirk et al: 270).**

**19. Bill lost a leg in the war. (Hawkins: 180).**

In [18] and [19], the articles are use instead of the passives. In [19], Hawkins (ibid.) argues that the reference of the object {a leg} is logically specific since human beings have two legs only. This means that Bill lost one of his legs. The referent of the object is unique since it is part of the speaker-hearer’s shared experience<sup>1</sup>.

### **3.3. Articles and Generic Use:**

#### **3.1.3. The definite article and generic Use:**

The generic use of the definite article is classified by Quirk et al (ibid: 284-88) into two main classes:

**A. With singular noun phrases.**

<sup>1</sup> see (Quirk et al, 1985: 269-70) for the other possible specific usages of the definite article.



## B. With plural noun phrases.

A. The generic use of “the” with singular nouns is to indicate “the class as represented by its typical specimen”.

### 20. The lion is numerous in these parts.

“the lion” here does not refer to a unique and particular lion, but to the whole class of lions instead. The same interpretation is met in:

### 21. The orange is rare in this area.

The use of the definite article in [21] is to indicate a universal idea by presenting a singular orange as a representative of whole class.

B. The generic definite article is used with plural noun phrases in two special cases:

#### B.1. Nationality nouns:

the definite article is used to indicate nationality, e.g.: {the Chinese, the English ... etc}.

#### B.2. Phrases with an adjective head:

the definite generic articles is used with phrases that have an adjective head referring to a group of people, e.g.: the blind, the rich ... etc.

But Hawkins (217) has a different view concerning the first case, i.e. the generic use of “the” with plurals indicating nationality. He claims that in the following sentences:

### 22. The Italians are lazy.

“the definite plural generic”, i.e. “the Italians” involves a pragmatic restriction in that “the Italians” refers to those individuals who inhabit Italy; so the reference here is limited to few individuals. It is therefore restricted in the world where speaker and hearer live.

Bolinger (1975: 181) gives a similar account, concerning the second case, i.e. “the” with an adjective head. In analyzing the following sentence:

**23. The generals usually get their way.**

Bolinger (ibid) observes that the large whole is “the people in government service”, but “the generals” in particular. So “the generals” here functions as a specific class of “officers” or “people in government service”.

Both Hawkins and Bolinger suggest to use the zero article in [22] and [23] to change the non-generic reference into generic one.

**24. Italians are lazy.**

**25. Generals usually get their way.**

[24] may mean that “any one” who is an Italian is asserted to be lazy. [25] may also mean all generals or any generals will get way. The use of zero article in the generic reference may stand for an “undifferentiated whole”, (Quirk et al, ibid: 282), e.g.:

**26. Cigarettes are bad for your health.**

### **3.2.3. The Indefinite Article and Generic Use:**

The generic use of the indefinite article differs from its specific use in that with the latter the speaker may know which individual is being referred to, whereas the hearer, in general, does not. In the generic uses, both the speaker and hearer do not have a particular referent in mind. The identity of this referent is thus random and arbitrary and as Hawkins (1978: 215) puts it, “generic references are non-specific references in specific contexts”, for example:

**27. A lion is a notable beast.**

In this sentence, the entire species is meant, i.e. the common properties of the whole class of lions are represented by a single one of its member. “A lion”, here, does not refer to a particular one, i.e.

the identity of “a lion” is random. It refers to the general idea that this class of beast is notable.

The same account could be found in Quirk et al (ibid: 281). They argue that the generic use of the indefinite article means “any representative member of the class”. Thus, in the generic use of the indefinite article, Quirk et al substitute “a” by “any”; that is why the sentence [27] may mean:

**28. Any lion is a notable beast.**

## **4. Articles in Arabic:**

### **4.1 Form:**

Arab grammarians who are they agree on saying that only the definiteness can be indicated by an article, which is [أل]:

(the house, the boys, the man). الرجل، الولد، البيت

While there is no article to indicate indefiniteness:

اشتريتُ بيتاً. (I bought a house).

Hence, in this part of the research, we will deal with the definite article and ‘zero article’ to express definiteness and indefiniteness respectively.

### **4.2. Use:**

According to the reference the definite and zero articles express, one can distinguish three kinds:

1. Specific reference.
2. Generic reference.
3. Unique reference.

#### 4.2.1. Specific reference:

##### 1. Definite article and specific reference:

A noun becomes definite when it is mentioned for the second time (i.e. it is already mentioned and thus its referent is now identified or 'known' for the hearer). (Al-Andalus: 1984: vol. 1: 514):

29. "كما أرسلنا الى فرعون رسولا. فعصى فرعون الرسول" {المزمل: الآية ١٦-١٥}.

