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著者	JONES, Willie
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# An Article on the Article

Willie JONES

## Summary

The articles, definite and indefinite, are often given fairly short shrift in text-books, yet they are of philosophical as well as grammatical interest; they are of especial interest to teachers of the English language, since languages such as Japanese do not find a place for the articles in their lexicons nor appear to have much use for general concepts of definiteness in their daily communications. This essay seeks to treat the articles as terms worthy of serious consideration. To this end, and to explain the determining function of the articles in English, it first analyses examples of failures to use the articles correctly, and uses the examples to demonstrate how the indefinite article selects while the definite article confirms selection and isolates the item that has been selected. It considers the related issue of countability and uncountability, and goes on to analyse in some detail a set of carefully selected examples which demonstrate that the definite article is not an empty word-form (if that description is taken to signify a word without much content), but that it has a crucial, complementary function in pointing to and specifying the uniqueness and exclusivity — the ontological definiteness, if you like — of the terms to which it is attached.

**Key Words:** article, definite, indefinite

1 Introduction

In *Linguistic Semantics* (1995), John Lyons speaks only in passing of the articles, which he categorizes as “empty word-forms”. Sir John tells us that the function of “empty form” words is syntactic rather than semantic, and that they do the work which in an inflected language such as Latin is carried out by word endings. As for the definite article itself, the “vast majority of the languages of the world” do not possess any such thing.

He adds: “it is worth noting the non-universality, not just of the definite article, but also of anything that might be called a semantic category of definiteness, in natural languages”. I have, as advised, duly noted this thought-provoking piece of information; and it influences the pages which follow. Sir John goes on: “But this is an issue which does not concern us for the moment” (p67). Nor does it concern him for the rest of the book.

It is an issue that concerns me, however, as it must concern any teacher of English to the Japanese, whose tongue is one of that “vast majority of languages” which employs nothing comparable to the articles as they are known to us in English (or other European languages). Whether the Japanese language also fails to categorise the concept of definiteness, I cannot be sure, but it certainly makes no morphological distinction between the singular and the plural, and it takes a pride in obfuscation; at the same time, it blithely makes promises which it never means to perform. One thing, at least, is undoubtedly true: native speakers of Japanese find it notoriously difficult to decide when, or whether, to use one of the English articles, because, much of the time, they cannot really understand *why* they need to.

Lyons also says of empty word-forms, such as (the) articles, that they are “easily predictable in the contexts in which they occur. Hence their omission in headlines, telegrams, etc., and perhaps also in the utterances of very young children as they pass through early stages of language-acquisition”. Sir John might, to the phrase “very young children”, have added “and second language learners”, who, if they are Japanese, do not find the articles at all predictable, even when they have passed on to the most advanced stages of language-acquisition.

Of course, Japanese students of English, if puzzled by the English articles, can consult a good grammar, such as Michael Swann’s recent *Practical English Usage* (Oxford, 1995), which they will find a useful, indeed practical, guide to these matters, and it might seem unnecessary on my part to do more than say “Have a look at Swann!” But since the issues raised by the topic do seem of more than merely grammatical significance, I hope that I may, as a result of brooding over these matters for myself, have something worthwhile to add.

## 2 Thesis

Although articles may be “empty forms”, they nevertheless have real work to do, and are rarely dispensable: I do not entirely agree with Lyons: their omission in headlines can sometimes create serious ambiguity. Of course, the ‘semantic content’ of articles depends, in context, upon the words with which they are paired, yet the nuances and subtleties they convey in partnership with the nouns they accompany do not seem to be entirely one-way, as I hope to demonstrate. Since their function has to do with the decisions which we, their users, are making about the definiteness and indefiniteness of our main terms, they, the articles, reflect upon, and determine, the ontological weight which we are giving to those terms.

Languages which do not possess, or embody, a distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness (between, for instance, meaningful promises and everyday expressions of politeness) must consequently have, or so it might seem reasonable to suppose, a somewhat different ontological conception of “the nature of being” from those languages, such as English, which do make such distinctions<sup>1</sup>.

And if we grow up with a certain understanding of the world and its ontological nature, we may, should we be Japanese, find it very hard to transfer our ideas into a language, such as English, which has different, and in this case rather more precise conceptions of what is concrete and what abstract, of what is discrete and what is undivided or indivisible, of what is existence and what essence, of what is real and what is fictional, of what may be so and what may be thought to be so — if it is accepted that such discriminations can be made at all.

### 3 Local Instances

These are deep waters, and rather than embark on them at what is very short notice, I shall look at one or two simple, elementary and local instances of what I take to be the indecision and uncertainty which Japanese users of English feel when they have to decide whether to use an article, and, if so, which one, or whether (the favoured course) to leave it out.

3.1 **The Sapporo City Transportation Bureau** has recently given prominence to a poster which is, in many ways, exemplary, since it furnishes the teacher with an opportunity to explain how, and why, we might, in English, set about distinguishing between the articles and deciding upon their use.

The poster advertises a ticket which can be bought for a day-tour

of Sapporo by public transport; it exhibits two photographs set side by side, featuring the same young woman and the same two young men (who are Japanese), in different poses, against different backgrounds.

The messages, however, are in English: the left-hand picture, which is photographed against the background of a station interior, tells us that the three young people (whom I infer to be visitors) are *Looking For Way*: the right-hand picture, taken in a train or a tram, tell us that they are *Going On Way*. These captions are incomplete, of course: the word 'way' does not refer to an uncountable mass or an all-inclusive general idea: it is something that needs to be made definite (or indefinite); both expressions thus require articles (or possessive pronouns such as 'my' or 'our'). Yet, should we not know intuitively which article is appropriate, how are we to decide which one to choose?

