

## SEMINAR 3B – ARTICLES with COMMON NOUNS (SGEL 5.11 – 5.24)

### - the indefinite article – the definite article – zero article

In discussing the use of the articles, we must distinguish between specific and generic reference:

e.g. *A lion* and *two tigers* are sleeping in the cage. (= specific r. – we have in mind something specific)

X

*Tigers* are dangerous animals. (=generic r. – not particular tigers, but tigers in general)

Note: generic ref. can be expressed in the following ways:

a) *A tiger* can be dangerous. (=any tiger in general)

But not! ~~*A tiger*~~ is becoming extinct. → The tiger is becoming extinct. or  
Tigers are becoming extinct.

b) *Tigers* can be dangerous.

c) *The tiger* can be dangerous.

But not! ~~*Tiger*~~ can be dangerous. – **zero article is possible only with U nouns:**

*Velvet* makes an excellent curtain material.

*Research* is vital for human progress.

Also: Mary is studying *dance*.

## I. THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE – A / AN

### 1) Classification

a) general statements

e.g. *An architect* is a person who designs buildings. / *A rose* is a flower.

b) definitions

e.g. *A cat* is a domestic animal. (or *Cats* are domestic animals. – is also possible)

c) origins

e.g. He's *a Frenchman*. / *an American*. (*also*: He's French / American. )

- d) occupation  
e.g. She's *a* doctor. / My father is *an* architect.  
She became *a* linguist.
- e) religion  
e.g. She's *a* Catholic. (also: She's Catholic. = an adjective)
- f) politics  
e.g. He's *a* Republican.

Exceptions – zero article:

- the verb 'turn' expressing a change of state, e.g. in *He turned traitor*. (not 'a traitor')
- some idioms, e.g. *They took him prisoner*.
- the verb 'become' if there is only one person in such position, e.g. *He became general director*.

**2) Quantity – a / an is used to mean 'only one'**

- a) one – we are not specifying any particular thing or person  
e.g. I'd like *an* apple.  
I met a friend of hers. (= one of her friends)

!! b) when *st* is mentioned for the first time – since it hasn't been mentioned before, it is unfamiliar to the speaker or hearer

e.g. I looked up and saw *a* plane. *The* plane flew over the trees.

Compare: I am just about to move into *an apartment* quite near where you live.  
(= an apartment – there are more apartments like that)

I am just about to move into *the apartment* directly above yours.  
(= we know exactly which – the one above yours)

- c) reference to measurement
  - price – e.g. *80 p a kilo / per kilo*
  - distance + speed – e.g. *40 km an hour / per hour*
  - frequency – *twice a day / per day*

Note:

- a) We walked for *a mile or two*. / We walked *one or two miles*.
- b) The water is *only a foot and a half deep*. / .... *only one and a half feet deep*.

### Other uses:

- **a / an** after **what / such** with C nouns

- exclamations – e.g. *What a surprise! What an interesting story!*  
But! What beautiful weather! ('weather' is uncountable)  
What lovely shoes! (plural)
- to emphasize degree – e.g. My boss is *such an* idiot!
- *what a lot ...* in exclamations – e.g. *What a lot of flowers! What a lot of trouble!*

- **pairs of nouns**

- the nouns are considered to accompany each other naturally
- *a / an* is used before the first noun of a pair

e.g. *a cup and saucer*  
*a hat and coat*  
*a knife and fork*

- **body parts**

- if they are multiple, they can be individually referred to with *a*:

e.g. Jack has *a broken finger*. but Jack has bumped *his head*.

- **illnesses / conditions**

- 1) the use of *a / an* is **compulsory** with: *cold, headache, sore throat, broken leg, fever, temperature* – e.g. I've got *a cold*.
- 2) the use of *a / an* is **optional** with: *catch (a) cold; have (a) backache, stomach ache, toothache, earache*
- 3) in the plural – **no article is used**  
e.g. *measles, mumps*
- 4) uncountable illnesses – no article is used  
e.g. *flu, hepatitis, cancer, pneumonia, diabetes, appendicitis*

## II. THE DEFINITE ARTICLE – THE

- **the** marks a phrase as definite – i.e. we refer to *st* that can be identified uniquely thanks to **the knowledge of context** or **general knowledge shared by the speaker and hearer**

e.g. immediate situation – the reference of ‘*the*’ is derived from the ‘extralinguistic’ situation (st is visible, present, obvious) as in:

*The roses* are beautiful. (= said in a garden)  
Have you visited *the castle*? (= said in a given town)  
Have you fed *the cat*? (= our cat)

or larger situation – the reference is based on general knowledge of the ‘larger situation’ that speaker and hearer share as in:

the Prime Minister (in a particular country everyone knows who we mean)  
the Pope, the moon, the sky, the sun, the Equator, the world, the Navy, etc.