"...as We have sent unto Pharaoh a messenger. But Pharaoh rebelled against the messenger". (Pickthall, 1988: 773). Besides, a noun is definite when it refers to one specific concept shared between the speaker and the hearer (Ibn Ya'eesh, vol. 5: 85):

30. I went to the farm ذهبْتُ الى البستان

Both the speaker and hearer know the real reference of the definite noun [البستان]; that is, there is a certain shared concept in their minds concerning this noun.

##### B. Zero article and Specific reference:

An indefinite noun can express specific reference when the speaker mentions something having a 'specific' concept in his mind, but the hearer has no idea about it. (ibid.):

31. (I read a book) قرأتُ كتاباً

The indefinite noun [كتاباً] refers to a certain concept in the speaker's mind, though it is unknown for the hearer.

#### 4.2.2. Generic reference:

##### A. Definite article and generic reference:

Ibnul-Nadhim (p. 88) states that the definite article is inserted to a singular noun when this noun is used to refer to its group or class:

32. **إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ** {العصر: الآية ٢}

“Man is in a state of loss” (Pickthall, 1971: 819).

The definite noun [man = الإنسان] does not refer to one specific man, instead it refers to all people. On the other hand, a definite noun is used to show generic reference when it implies a general meaning (Abdul-Hameed, 1939: 221):

33. **قَالَ إِنِّي لَيَحْزُنُنِي أَنْ تَذْهَبُوا بِهِ وَأَخَافُ أَنْ يَأْكُلَهُ الذِّئْبُ** {يوسف: الآية ١٣}

“He said: in truth it saddens me that ye should take him with you, and I fear lest the wolf devour him” (Pickthall, 1971: 311).

In this verse, the definite noun [wolf = الذئب] does not refer to a specific concept shared between the ‘speaker’ and ‘hearer’, nor does it refer to the whole class of wolves; it simply means any wolf.

##### A. Zero article and generic reference:

Sometimes the speaker mentions an indefinite noun in general meaning without denoting a certain thing or idea (Ibn Ya’eesh, vol.5: 85):

34. **اقرأ كتاباً**

The speaker only advises or orders the hearer to read a book, and this book does not refer to any concept in either of their minds. In other words, this sentence shows that the indefinite noun refers to ‘any book’ not a ‘specific one’.

### 4.2.3 Unique reference:

Since unique reference points to single objects, it is supposed that these objects are known or 'definite'. Thus, concerning articles, one can say that only the definite article is used in unique reference. The following examples illustrate this point:

35. "والشمس تجري لمُسْتَقَرٍّ لَهَا ذَلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ الْعَزِيزِ الْعَلِيمِ" {يس: الآية ٣٨}.

"And the sun runne th on unto a resting-place for him. That is the measuring of the Mighty, the Wise". (Pickthal, 1971: 58).

36. "اَقْتَرَبَتِ السَّاعَةُ وَانْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ" {القمر: الآية ١}.

"The hour drew nigh and the moon was rent in twain".  
(Pickthal, 1971: 703).

37. "يَوْمَ نَطْوِي السَّمَاءَ كَطَيِّ السِّجِلِّ لِلْكُتُبِ" {الأنبياء: الآية ١٠٤}.

"The Day when We shall roll up the heavens as a recorder rolleth up a written scroll". (Pickthal, 1971: 430).

All the underlined nouns in the above examples refer to unique objects, that is, the hearer (or the reader) knows that there is one sun [الشمس], one moon [القمر], and one sky [السما].

Included in this respect are the names of some countries and cities especially those which are always attached with the definite article like [العراق]: Iraq, [الموصل]: Mosul, [القاهرة]: Cairo, ...etc.

Other names like [بغداد]: Baghdad, [دمشق]: Damascus, ...etc. Also have unique reference for they are definite, though they cannot be attached with the definite article. In addition, there are some personal proper nouns always found with the definite article, such as: [المتنبي] Al-Mutanabbi, [الفارابي] Al-Farabi, ...etc.

It is important to mention, here, that when such place and personal proper nouns are added to other nouns, the article will be dropped:

[قاهرة الماضي]، [ممتنبي قومه]. (Aziz 1989: 106).

### 4.3 Other uses of the definite article:

The definite article can also be inserted to some personal proper nouns which are normally found without it to denote not only the name of a person but also one of his characteristics.