The poster helps the teacher to offer an illustrative answer. When we are looking for something, or selecting something, we select it from a range of alternatives: we are making a choice from a set of similar objects, occasions, events, opportunities. Before we make our choice, our chosen route is still indefinite, it is still one way among many ways. We shall therefore be looking for *a* way, as we might look for *a* pencil.

Our way is still shadowy, formless; its ontological 'being' is vague, undetermined: it is partly absent, partly present. It hovers, for a moment, between indeterminacy and realisation. It is, in a sense, inchoate: that is, it is passing through the first stages of becoming definite, particular, individual. This way of describing the case may seem absurdly inflated (much too metaphysical, perhaps), but it may, I have begun to believe, come close to the truth of the matter.

When we have chosen our way, however, it becomes the way that we have chosen: it is — for the time we are travelling upon it — unique: we are going on *the* way — the *unique* way — that we have

selected. It is concrete, its being is determined: it is present to us as something particular, realised, as the pencil which I hold in my hand becomes *the* pencil, the unique pencil that is present to me, within my grasp. It also, and this too is important, excludes from consideration all those ways or routes that we have not taken, or those pencils that we have left in the box.

After what may seem an over-elaborate, long-drawn-out preamble, I suggest that in this instance we need to say *Looking for A Way, Going on The Way*.

3.2 It would, of course, be quite acceptable to say “I am looking for the way”, but the change of article would change the meaning of the utterance, and, of course, change its interpretation. The definite article would indicate a way already chosen (selected from among many) to a place already decided upon (selected from among many places) as my destination (chosen by me or by somebody else) — as the way I need to take if I wish to get to that place: it is way already determined upon: other possible ways have already been excluded. I would, however, be implying, and the listener would infer, that I am having some trouble finding the way, but that when I do find it, I shall recognise it in all its unique appropriateness as *my* way.

When we have selected something and it becomes our topic, it becomes exclusively the thing about which we are speaking. The first reference to such a topic, if it is countable, will take the indefinite article, because it is a first, selective, reference: we choose it as something to talk about, as we take the first step from absence to presence. All subsequent references will need the definite article because we are pointing to the particular object(s) that we have already chosen.

If, with my students, I were to consider the paragraph in which I

describe the poster, I would point out that although ‘two photographs’ is a first reference and the word ‘photograph’ is a countable term, it is here in the plural, and there is thus no article. I go on to speak of ‘the’ right-hand photograph, since this is a second reference to something already established, and to ‘the’ left-hand photograph, another second reference. I also mention ‘the’ interior of ‘a’ station, since stations possess only one interior and there are many stations, as well as mentioning ‘a’ bus and ‘a’ tram, since these are also first references and in the world there are countless buses and trams.

I would also point out that when I say that the poster is advertising ‘a’ ticket, this would signify that it is one ticket selected from the complete range of all possible tickets. If, however, I had referred to ‘the’ ticket — “The poster advertises the ticket which can be bought...” — I would have been wishing to draw attention to the fact that this ticket is a particular kind of ticket, and that it is only used for a particular, special function, a function which excludes all other functions for which we might buy any of the tickets which are not included in this category.

3.3 While I have lived in Sapporo, I have spent much of my time editing learned papers, and, to illustrate the same point, I take an extremely simple example from a paper by a Hokudai scientist after I had edited it:

The sperm cells<sup>1</sup> were placed on a glass slide<sup>2</sup> and a glass rod<sup>2</sup> was placed across the slide<sup>3</sup>; the glass rod<sup>3</sup> was laid in position with a pair of forceps<sup>2</sup>.

1 is the topic or theme, which has already been announced (it is



already known to the reader as the topic of the paper); 2 are all first references, as the writer selects one piece of equipment from a mass of pieces of similar equipment. 3 are second references: we are now pointing to, and thus confirming, the choice that has been made. In the context, these become unique pieces of equipment. All subsequent references will also take the definite article.

3.4 I may, however, choose the definite article when introducing a new topic, should that topic be already well-known to both my listener and myself: when it is part of the common ground and experience that we share, those concepts and phenomena of which we are mutually aware.

If I were, without preamble, to say "I am just off to catch the bus", the person to whom I said it would know exactly which bus I meant, and, even more specifically, the route which that bus would take; this would entail that she would also know my destination: all these things would be as present to her as they would be to me. If I were to say, "I am going to catch a bus", she would not be able to make the same inferences: she might guess, of course, since she knows my habits, but nevertheless she might also feel compelled to ask, "Where to?"

Should I say "Have you seen the children?", the listener will know to which children I am referring: they will be, in some sense, unique: my children, our children, your children, and the listener will infer that I am not able to see them at the moment of my utterance. Should I say "Have you seen children (in the garden)?", all my listener would be able to infer was that, recently, I had seen some children, and, crucially, that I did not know who they were: the children would, at the moment of utterance, be unidentified: just a mass, or mess, of children. So, not only does the change or omission of (the) article radically change the

implications of my utterance, it crucially determines my stance towards the person with whom I am speaking and affects how I expect my interlocutor to interpret (and respond to) my words.

3.5 New trains on the Sapporo Subway are equipped with electronic message boards, and on the Nanboku line, for instance, one of the messages which pass across the indicator tells us “This is the train bound for Asabu”. Of course, there is nothing grammatically wrong with this sentence, but “the train” suggests that it is the one and only train going to Asabu, that it is, in the context of this journey, unique. The use of ‘this’ as the pronominal topic implies a strong contrast, so that the implicated message might be taken to be “Ho, ho! If you thought that you were on the train for Makomanai, dear boy, you have made a big mistake: *this* is the train bound for Asabu!” I suggest instead “This train is bound for Asabu!”, by which means the suggestion of the uniqueness of the operation is removed.

3.6 The subway trains also carry another message, this one fixed above the Silver Seats (which on the Nanboku and Toho lines are, in fact, blue): “seats reserved for senior citizens and the handicapped passengers”.

