Grammar I

Determiners

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Posnaniae

The Definite Article

Perhaps the most difficult determiner in English for Polish students is the definite article, *the*. To use definite articles correctly in the many languages which have them it is necessary first of all to undrstand the fundamental meaning:

> *The definite article means that the speaker/writer believes that the listener/reader knows **which** the speaker/writer is referring to (or will know by the time the listener/reader reaches the end of that same sentence).*

The listener/reader might be expected to know *which* under the following circumstances:

1) Previous mention. E.g.:

John has a dog. *The* dog is black.
Mary's house is green and pink. *The* house is very small.
The mayor of that town is George Mills. *The* mayor is very popular.

Note that one could (with a slight difference of meaning or emphasis) also use a pronoun in these cases:

John has a dog. *It* is black.
Mary's house is green and pink. *It* is very small.
The mayor of that town is George Mills. *He* is very popular.

This shows that a nominal with *the* in front of it can be used to refer back to something just as a pronoun might do. It is, however often clearer than a pronoun would be.

Note that the previous mention might have been several or many sentences previously, not necessarily immediately before.

2) Immediacy. E.g.:

The water is dirty.
(If one is standing in front of a river or glass of water with the listener.)

The room is too hot.
(If one is in the same room with the listener.)

The President might resign.
(If one is in the same country as the listener or speaker and listener are compatriots.)

3) Universality. E.g.:

The sky is blue.
The moon is beautiful in October.
The Earth is the third planet from *the* sun.
The future and *the* past are only known in *the* present.

Everyone automatically has experience of these things and knows which one because there is only one of each in our daily life.

However, English has a special rule which prohibits following this logic with **material substances** and **abstractions**:

Water is wet. (Never, speaking generally, ! "*The* water is wet.")
Freedom is precious to the human heart. (Never, speaking generally, ! "*The* freedom…")

This is a speciality of English. In French, for example, one does say "*L'eau*..." and "*La liberté*..." and this is logical according to the rule of universality in a language which does not have the special rule of English about this.

3) Logical inferrability. E.g.:

These lockers can be used to store your things. *The* keys are hanging over there.
(It is fairly obvious that lockers might have keys.)

This old book is very beautiful. *The* edges are covered with gold.
(Books are known to have edges.)

If you go to Honolulu, take cool clothing. *The* temperature is very warm.
(Places naturally have temperatures.)

I bought a new car, but *the* engine does not work as it should.
(Automobiles normally have engines.)

Note: Parts of the body can be predicted to belong to the body, but when we are specific in English, we state *whose* body parts they are with a possessive and do not use the define article:

John raised *his* hand. (Never ! "John raised *the* hand". This rule is a speciality of English. In French one would indeed say " *Jean a levé **la** main,"* in Esperanto "*Johano levis **la** manon*", and in German "*Johann hob **die** Hand*".)

4) Clear designation in the utterance.

This one is extremely important. Sometimes a modifier in a sentence will make it clear *which* the speaker/writer is referring to. E.g.,

The **Polish** parliament is called the *Seym*, and *the* **Israeli** parliament is called the *Knesset*.
(**Proper adjectives** – adjectives coming from proper nouns – can tell us exactly which one. They are always capitalised in English.)

The **Poznań** city hall is a beautiful example of Renaissance architecture.
(This is an example of a **proper noun** used as an adjective.)

The glass **on the table** is mine.
(If there is only one glass there, the **prepositional phrase** "on the table" clearly specifies *which* glass. If there were two glasses on the table, this sentence would not be correct.)

The Republic **of South Africa** has a mixed-race society.

The United Kingdom **of Great Britain and Northern Ireland** is smaller than *the* United States **of America**, but both belong to *the* **United** Nations (Organisation).
(Even the short forms "U.K." and "U.S.(A.)" and "U.N." must have the definite article in front of them unless they are acting as attributive adjectives in front of another noun, e.g. "**U.K.** troops are in Iraq, but would probably like to return to *the* U.K." "**U.N.** forces might replace them, but *the* U.N. never does anything.")

Colorado State University is bigger than *the* University **of Colorado**.
(It would be logical to expect "*The* Colorado State University" since "Colorado" is a proper noun, but here the proper noun does not modify like an adjective but is part of the university name just as in "Oxford University", "Cornell University", "Adam Mickiewicz University", "Taiwan National University", and "Pennsylvania State University". However, when there is the word "of", there is always the article: "*The* University **of** Pennsylvania", "*The* University **of** British Columbia" or "*The* University **of** Michigan".

The man **whom I told you about** is on the phone.
(The **relative clause** "whom I told you about" specifies a certain man. If I had recently told you about more than one man, this sentence would be incorrect.)

5) Typical environments.

In English there are certain environments which are assumed to be universal experiences. It is important to know when these are being used in the universal sense and not of a concrete individual place. These include:

the street, the sea, the mountains, the land, the city, the country(side), the wilderness, the woods, the forest, the jungle, the desert, the beach

Be careful in *the street* not to get your pocket picked. (No particular street.)

If you want to travel in *the desert*, it is well to take a good supply of water.
(No matter which desert it may be.)

He lives in the country, lucky thing!
(This does not mean "national territory" here, but "countryside" – however, "in the country" also has the meaning "not abroad".)