### 1) Classifying

#### a) general statements

e.g. *The cobra* is dangerous. (= a certain kind of ... / as a species)

also: *Cobras* are dangerous. (= the whole class)

*A cobra* is a very poisonous snake. (= as an example of the class)

#### b) the group as a whole – the + nationality adj.

e.g. *The British* prefer staying at home. (= the British people in general)

*The Japanese* admire the traditions of *the Chinese*.

#### c) the group as a whole – the + plural names

e.g. *The Price sisters* have opened a boutique.

*The Europeans* are a long way from political unity.

*The Liberals* want electoral reform.

#### d) specified groups – the + collective noun or plural C

e.g. *the police, the public, the unions*

#### e) the + adjective

e.g. *the blind, the rich, the unemployed, the homeless, the disabled, the poor, the elderly, the sick, the injured, the deaf, the dead, the young*

## 2) Specifying

- we use *'the'* when the listener or reader can already identify what we are referring to, i.e. *'the'* shows that the nouns has been specified by the context / situation or grammatically (**anaphoric** and **cataphoric** reference)

### a) anaphoric reference – ‘anaphora’ (=back reference)

e.g. Singleton is a quiet village near Chichester. **The** village has a population of a few hundred people.

In the first sentence the village was mentioned for the first time – *a quiet village*  
In the following sentence we already know which village we are talking about – we have already specified it in the first sentence. (=direct anaphora)

the anaphoric ref. can also be indirect as in:

e.g. I lent Bill *a valuable book* but when he returned it, *the cover* was filthy and *the pages* were torn. (= we didn't mention *a cover* and *pages* before, but we know that a book has a cover and pages)

### b) cataphoric reference (is ‘the opposite’ of anaphoric = the identity will be established by what follows the head noun, i.e. an *of*-phrase, a relative clause or non-finite clause:

e.g. I am trying to find **the** book that I wanted to show you.

Where's **the** magazine I brought this morning?

**The** letters on the shelf are for you.

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

### c) specifying with a limited context

- the context is limited enough for the listener (or reader) to identify who or what is referred to

e.g.

people: Who's at the door? – It's *the* postman.

places: Where's Jenny? – She's gone to *the butcher's* / to *the supermarket*.

things: Pass me *the salt*, please.

parts of a whole:

a human body – He has a pain *in the chest*. / I grabbed her by *the arm*.

a room – *the ceiling, the door, the floor*

an object – *the back, the centre, the top*  
a town – *the shops, the station*  
an appliance – *the on/off switch*

**Note:** We also use *the* when we do not refer to a specific place or thing:

e.g. go to *the cinema / theatre / doctor's*  
*the country / mountains / seaside, sea*  
*the paper* (=newspaper) as in You'll probably see it *in the paper* tomorrow.  
*the news / the radio / the press*  
Do you prefer *the town* or *the country*?  
I love listening *to the wind*.

Compare: He lives near *the sea*.  
Is it dangerous to swim *in the sea*?  
He works on ships. He's *at sea* most of the time.

**Locations which are 'one of a kind':**

e.g. *the earth / sky / sun / moon / solar system / the galaxy, the universe*

**Uniqueness:**

e.g. *the Pope, the President, the government, the Equator*

**Other uses:**

- *the* in time expressions – e.g. *the beginning, the middle, the end, the first / last, the next, the following day, in the morning / afternoon / evening*
- seasons – *the* is optional – e.g. We usually have a holiday *in (the) summer*.

**But:** if we refer to a particular season – *The spring of last year* was cold.

- dates – *the* is spoken but not written

e.g. I'll see you on May 24<sup>th</sup>. (spoken as *May the 24<sup>th</sup>*)  
I'll see you on 24<sup>th</sup> May. (spoken as *the 24<sup>th</sup> of May*)

- fixed time expressions

e.g. *all the while, at the moment, for the time being, in the end, in the meantime, etc.*

- superlatives  
e.g. It's *the worst* play I have ever seen.
- musical instruments – I play *the piano*.
- fixed phrases – *The sooner the better*.
- fixed expressions – *do the shopping*
- restrictive items – e.g. sole, only, same – She was *the sole survivor* of the crash.
- the + adjective – *the blind, the unemployed*
- ordinals – *the first*  
*but!* Let me have *a third guess*.

### III. ZERO ARTICLE

- with plural countables: *Girls* do better than *boys* at school.
- uncountables – *Butter* makes you fat.
- proper nouns – *John* lives in *London*.

#### The class as a whole – general statements

##### a) zero article + plural C nouns

people: *Women* are fighting for their rights.  
places: *Museums* are closed on Mondays.  
food: *Beans* contain a lot of fibre.  
occupations: *Doctors* always support each other.  
nationalities: *Italians* make delicious ice cream.  
animals: *Cats* do not like cold weather.  
insects: *Ants* are found all over this area.  
plants: *Trees* don't grow in the Antarctic.  
products: *Watches* have become very accurate.