Since “handicapped persons”, like “senior citizens”, indicates a category which can stand by itself, it does not need an article: it is a term which names a self-enclosed, all-inclusive group, a particular category, set or class that is complete in itself: “seats reserved for senior citizens and handicapped passengers”. Here the two terms are inclusive and self-sustained: they are not, as terms, in contrast with other terms.

If, however, we were to substitute ‘elderly’ for “senior citizens” and

'handicapped' for "handicapped passengers", the definite article would be required since when the epithets 'elderly' and 'handicapped' are used by themselves as noun-substitutes they are in contrast with other epithets-as-nouns which are neither of these things: the definite article excludes all those others, the young, the middle aged and the fit, and denies them permission to use the seats: "These seats are served for the elderly and the handicapped". This usage is both inclusive and exclusive.

The use of the definite article signifies membership of whatever category we are pointing to, and defines it as something separate and apart, while it significantly excludes all that does not fall within that category, which can be a single thing or many things treated as a single thing. The omission of the article establishes a particular class of people that is, as a class, complete in itself: a single unit of whatever it may be: people, objects, abstractions, natural phenomena.

#### 4 Countability

Before going any further, it is necessary to make a detour, sortie or foray, into the domain of countability and uncountability, another area or territory which, for speakers of Japanese, is unknown or alien.

The English language distinguishes between nouns (or, more correctly, their referents) which are countable and nouns (or their referents) which are not; the Japanese language does not make this distinction. This obviously adds to the (ontological) difficulty which Japanese speakers and writers of English face when plagued by the need to choose and use articles.

4.1 All Japanese students know that English makes a distinction between countability and uncountability, and that to form the plural in

English, one frequently adds an 's' (unless it is already embodied in such uncountable terms as, say, 'clothes', 'trousers', 'spectacles', 'pyjamas', and 'scissors'), but many of them have only a very hazy idea about which nouns are countable and which are not, and seem unaware that whereas countable terms can take the indefinite article (this being an indication of their countability), uncountable terms can not.

The term 'desk' for example, is countable: in one classroom there may be many desks. When a student enters a classroom, he or she selects *a* desk at which to sit; when that desk has been selected it becomes *the* desk at which the student is sitting: it necessarily excludes from its reference all those other desks at which the student is not sitting.

'Furniture', on the other hand, is not countable (in British English, at least), nor are such words as 'equipment', 'apparatus', 'advice', 'research', 'stationery', 'information', 'behaviour' or 'knowledge', all terms which, in my experience, Japanese writers treat as if they were countable. We cannot, in British English, say 'furnitures', 'equipments', 'apparatuses'; nor can we say 'an equipment', 'an apparatus', 'a stationery'.

I add the rider "in British English" since I have noticed that some American writers are beginning to treat many such words as if they *can* be counted, 'behaviour', for instance; this may be because the mother tongue of many contemporary American scientists, an influential group, is not English, as well as, perhaps, out of a more deeply-rooted historical desire to flout fuddy-duddy British convention.

I shall continue to resist this tendency myself, since a word like 'behaviour' refers to an abstract notion that is applied as a general term appropriate to everyone, while a word like 'furniture' refers to the mass of those objects which all together make up a particular class or

category of things: it signifies a complete set of something, whose parts do not have to be separated out into definite discrete units until we need to specify one item of that set. I shall therefore, perhaps pedantically, continue to say “a piece (or item) of furniture, or equipment, or apparatus”, and “an item of stationery”, “a type or kind of behaviour”.

When we are referring to the total set or category of non-count nouns such as these, it is customary to omit the definite article, too: when things of these kinds, that is, are grouped in the mass: we would not, for example, say of a certain furniture shop in Sapporo \*“Møbel sells the furniture”. If we are being neither definite nor indefinite as to the particular nature, quality or quantity of the furniture which is being sold, we say “Møbel sells furniture”.

We do, however, use the definite article when we wish to specify a particular *sub-set* of the mass nouns in question, a sub-set which will exclude and be *in contrast* with other sub-sets of that particular category: “the furniture in the Møbel showroom is imported from Europe”, “the equipment in Professor Brown’s laboratory is rather antiquated”, “the stationery which I bought from Mr. Roberts’s shop is of excellent quality”.

And if on returning from a furniture shop (which we would refer to as *the* furniture shop if it had already been determined upon), a husband were to say to his wife “Did you buy the furniture?”, he would be referring to furniture already established between them as items that they desired, and that she was intending, to buy<sup>2</sup>.

4.2 NHK’s 7 o’clock news bulletin offers a bilingual service (as I mentioned in my last piece), and one evening there was an item of “news” (another uncountable noun, of which the ‘s’ is an embodied, inalienable part) which reported that 300 heavy smokers had undergone

tests to find out if they showed any symptoms of cancer. The news item reported that their 'phlegms' had been sent to a laboratory for (an) examination, and that, as a result of the tests (the examination), three of the smokers had had to undergo 'a surgery'.

If I speak of 'examination' without an article, this simply indicates the general procedure which includes all and every kind of examination; *an* examination by implication selects a special type or kind of examination which, we infer, will be suitable for carrying out the particular operation already decided upon; *the* examination points to the particular examination which will be, or has been, carried out on that particular occasion.

I have selected this particular example because we cannot speak of 'phlegms' with the plural 's': 'phlegm' is a bodily substance and is, like other bodily substances, uncountable, while, in this particular instance, too, 'surgery' is an unparticularised, general activity or procedure, carried out by a surgeon (one surgeon, that is, selected from among many surgeons), and, since it is so, 'surgery' is, in this sense, also uncountable, and cannot therefore take the indefinite article. It could take a definite article, however, if it were suitably qualified: "the surgery {the act of surgery}(on this occasion) was successful".