A farmer lives on *the land*.

6) Typicality.

Sometimes we use the article to mean "a typical…" or "every" or "the species…":

The dog is a mammal. (species)

The student must study hard. (every)

The Warsovian is a busy person. (a typical)

We could replace the above definite article with the indefinite article: "*A* dog…", "*A* student…", and "*A* (typical) Warsovian…".

Special Cases

In British English one says "in future" and "to hospital" when American English would say "in *the* future" and "to *the* hospital ".

British: In future get him to hospitable on time!
American: In *the* future get him to *the* hospital on time.

In the case of "future" it is more in accordance with the logic of English to use the article, so the British usage here is a special exception. With "hospital" the British is anomalous because normal grammatical rules require a determiner before a singular common count noun, and the American is anomalous because in fact there is often a choice of hospitals, and it would be more natural to use the indefinite article.

This last is similar to the expression "read the newspaper" even when the town has more than one newspaper.

"In church", "in school" and "at work" are additional exceptions which imply that one is in the place for the typical purpose of that place: worship, teaching/studying and working respectively. Also "at home" although the typical activity there is obscure.

"In *the* church", "in *the* school" and at *the* work*place* refer only to the place without reference to the typical activity there. "At work" can also mean "working" without reference to the place; this is a distinct meaning. We can also say "at *the* home of my friend". My friend is at home there, but I am simply in the place which is his home – it is not my home.

The Indefinite Article

The indefinate article, a(n), carries three meanings:

1. Oneness.
2. That there is at least one other example of the same thing in the world.
3. That the listener / reader is not expected to know *which*.

Thus, we say, "I have *a* dog." It means I have only one such animal, that at least one other dog exists, and we do not expect our interlocutor to know which dog my dog is. If I had the last dog in the world, of course, we would have to say, "I have *the* dog". Then the dog would automatically be unique and clearly identified.

There is a rule which can help us with this article:

Almost always a singular common count noun has the indefine article before it.

(A *common* noun is one which names more than one thing, such as "chair", "star", "problem", "love". Nouns beginning with capital letters in English are *proper* nouns; with them this rule does not apply – "I am going to Poznań, not ! "*a* Poznań".)

So, we must say, "I have *a* cat," because "cat" is a singular common count noun. We cannot say ! "I have cat". We *may* say, "I have cats," because "cats" is plural.

We say, "Water is wet," because "water" is not usually a count noun.

We say, "*A* lion is looking at me", but can also say in the plural, "Lions are looking at me".

There is, however, a plural of "a" – *some*. We therefore can say "*Some* lions are looking at me," if we wish.

"Some" means:

1. More than one or something non-count.
2. That there are more or is more in the world.

If all the lions in the world were looking at me, we would have to say "the lions".

Because it is not countable, we say, "I have some water". Of course, if the listener/reader knows *which*, we must always use a more specific determiner: "I have *the* water," "I have *my* water," or "I have *this* water."

In negative sentences and most question sentences we use "any" instead of "some":

I do not have *any* lions.
I do not have any water.
Have you *any* lions?
Have you any water?

However, if there is a strong supposition that there is or should be an affirmative answer, "some" may be used in a question:

Have you got *some* money for the ticket? (I assume you already know you will need it and therefore have brought it.)

If there is a singular count noun, we use the indefinte article:

I do not have *a* lion.
Have you *a* lion?

The Demonstrative Pronouns

The demonstrative pronouns “this”, “that”, “these”, and “those” do not usually cause problems. (And they are not determiners, although the same words when they are demonstrative adjectives are). However, in referring to other parts of the same discourse instead of to concrete objects they may be problematical.

In referring to things already mentioned we normally use “that”, e.g.:

He needs help. *That* is why I came to see you. (Not “this”.)

I am terribly sorry. I just wanted to tell you *that* before it was too late.

On the other hand, to refer to what one is going to say next one normally says “this”:

I just want you to know *this*: you will never succeed with your evil plans!

Just answer *this*: why did you ever decide to study here?

Rarely, “this” is used for something previously mentioned, but that is a rather “fussy” or even “precious” usage which ordinarily should be avoided.. “That” is never used for something following.

When Not to Use Determiners

Using a determiner with an English noun is the default. Not to use a determiner requires a special reason. The common special reasons are:

1. **Simple Proper nouns:** Cracow is a historical Polish city.
2. **Non-count nouns:** Water is wet. Freedom is sweet.
3. **Plurals:** Lions and tigers are cats. [A statement, by the way, true in English.]

In the case of non-count nouns and plurals the meaning of the nouns is “in general”, almost “all”. However, often determiners are used with non-count and plural nouns to express other meanings:

The water in my bathtub is hot. (Not water in general.)

The freedom to practise one’s religion is important. (Not freedom in general.)

My freedom to do what I please in the summer is important to me.

Although simple proper nouns are usually used without determiners, compound proper nouns, as mentioned above, use the definite article: *The* United States of America, *The* Czech Republic.

And a few simple proper names do too: *The* Hague. And in British English *The* Lebanon, *The* Gambia. Also with mountain ranges (normally plural) and some rivers:
The Himalayas, Alps, Rockies, Andes, Tatras. *The*, Nile, Amazon, Vistula, Oder, Mississippi, Tiber, Thames.

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