##### b) zero article + U nouns (always singular)

food: *Refined foods* like sugar should be avoided.  
drink: *Water* must be pure if it is to be drunk.  
substances: *Oil* is essential for the manufacture of plastic.

collections: *Money* makes the world go round.  
colours: *Red* is my favourite colour.  
activities: *Smoking* is bad for the health.  
other activities: *Business* has been improving steadily this year.  
sports, games: *Football* is played all over the world.  
abstract: *Life* is short.  
politics: *Capitalism* is by-product of free enterprise.  
languages: *English* is a world language.

### **Unique items**

- first names – e.g. *Elizabeth* was my mother's name.
- surnames – e.g. These tools are made by *Jackson and son*.
- full names – e.g. *Elizabeth Brown*
- titles – e.g. May I introduce you to *Captain / Colonel / Major* Rogers?
- days, months, seasons, holidays (Christmas)
- subjects – e.g. Biology, Physics, Geography

### **Other uses of zero article**

- **times of day and night**, esp. after the prepositions *at, by, after, before*

e.g. *at dawn / daybreak, sunrise, noon, midnight, dusk, from dawn to dusk*  
*by day, at night* But! *during the day, in the night, in the day time*  
*before morning*

- **meals** – *breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner, supper*

e.g. *Dinner* is served. / Michael's at *lunch*. / Let's have *breakfast*.  
Will you stay *for breakfast*?  
I'll work on it *after breakfast*.

#### **But! When a meal is specified, we use articles as in:**

*The breakfast* I ordered still hasn't arrived.  
That was *a very nice dinner*.  
We had *a nice dinner*, just the two of us. (= a particular meal)

- **man** – as the 'human race' or 'mankind', also 'man' and 'woman' in a general sense:

e.g. This book is an attempt to trace the history of *man / mankind*.  
*Man and woman* were created equal. (or the plural *Men and women*...)





*hand in hand*                      *eye to eye*

- 'pairs' joined by 'and'

e.g. *day and night*  
*father and son*  
*husband and wife*  
*light and dark*  
*pen and ink*  
*sun and moon*

- other **phrases** with **zero article**

<i>from top to bottom</i>	<i>in terror</i>
<i>by reason of</i>	<i>in haste</i>
<i>keep in mind</i>	<i>in trouble</i>
<i>in case of</i>	<i>in fear</i>
<i>in turn</i>	<i>in danger</i>
<i>come to light</i>	<i>in memory of</i>
<i>by heart</i>	<i>from father to son</i>

But: there are phrases where we use 'a', e.g. *in a hurry*

- **what / such + plural nouns or U**

e.g. *What freedom* young people enjoy nowadays!  
We had *such problems* getting through Customs.

- unspecified quantity

e.g. I have news for you.  
I have presents for children.

### **Zero article with definite meaning**

- **when a phrase specifies a unique role or task, e.g. only one person holds the particular position**

e.g. Mary is *(the) captain* of basketball this year.  
As *(the) chairman*, I declare this meeting closed.

John F. Kennedy was *(the) President of the United States* in 1961.

Compare: *Prime Minister Blair* v. *the Prime Minister*  
*Queen Elizabeth II* v. *the Queen*

**- articles are usually omitted in headlines or on official forms**

e.g. 'Crew deserts *ship* in harbour'  
Please state *reason* for application and give .....

**- fixed phrases v. a particular thing**

Compare:

<i>be in town</i>	v.	<i>The town</i> is very old.
<i>be in bed</i>	v.	<i>It's on the bed.</i>
<i>go to church</i>	v.	How far is <i>the church</i> ?
<i>go to sea</i>	v.	<i>The sea</i> looks calm.
<i>travel by bus</i>	v.	She was <i>on the bus</i> .
<i>send it by post</i>	v.	<i>The post</i> is late today.

**- abstract nouns**

e.g. She is studying <i>European history</i> .	X	.... <i>the history of Europe</i> .
..... <i>human evolution</i>	X	.... <i>the evolution of man</i>
..... <i>medieval art</i>	X	.... <i>the art of the Middle Ages</i>

Further notes:

a) **uncountable nouns treated as countable** - some normally uncountable nouns can be used with 'a' in the singular (=the meaning is particular, not general) , but the plural form is not possible

e.g. Mary has *a good education*.  
She felt *a certain impatience*.  
I need *a good sleep*.  
You've been *a great help*.

Careful: not all uncountable nouns can be used like that, some remain uncountable in all contexts, e.g. weather, progress, etc.

b) TV

What's *on TV* tonight? v. Look! The cat's sitting *on the TV*.

c) **parts of the body**

- normally we use '**possessives**', not 'the'

e.g. Katy broke *her arm* climbing. (not 'the arm')  
He's cut *his finger* when he was cooking.  
He stood in the doorway, his coat over *his arm*.  
Jack bumped *his head*.  
She has sprained *her ankle*.

- we prefer '**the**' in **prepositional phrases related to the object**

e.g. She hit him *in the stomach*.  
Can't you look me *in the eye*?  
He was shot *in the leg*.