Since, in this piece of writing, I am being prescriptive, we need to say something like "a sample or specimen of their phlegm", as we would also speak of "a specimen or sample of their blood/urine/bile/bone tissue/skin", and that, as a result of a test/the test (depending on how definite we wished to be), three of them "underwent surgery" or "had undergone", or "had had to undergo surgery"; they might, if we preferred, have "had to undergo an operation" (that is, a surgical operation) since operations are countable.

The term 'surgery', however, can be counted when it refers to a

particular place — a room in a clinic or house (or the clinic itself) where a doctor holds consultations: his surgery: the place where he examines his patients; a doctor has a surgery, where, during “surgery hours” (similar to “office hours”), he sees his patients (or she sees hers, of course). By metonymy, the phrase also refers to the hours when a member of parliament is available to accept visits from his constituents.

4.3 In English, several classes of nouns are uncountable, which means that, in principle, they cannot take the plural form, nor can they take the indefinite article:

i), Those **material objects** which are grouped together to form an undifferentiated mass, or entities which may be referred to in the abstract, or as generalised concepts: when they cease, that is, to be individual, countable, discrete, definite examples of that category of things to which they as individuals belong, when the term is taken to include all examples of the whole undifferentiated set: ‘furniture’, ‘equipment’, ‘apparatus’, ‘stationery’, ‘rubbish’, ‘garbage’, ‘sewage’, ‘plumage’ (for ‘feathers’), ‘foliage’ (for ‘leaves’).

Nor will these terms take the definite article, in its function as a deictic determiner, unless we are speaking of, pointing to, a sub-set of the general, all-inclusive mass: “the plumage of a/the peacock”, “the foliage of a/the maple”. (I discuss this in more detail below, section 9.)

ii), Those **conditions, states of affairs** (in the natural or social worlds) or **individual states of mind**, which are treated as general, all-inclusive, abstract perceptions, concepts, or happenings: for example, ‘knowledge’, ‘pollution’, ‘involvement’, ‘destruction’, ‘cooperation’.

When terms like ‘nature’, ‘growth’, ‘drought’, ‘western materialism’, ‘natural afforestation’ — all these words or phrases come from papers which I have edited where they were given unnecessary articles — are used as all-inclusive terms, they take neither the indefinite article (since they cannot be counted) nor the definite article (since they are self-contained: they are entities or abstractions unique in themselves which do not need the assistance of any indexical, or deictic determination): “nature red in tooth and claw”, “growth is a feature of living organisms”, “drought is a serious problem for agricultural communities in the Indian sub-continent”.

The moment, however, that we specify or distinguish one sub-set from the parent set as a whole, or from other family members of the set — when we wish to point to them as specific and individual instances — then they take the definite article: “the furniture in the Møbel store comes from Europe”, “the materialism of western nations”, “the nature of Hokkaido”, “the drought of 1967”, “the sub-continent of India”, as opposed to the sub-continent of Africa or the Americas (an apparent anomaly, see below, 7.3).

iii), **Items of food** when thought of in the mass or even in the abstract as all-inclusive categories: ‘meat’, ‘bread’, ‘pork’, ‘beef’, ‘fish’ (we can, however, say ‘a fish’, although rarely ‘fishes’), ‘salt’, ‘sugar’, ‘pepper’ (ground peppercorns rather than the brightly coloured fruits). Paradoxically, butchers speak of ‘meats’ and ‘beefs’, while bakers speak of ‘breads’ and mineralogists of ‘salts’; but these are professional, and thus particular, limited usages: the rest of us say “a loaf of bread”, “a joint of beef or pork (or lamb)”, “a pinch of salt”.

There are, of course, pitfalls: as well as referring to a type or kind of meat we find in a butcher’s shop, ‘lamb’ can also be used of an



individual, youthful member of the sheep family, a lamb, while 'sheep' can signify both sheep in general and an individual sheep in particular.

iv), **Bodily fluids** like 'blood', 'phlegm', 'bile', 'urine', 'catarrh', 'sperm', as well as certain **natural substances** or **phenomena** when these are treated as general, all-embracing terms, such as 'sand', 'earth', 'soil', 'rock', 'water', 'cloud', 'sky', 'weather'.

Skin tissue, when thought of in its generality, is not counted: but 'a skin', again a technical usage, would refer to the particular skin of a particular animal after it had been removed from the dead animal's carcass, or the skin of Marsyas, say, after he had been flayed by Apollo.

This indicates another problematic area. 'Soil' can, of course, be counted by soil scientists, who are able to distinguish different kinds, and 'earth' can be counted when it is used, idiosyncratically, as the name of a fox's hole in the ground. 'Ground' can be counted or uncounted, depending on whether we are speaking about it as a near-abstraction ("the apple fell to the ground") or as a specific piece of ground ("there are several football grounds in London"). 'Rock' can be countable or uncountable: so can 'cloud' and 'sky': our decision about which it is to be will depend upon our sense of whether our referent is general or particular, abstract or concrete, indeterminate or individual.

v), **Processes**, when treated as categories or abstractions: 'education', 'research', 'behaviour' (countable in some languages, and now often counted by those Americans who are not native speakers of English), 'shopping', 'resistance', 'publicity', 'conduct', 'hospitality', 'applause', 'progress'.

The same is true of **Arts, Crafts, and Performances**, which are all processes of a kind: 'architecture', 'music', 'dancing', 'riding', 'painting',

‘literature’, ‘oratory’, ‘photography’, ‘woodwork’, ‘carpentry’, ‘homework’; a word like ‘sculpture’ can be both process and an individual piece created by that process.