38. جاءَ حَسَنٌ Hasan came

39. جاءَ الحَسَنُ Al-Hasan came

Sentence (38) simply shows that a person called 'Hasan' came. sentence (39) shows that the person is also called 'Hasan' and, at the same time, has the characteristics implied in his name [الحسن = the handsome]. (Abdul-Hameed 1964: 184).

## 4. Comparison:

### 4.1 Form:

In English both definiteness and indefiniteness are represented by articles which are "the" and "a/an" respectively. In Arabic, on the other hand, only definiteness is represented by an article which is [أل], whereas there is no any article to indicate indefiniteness.

### 5.2 Use:

Concerning the reference in which articles are used, some differences are found out between English and Arabic. English articles are used in two kinds of reference, namely, specific reference and generic

reference; while in Arabic, the articles are used in three kinds: specific reference, generic reference, and unique reference.

### 5.2.1 Specific reference:

#### A. Definite article and specific reference:

The definite article in both languages is used to express specific reference either when the noun refers to a specific concept shared by the speaker and the hearer, as in

#### 4. Bill didn't eat the large cake.

#### 40. ذهبْتُ الى البستان (I went to the farm).

Or when the noun is mentioned for the second time, and thus both the speaker and the hearer will know what this noun refers to:

2. I saw a cat and a dog. I liked the cat more.

#### 41. "كما أرسلنا الى فرعون رسولا. فعصى فرعون الرسول" {المزمل: الآية ١٥-١٦}.

"as We have sent unto Pharaoh a messenger. But Pharaoh rebelled against the messenger".

#### B. Indefinite article and specific reference:

The referent of an indefinite noun, which is generally non-specific for both the speaker and the hearer, can sometimes be specific at least for the speaker even if it is still non-specific for the hearer:

6. John has a weird purple telephone.

#### 42. قرأتُ كتاباً (I read a book).



### 5.2.2. Generic reference:

#### A. Definite article:

English and Arabic are extremely similar in employing the definite article to indicate generic reference. In each of them, the article is used with a singular noun to refer to the whole class:

**26. The lion is numerous in these parts.**

32. {العصر: الآية ٢} "إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِفِي خُسْرٍ"

"Man is in a state of loss".

There is, however, a little characteristic to each language in this respect. On one hand, English definite article can be used with nouns of nationalities and with certain adjectives to denote a group of people:

The Chinese , the rich

On the other, hand in Arabic the definite article is used with a singular noun not to refer to a class - as it mentioned above – but to indicate a general meaning:

33. {يوسف: الآية ١٣} "قَالَ إِنِّي لَيَحْزُنُنِي أَنْ تَذْهَبُوا بِهِ وَأَخَافُ أَنْ يَأْكُلَهُ الذِّئْبُ"

"He said: in truth it saddens me that ye should take him with you, and I fear lest the wolf devour him".

#### B. Indefinite article:

Indefinite article indicating generic reference functions in the same way in both English and Arabic. The referent of an indefinite noun is not specified in any of the speaker's or the hearer's mind:

27. A lion is a notable beast.

34. أقرأ كتاباً (read a book)

### 5.2.3. Unique reference:

There is an obvious difference between English and Arabic concerning articles in unique reference. To start with English, unique reference is attached to the specific reference; English grammarians make no separation between specific reference and unique reference in their discussion of the use of the definite and indefinite articles:

### 3. Minna wants to meet the Norwegian.

#### 13. A Prime Minister has just died.

In Arabic, however, unique reference is separately discussed, though only the definite article is used ‘uniquely’; and this is another difference between the two languages in this respect:

35. والشمس تجري لمستقر لها ذلك تقدير العزيز العليم {يس: الآية ٣٨}.

“And the sun runneth on unto a resting-place for him. That is the measuring of the Mighty the Wise”.

## Conclusion:

After reviewing and comparing definite and indefinite articles in English and Arabic languages, one can conclude that there are some aspects shared between the two languages, and some others which are restricted to one language rather than the other. To start with the form of articles, there is an obvious difference between English and Arabic: while both definiteness and indefiniteness are indicated by articles in English, such indication is restricted the definiteness in Arabic; that is, there is no any article to show indefiniteness (a case which have been expressed by the term ‘zero article’ in this research).

The use of articles, on the other hand, also bears a difference between the two languages. English articles are used in two kinds of reference, namely, specific reference and generic reference, while Arabic

ones are used in three kinds: specific, generic and unique references. However, when used in specific and generic references, articles in both languages are rather the same, with the exception of some slight differences which do not affect the main function of these articles in each reference.

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