

### Specificity as a grammatical notion: Evidence from L2-English article use

In this paper we address the question of what experimental evidence from acquisition of English as a second language (L2) tells us about the featural composition of articles. Previous L2 researchers (Huebner 1983, Master 1987, Thomas 1989, Murphy 1997, i.a.) have shown that L2-English learners overuse *the* in indefinite contexts, but have not provided a conclusive explanation for this phenomenon. Based on new L2-data, we will argue that *the* overuse in L2-English provides support for the reality of the semantic feature [ $\pm$ specific], defined as *the speaker's ability to identify the referent* (Fodor and Sag 1982).

**Background.** Fodor and Sag (1982) argued that speaker knowledge of the referent is the crucial determinant of specificity. Thus, *a dog* is [+specific] in (1a) and [-specific] in (1b). Indefinites that are [+specific] must take wide scope over intensional operators (2a) while [-specific] indefinites may take narrow scope (2b). The distinction between specifics and non-specifics is morphologically encoded in the article systems of some languages, e.g., Samoan (Lyons 1999). We argue that this distinction is also relevant for L2-English article choice.

**Hypotheses.** We hypothesized that the overuse of *the* with indefinites in L2-English (cf. Huebner 1983, i.a.) is due to the fact that L2-English learners erroneously use *the* to encode specificity. This predicts that L2-English learners should overuse *the* with [+specific] but not with [-specific] indefinites.

**Methods.** To test our hypothesis, we used a forced-choice elicitation task with intermediate/advanced adult L1-Russian and L1-Korean learners of English. There were 37 subjects in each language group. The L1-Russian participants ranged in age from 17 to 57 (mean = 38), and the L1-Korean participants ranged from 17 to 38 (mean = 28). Russian and Korean have no articles, so no L1-transfer effects were expected. Our test was piloted with seven L1-English speakers, who used articles appropriately.

The test consisted of 56 short dialogues; participants had to choose the appropriate article for the last sentence in each dialogue, based on the preceding context. There were 14 context types, four items per each. Among them, three context types were designed to elicit singular [-specific] indefinites; indicators such as denial of speaker knowledge (3a) and narrow scope under an operator (3b) were used for this purpose. Three context types targeted singular [+specific] indefinites, using explicit speaker knowledge (4a) and/or modification by *certain* (4b). One context was designed to elicit singular DPs that were definite by virtue of previous mention and hence obligatorily [+specific] (5). Three additional contexts tested for article use with plural DPs.

**Results.** As shown in (6), overuse of *the* was much higher in [+specific] indefinite contexts than in [-specific] indefinite contexts with singular DPs. Russian speakers overused *the* in 44% of specific indefinite contexts, compared to only 11% overuse with non-specific indefinites. For Korean speakers, *the* overuse was 24% with specific indefinites and 7% with non-specific indefinites. The differences between [+specific] and [-specific] indefinites in the overuse of *the* were statistically significant for both Russian and Korean learner groups ( $p < .00001$ ). Speakers in both groups correctly used *the* in definite contexts. Article use with plural DPs showed a similar pattern to singular DPs.

Crucially, the two groups of L2-learners exhibited similar patterns of article use (see 6). We suggest that the higher accuracy rates for Korean speakers are due to age and social status: unlike the Russian speakers, most of the Korean speakers were students, and student status is known to have a positive effect on L2-acquisition (cf. Flege and Liu, 2001).

**Discussion.** We conclude that specificity plays a role in L2-English article choice: L2-learners often use *the* in contexts where the speaker can identify the referent, but the hearer cannot (4). This use is inappropriate because *the* encodes definiteness. As shown in (7), definiteness and specificity are two ways of “carving up” the space of possible article meanings provided by UG. We propose that the learners are sensitive to both of these semantic distinctions, but do not know which one is appropriate for English and thus fluctuate between assigning *the* for definiteness vs. for specificity. This results in optional use of *a* vs. *the* with specific indefinites, as shown in the last column in (7). We suggest that this fluctuation comes from L2-learners' inability to generalize over discourse-based triggers involving speaker/hearer knowledge. Available data on overuse of *the* in L1-English (Matthewson and Schaeffer 2000) suggest that the same factors are at work in L1-acquisition, but with a slightly different twist: we will argue that child L1-learners fail to differentiate between speaker knowledge and hearer knowledge in perceived speech.

**Further data.** In a follow-up study, we expand our research to L2 article use in other contexts related to definiteness and specificity: referential vs. attributive definites (cf. Donnellan 1966) and indefinites in partitive contexts (cf. Enç 1991).

1. a) A dog barked under my window all night – it was my neighbor’s dog, a big German shepherd.  
b) A dog barked under my window all night – I wish I knew what dog it was!
2. a) I want to find a book of French history – my professor highly recommended it.  
b) I want to find a book of French history – any book will do.  
*(the full contexts from the test are not given in (3) through (5); the target article is underlined)*
3. a) [discussion of Professor Clark’s whereabouts] This afternoon, she met with (a, the, --) student – but I don’t know which one.  
b) [a customer asking for help from a salesperson] I am looking for (a, the, --) warm hat. It’s getting rather cold outside.
4. a) [discussion of Professor Jones’s whereabouts]. This morning, she met with (a, the, --) student – he is in my physics class.  
b) [discussion of Lucy’s trip to a newsstand] She was looking for (a, the, --) certain magazine - it contains interesting articles about Africa.
5. [previous mention of a dog] I took (a, the, --) dog for a walk.
6. Performance in singular contexts

CATEGORY	TARGET	L1-Russian participants			L1-Korean participants		
		%the	%a	%omission	%the	%a	%omission
definites	the	85%	14%	1%	83%	14%	3%
specific indefinites	a	44%	46%	10%	24%	71%	5%
non-specific indefinites	a	11%	80%	9%	7%	89%	4%

#### 7. Article use cross-linguistically: possible UG options

DP type	Distinction by specificity (e.g., Samoan)	Distinction by definiteness (e.g., English)	L2-English: fluctuation
Non-specific indefinites			
Specific indefinites			
Definites			

A boundary between two shaded areas represents a morphological distinction between articles.

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