Nor can such terms take the definite article unless we are specifying, or pointing to, a sub-set of the class: “the architecture of Palladio”, “the music of Mozart”, “the literature of the sixteenth century”. When specific references are used as epithets or in the possessive case, the definite article is dropped: “Palladian architecture”, “Mozart’s music”, “sixteenth-century literature”, since we are now dealing with something in its totality and are not *contrasting* it with another sub-set.

vi), **Pure abstract nouns** — the virtues and the vices, say, ‘faith’, ‘hope’, ‘love’, ‘desire’, ‘greed’, ‘jealousy’, ‘despair’; if such a noun is thought of as a concept, that might then be personified (as in an Allegory of the Virtues and Vices), it is uncountable — “it is love that makes the world go round” — but it may be counted if it is an individual instance that is set in comparison with, and excludes, all other instances of the same kind: David’s love for Jonathan was described as “a love passing that of women”, people speak of “a supreme faith”, “a terrible despair”. The indefinite article is indicating “a kind of” whatever the state is from which it, as a species, is being selected: one thing of that type of thing.

vii), None of this will be news to my readers, but it might not be known to our students. For the time being, at any rate, thus much: if we are using a noun as a general term, with reference to an unspecified mass, or an abstraction, it is usually not counted: if it can be separated into discrete elements, it may be.

5 The argument so far

5.1 The reasons why native speakers of Japanese have difficulty (difficulties) with articles are complex. One complication, as I said in my last piece (on Prosody), is that they usually fall off the rhythmic beat, and Japanese listeners rarely hear them (more exactly, they find them hard to catch). Another is that there are no articles in the Japanese language (only post-particles), and the concept of definiteness is therefore likely to be, at the least, less familiar, or differently expressed, since the Japanese language does not distinguish between count and non-count nouns, and thus one may suppose that its sense of the notions and conceptions of vagueness and definiteness, mass and individuality, multiplicity and uniqueness, are unlikely to coincide with these ontological notions as expressed in the English language.

5.2 Where 'things' can be counted — pencils, books, chairs, boys, apples — the indefinite article selects from a class of things one member of that class, one chosen from among many. The definite article, on the other hand, points to a single representative of that class, which has already been selected and is now confirmed, the only one, or to a sub-set of that class as, in itself, a single, self-contained entity.

Indefiniteness implies inclusiveness: to a class or category of countable things, whose individual members are, until chosen, still inchoate. Definiteness excludes: for once a thing has been selected, all other members of the same set are automatically banished from the speaker's or listener's (writer's or reader's) consideration, and we are left with something that has its own unique form, nature, content, existence, presence.

6 A Bridge Passage

It would thus seem that a speaker's (or writer's) choice of either indefinite or definite article presupposes, respectively, plurality or singularity.

If I ask "Could you please pass me an apple?" that would imply that I presupposed that there were more apples than one in, let us say, a bowl, at the other end of the table from where, let us say, I am sitting. If I were to say "Could you pass me the apple?", that would imply that I presupposed that there was only one apple in the bowl. Both presuppositions could be cancelled, of course: there might be only one apple in the bowl in the first case, or, in the second, they might all have been eaten.

At the same time, my first reference to 'bowl' was to 'a bowl', since this was my first reference, and I was selecting a bowl about which to speak from amongst the plurality of bowls in the world: all subsequent references are to 'the bowl', since this has been established as the singular, unique bowl, the one about which I am speaking, the one sitting on the table in front of you.

'Salt', unless we are mineralogists, is uncountable, and if we were referring to salt in its totality, as a mass commodity, we would not use an article — "salt is necessary for human survival, but too much is bad for us" — but if we were to ask for salt at the meal table we would speak about 'the salt', since we would be wishing to isolate the salt from anything else we might like to ask for, such as 'the bread and butter' or 'the jam'. we can also speak of 'salts', as in 'bath salts'.

While establishing a contrast, the definite article is also acting as a pointer, for I am directing your attention to a particular salt-cellar, one salt-cellar among many, already selected or chosen for our attention: we all know which dose of salt I am referring to; it is present to

all of us.

Uncountable commodities like salt, sugar and pepper, can take 'a little', although not \*'a much': 'a little' is an elliptical reduction of "a little bit of salt/sugar/pepper/whatever".

What this means, I believe, is that the choice of the definite article always signifies that whatever it defines and determines is, in the particular context in which it is used, unique, however many millions of examples of the same thing we might find elsewhere, and know to be there: all of which, by the same token, the definite article excludes.

## 7 On Uniqueness

The Japanese language does, of course, possess notions of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, but these tend to refer to inclusion within or exclusion from a group rather than amongst individual entities, while nails which stick up are, as we all know, hammered down. The doctrines of Romanticism, and its emphasis upon the unique individual's unique creative responsibility and the obligation which is thus imposed upon the individual to choose, to make his or her own personal choices, have not yet become current in Japan.

7.1 Uniqueness is important. Many people misuse the term 'unique'. You should not say, as even native speakers often do, that something is 'very unique'. Unique means "one, by itself, standing alone". It might just be possible, I suppose, to say that something is 'almost unique', but I would resist it: 'rare' would be preferable: something is either unique or it isn't<sup>3</sup>.

In the present context, 'unique' signifies that whatever I am speaking of is unique in the limited world of my discourse: the one and only

pencil I happen to be holding in my hand at this moment, the one and only chair in which I am sitting. The definite article, that is to say, points to uniqueness in a context, which, inevitably and at the same time, excludes all other examples of the same thing from our attention and concern.

7.2 When the Scots speak of “The Macdonald”, or “The Mackinnon”, they are pointing to a unique, individual man: the living chieftain of the clan of the Macdonalds or the Mackinnons (the clans of that ilk): they might also speak of him as “Himself” — “Herself” if the chieftain is a woman, which she sometimes is: as is the Countess of Mey. “The Macallan” is a particular, unique brand of whisky.

The Welsh, when speaking English, use the definite article to point to a particular individual, although not quite as the Scots do. Many Welsh people are called Jones — a very *indefinite* name — and to distinguished one Jones from another (of that ilk), they are characterised by some attributive reference, usually with regard to the man’s or woman’s profession or trade, often by metonymy — a reference which, in his or her particular community, will signify his or her uniqueness within that community: *Jones the Post, Jones the Bread, Jones the Milk*. I would be known as *Jones the School*. When the Wagnerian soprano Dame Gwyneth Jones was a young woman, she was known as *Jones the Voice*.

Sometimes, the noun to which we apply a definite article may well be unique at any one moment of historical time: “The President of the United States”, and, should we be speaking in a British rather than, say, Dutch or Danish context, “Her Majesty, The Queen”.

7.3 Articles are needed when we point to the first, second, third,

of a sequence or series, to distinguish them, in all their unique particularity, from each other: “the *first* day of Christmas, the *second* day of Christmas”, and so on. The Americans refer to “World War II”, which is, in effect, an individual name, and, as such, the article is not needed; but the British say “The Second World War”, to distinguish it from “The First World War”, which was also known as “The Great War”, since it was, at the time, uniquely world-embracing.

We also need the definite article when referring to “The United States”, “The United Kingdom” and “The (former) Soviet Union”, to distinguish them from each other and signal their uniqueness: “The United X”, “The United Y”, but we do not use either article with ‘America’, ‘Great Britain’, ‘Russia’, which are names, and are thus unique to their referents.

‘The Americas’ (the anomaly I mentioned earlier, 4.3, ii)) refers to both North and South America, and distinguishes them from (by exclusion) continents which are not American; it perhaps comes from the Spanish, since Cervantes, speaking of the Kingdoms, Dukedoms and City States of sixteenth century Italy referred to them as *Las Italias*.

7.4 The definite article also serves to highlight nouns or adjectives which are *in contrast with* other nouns or adjectives in the same set when these terms are associated with a noun with which they share a collocational link: as in “The First/Second World War”, “The United States/Kingdom”, or when adjectives are used in place of nouns: the elderly, the handicapped.

We might add ‘The River *Thames*’, not ‘The River *Severn*’; ‘The *Pacific* Ocean’, not ‘The *Atlantic* Ocean’; ‘The *North* Sea’, not ‘The *Japan* Sea’; the ‘Gard du *Nord*’, not the ‘Gard du *Sud*’.

It would be wrong, however, to say \*“the Euston Station”, \*“the

Waterloo Station”, \*“the Paddington Station”, anymore than we would say \*“the Great Britain, \*“the America”, \*“the Russia”, since these are all, like “World War II”, fixed and established names, with fixed and established referents. Yet there are exceptions to this rule, of course, and there is a yatch race called ‘The America’s Cup’ (*Chambers Encyclopaedic Dictionary*), which is puzzling.

7.5 If I were to say “In our neighbourhood, garbage is collected on a Tuesday”, that would mean every Tuesday of every week: we are not pointing to any specific or unique Tuesday; but if I said “I can visit you on the Tuesday”, that would point to the Tuesday of a certain week that had already been specified and established as the particular week which we are speaking about, and the Tuesday in question would be *that* Tuesday and no other.

## 8 Some examples analysed

Many years ago, while flying to Europe, I sat next to a young Japanese scholar who told me that he was about to write an article on articles. Had I any suggestions? When I got back to Japan, I sent him some of the examples which follow. I do not know if he used them. I chose them because they exemplify rather clearly some of the points which I have been attempting to make: they all, that is, draw our attention to the distinction between the definite and indefinite articles, and this highlighting of the difference becomes a crucial aspect of the meaning of the sentences in which the distinction is drawn.

### 8.1

The road to Bamiyan is certainly an ancient (I dare not say the ancient) route from Balk and Samarkand to India.



Peter Levi, *The Light Garden of the Angel King*

The use of the indefinite article in the phrase “an ancient route” tells us that the route is one of several routes, and that it is not especially, or uniquely, important. “The ancient route”, on the other hand, which Levi might have italicised, as the writers of my other examples do, implies a stressed contrast with routes or ways that are being excluded, and it also implies that this route is, in some way, unique: that it is the most important route, that it is the route which the classical authors wrote about, that it is the Silk Road, that it is the route taken by Alexander the Great — that it is, at any rate, superior, set apart from other routes for one reason or another.

8.2

‘I beg your pardon,’ said the Mole, pulling himself together with an effort. ‘You must think me very rude; but this is all so new to me. So—this—is—a—River!’

‘*The River*,’ corrected the Rat.

‘And you really live by the river? What a jolly life.’

‘By it and with it and on it and in it,’ said the Rat.

Kenneth Graham, *The Wind in the Willows*

The Mole, it goes without saying, has not made a mistake: his sentence is perfectly correct, and does not need to *be* corrected: this is just one river among the thousands of rivers that may be found in the world. What the Rat is saying is that — as far as he is concerned — there is only one river in the world, and this is it: for the Rat, this is the unique, the one and only river: all other rivers are nothing in comparison with his own priceless, ineffable, peerless river. It is the best of all possible rivers: it is, he is saying, *my* river.

8.3

Dr Rosenbaum chuckled delightedly, and said with a look of deep respect, "You are the most vell-read in music for a layvoman"; and his little eyes twinkled at her...Gertrude was as brave as a wolverine, but sometimes, in that unequal struggle, she despaired; when she would meet Dr. Rosenbaum lumbering to the tennis coursts, wrapped in a cable-stich sweater the size of an ordinary overcoat, accompanied by three devoted students in cut-off jeans and men's pink Oxford shirts, all four of them singing happily *Ich armer Tambourgs'sell* — when she saw this she would turn aside, or stare rigidly into the hedge, or shut her eyes, unwilling to tolerate the sight. She wanted to — to unravel his sweater, to make the girls' jeans long and new again, to reveal that the song they were singing had really been written by Sir Edward Elgar. She was even sorry that Dr. Rosenbaum was a Jew (he had got his fair hair and the name Gottfried Knosperl from his mother, a braided Austrian type, all *himmelblau und zuckerl-rosa*), since this made it impossible for her to say what she felt was somehow true: that he was a Nazi, *the* Nazi.

Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*

This is rather a long lead-up to the example, but this passage comes from the book that I would take with me to a Desert Island, and to quote from it is a self-indulgence, as well as an advertisement. The meaning of the change of article at the end should be quite clear. A Nazi would be one among thousands of Nazis, selected almost at random; *the* Nazi would sum up in himself all the characteristics and qualities that go to make up all Nazis: he would be the *quintessential* Nazi: the perfect, representative example: the type which could stand for all others of the same kind.

8.4

On my reading, then, provisional and oblique as it may be, *Antigones* is the chronicle of an encounter between two absolutely opposed figures; an

encounter which lasts all through European history and on into our future. For Steiner...the confrontation of Creon and Antigone packs within itself *the* five major human conflicts: man against woman, maturity against youth, state against individual conscience, living against dead, human against divine. No other text so fuses these five archetypal forms of confrontation.

You might question that “*the*”. Why only five? What about, for instance, racial conflict, which informs the confrontations of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*?

Ruth Padel, *Encounter*, November, 1984, reviewing George Steiner’s book *Antigones*.

Ruth Padel is questioning George Steiner’s use of the definite article, because, by using the definite article, “the” — which, when stressed, is here a marker both of inclusion and exclusion — Steiner is thereby quite deliberately excluding all other types of conflict from the category of major confrontations: these five are unique in that they form a class which is an elite: no other types of conflict may be allowed to enter this all-inclusive, sealed-off enclave of archetypal confrontations; Padel suggests that racial conflicts, for instance, are just as major.

8.5 Each of these examples stresses the definite article since the writer wishes to draw our attention to the uniqueness of the term that they accompany, and in respect that they are stressed the usages are untypical. The definite article is usually unstressed: it is just there, you might think, to add, by its very lack of emphasis, a little extra rhythmical weight to the noun which follows, as my previous paper might have suggested, the up-beat before the stressed down-beat. But the drawing of our attention to the work that the definite article is capable of doing when it is stressed indicates and demonstrates the kind of work that it is also doing when it is unstressed. With examples like

those that I have just cited, it is difficult to maintain that the definite article is an empty word.

8.6 The same may be said of an indefinite article, when it is used in a way which draws attention to itself.

Recently, a Mr. Oliver Reed, in 'a tired and emotional state', caused something of a stir in a holiday town and spent some time in the local jail. The Daily Mirror was much moved by this event, and in an editorial praised the miscreant for being a bit of a rogue and for lending colour to the otherwise drab and lacklustre lives of its readers. It was an unexpectedly honest example of the ambivalence we all have about those who drink too much.

Anthony Clare, 'El Vino Veritas', *The Listener*, 27th September, 1984

Of course, I only need the first sentence of this to make my point, but the sentences which follow preserve the note of irony — and confirm the ironic tone — of that first sentence. We might notice "a tired... state", since there are many states (of mind and body) and this is one them, "a stir" since we are selecting from a range of things that Oliver Reed might have caused, "a holiday town" since there are many holiday towns, "the local jail", since the town has only one jail, "the miscreant" since we have already established him and are now pointing to him, "a rogue" (one among many things that he could be), "an editorial" (one of many), "an example" (one of many), "the ambivalence", since this a state of mind which is uncountable and inclusive.

The reason I choose this example, of course, is "a Mr. Oliver Reed". The writer is selecting this name, out of a hat as it were, and the indefinite article implies that this is the first time that he has ever come across the name: that it is unknown to him. In fact, Oliver Reed is (or was at the time) a well-known actor, a fact of which the writer would

have been perfectly well-aware, as would his readers (and as would Oliver Reed were he to have read the piece). Oliver Reed was famous, and was rather proud of his fame: he tended, as the incident suggests, to throw his weight about, as well-known actors and athletes sometimes do when they are drunk. To imply that you do not know him is therefore to insult him, and the insult would have been understood, as an insult, by the readers (and by Oliver Reed himself): “Oliver Reed? Never heard of him? Who is he? Who does he think he is? Silly ass!” Once again, when the article (either definite or indefinite) is used in an unusual way, its implications can be extremely significant, and it is far from empty.

## 9 The definite Article as Classifier

I have just spoken of “the article” rather than “articles” to signify both indefinite and definite articles — as I do in the title to this piece, where the usage is, of course, meant to draw attention to itself. We can use the definite article, that is, to point to a set or species of something when we wish to consider it as a species, or genus, that includes all representatives of that species and excludes all members of every other species, as if one representative stood for all other members of that particular set or category: “the article” of my title signifies the complete, all-inclusive set of articles, the category of grammatical forms that come within the definition of that category, and excludes all others.

### 9.1

‘Twas at the Royal Feast, for Persia won,  
By Philip’s warlike son:  
Aloft in awful State

*An Article on the Article (Willie JONES)*

The God-like Heroe sate  
.....

The lovely Thais by his side,  
.....

Happy, happy, happy Pair!

None but the Brave,

None but the Brave,

None but the Brave deserve the Fair.

John Dryden, *Alexander's Feast, or The Power of Music, An Ode in Honour of St Cecilia's Day*

Philip's war-like son is, of course, Alexander (the Great), who has just defeated the Persian army and is celebrating his victory; Thais is his bride. Alexander was a brave man, and thus typifies, represents, signifies all brave men; he is an outstanding specimen of a particular genus: all those men who are brave: thus, "the Brave": Alexander in his own person personifies the abstract attribute Bravery. Thais is a beautiful (fair) woman and she typifies, personifies, all beautiful women: the Fair. *The definite article establishes as a type or set all who share a certain characteristic.* If we prefer to select from among all men and women one with the qualities of bravery and beauty we would use the indefinite article: only a brave man deserves — as his bride — a beautiful woman.

9.2

The cock doth crow

To let you know

If you be wise

'Tis time to rise;

For early to bed,

And early to rise,

Is the way to healthy  
And wealthy and wise.

*English Nursery Rhyme*

“The cock” signifies (refers to) both an individual bird and all birds of that particular species, since they all behave in the same way: what one cock does is what they all do. One cock can therefore stand for all cocks. We are pointing to the species (and sex) of the bird in question. At the same time, this is “the way” to be “healthy and wealthy and wise”, not “a way”: “a way” would be one way among several: “the way” is the only way, the unique path we must follow if we wish to succeed in life. When we were children, we might also have been advised to consider that particular species of creature known as “the ant”: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise”. (*Proverbs, 6,6*)

9.3

If the oak is out before the ash,  
Then we will only have a splash;  
If the ash is out before the oak,  
Then we will surely have a soak.

*English Country Wisdom*

Here, “is out” means “comes/breaks out”, that is, “comes/breaks into leaf”: if the leaves of the oak break out before the leaves of the ash, or vice versa, then certain meteorological conditions will follow. “The oak” and “the ash” because, like the cock, they are both individual specimens and representative of all trees of their particular species (or genres): what one does, all will do. English summers are often wet, and the rain can, amongst other things, be light (“a splash”) or heavy (“a

*An Article on the Article (Willie JONES)*

soak”): metonymically, “a soak” means a very wet summer; “a splash” means a not so wet summer.

9.4

A wise old owl sat in an oak;  
The more he saw the less he spoke;  
The less he spoke the more he heard  
— Wasn't that a wise old bird!

*English Nursery Rhyme*

In this instance, we are introduced to a single owl and a single oak: it is the nature of this owl perched in this tree to be wise. Since all owls, however, are reputed to be wise, he can nevertheless represent all owls. At the same time, he is being held up as an example, which we, the children who learn this and other rhymes, must follow: if we behave as the owl behaves, we, too, shall be wise. We might also notice that when adjectives of degree or comparison become nouns, they also take the definite article, since the degree will be in contrast to other degrees on the same scale, and we are indicating the particular point on the scale: “the more”, “the less”, “the same”. This suggestion of contrast often underlies the use of the definite article: *the* river, not any other river.

9.5

Consider the following set:

- a) The classroom is the place where we can make mistakes.
- b) A classroom is a place where we can make mistakes.
- c) The classroom is a place where we can make mistakes.
- d) A classroom is the place where we can make mistakes.



These sentences are obviously not synonymous

a) “The classroom” stands for the generic classroom and it is a metonymy for *any* place — which might, if we are Socrates and Phaedrus, be a shady spot beside a river — where the teacher/pupil relationship operates. “The place” implies that this is the *only* place where we can make mistakes, and, if the teacher is wise, not be punished for them; if we make mistakes in other places (by contrast), we may have to pay for them.

b) “A classroom” signifies a physical classroom, a particular place which we have selected from all other places of the same type: any classroom that we like to choose will represent all other classrooms. “A place” signifies one place, among other places, where we may be able to make mistakes without being punished for them or have to pay for them.

c/d) These sentences, of course, play variations on sentences a) and b).

## 10 Conclusion

Although much of this material (the specific analyses) has existed for years in the form of handouts, this piece has now been written at very short notice for a precipitate deadline. I should have liked more time, of course: as it stands, the piece runs in double harness, one horse ridden for my colleagues, the other for the students; but, here again, I must leave the topic for the time being. This is, at least, a start, and I hope that my remarks may have been provocative.

## Notes

These notes formed part of the penultimate draft of this text, and though I felt it better to remove them, I did not wish to lose them. Other material has disappeared altogether.

1 I offer two propositions for consideration. They are based on the Whorfian hypothesis that linguistic differences in the way that diverse cultures describe and categorise their experience will both mirror and be mirrored by differences in their perception of the world in which we all find ourselves located as physical and spiritual beings: our languages, that is to say, articulate the way we perceive and understand the nature of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds: of the existences and entities of which these worlds are composed.

If this much relativity is allowed, it will, 1), therefore follow that different categorisations of, say, the concept of definiteness must reflect, and reflect back upon, the way in which different languages conceptualise, among other things, the nature of being: that bundle of universals and particulars, concrete existences and abstract entities which constitute what philosophers know as the business of *ontology*; and, 2), if Japanese is indeed one of those languages which has found it unnecessary to conceptualize notions of definiteness or to develop grammatical terms to discriminate between shades of definiteness, it is not surprising that native speakers of the Japanese language may never completely understand why they need to choose between articles (or omit them) when speaking or writing in a language, such as English, which does embody such concepts and uses parts of speech to determine the differences in definiteness that it considers ought to be marked — not only, of course, to signify what the users take their utterances to mean, but also how they wish them to be interpreted.

2 I am puzzled by the sub-title of a book which I am currently trying to make sense of (on Deviant Logic): *Beyond the Formalism: without the article*, I would understand this to refer to a philosophical concept known as 'Formalism', but with the article, I wish to ask "the formalism of what?"

3 If we said "this book is unique", we would, if it were a printed book, be referring to the contents rather than to the object itself, which, if it is a printed book, will be duplicated many times, although an individual book is certainly a single presence, and should all other copies be destroyed, then it would become a unique copy of that book. If the object were a

medieval manuscript, however, the object itself would be unique, for, although copies might be made, nothing will ever duplicate it in all its idiosyncratic individuality. If something is unique, there is only one of its kind in the world.