Book titles and their articles
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1.
Discussing the difficulty inherent in the acquisition of the English articles by Polish learners, professor Arabski observed that this arduous task is further compounded by the fact that it is at times hard to discriminate between the results of choosing one of the articles or omitting them altogether. Illustrating that point he noted:

There is still another aspect of difficulty in the acquisition of English articles. The construction as such is difficult beyond any other language perspective. On the shelf of my library in the reading section I have two books – one’s title is Psychology of Reading (by Robech and Wilson) and the other’s The Psychology of Reading (by Gibson and Levin): the meaning of both is very close. (Arabski 1990: 14).

In point of fact the usage is even more complex than reported above as a simple library search shows that there are also books whose titles feature the indefinite article, e.g. The Global Method. A Psychology of Reading by Ovide Decroly (by van Gorp) or Toward a Psychology of Reading: The Proceedings of the CUNY (City University of New York) Conferences (by Reber and Scarborough).

However, given the benefit of hindsight and the progress in understanding English articles it is now possible to specify in quite much detail how the three patterns differ and explicate the motivation behind choosing to open the book title with the indefinite article, the definite article or no article at all. The three options and their consequences will now be discussed in that order.

2.
Ever since the publication of Hawkins (1978) it has been known that the key ingredient of the meaning carried by the indefinite article is exclusive reference. The linguistic status of this property was subject to some controversy as witnessed in Declerck (1987) and Hawkins (1991), but its cognitive significance has never been questioned. As shown in the latter publication, the essence of exclusive reference boils down to the fact that the entity designated by a nominal grounded by the indefinite article is presumed to belong to a set of at least two items out of which only one is actually profiled. Since the nominal is in the singular the other one(s) obviously remain(s) unprofiled but the encyclopedic knowledge
of the interlocutors leaves no doubt that the existence of such surplus entities in a given situation can be reasonably assumed.

For example, reading about Charles Philip Arthur George Mountbatten – Windsor better known as Prince Charles, it is easy to find that he is an avid hunter, a water color painter, a car collector, the eldest son Elizabeth II and Heir Apparent to the Crown. In the first three cases it is easy to presume that there are many other hunters, watercolor painters and car collectors around so that when membership in these sets is predicated of Prince Charles in each of them there are scores of members who can be excluded. However, since only one son is the eldest and there is only one heir apparent to the throne, in each of these two latter sets there are no other members besides Prince Charles, which means that if he is profiled there is nobody to be left unprofiled.

Consequently, the use of the indefinite article is the rule in the first three cases as shown above, but it is out of question in the two final examples. The failure to meet the simple numerical requirement calls for the use of the definite article or no article at all and will be discussed in sections 3 and 4, respectively.

As has been argued at length in Berezowski (2002), the same principles of article use apply also to proper names, including titles of books and other publications. The use of the indefinite article in book titles is thus based on the assumption that the works they name belong to a set populated also by other publications on the same topic and, perforce, other authors. In most fields of study making this assumption is trivial since there are scores of publications on almost any topic. However, choosing to highlight that obvious point in the title of a book leaves no doubt that its author intended to present his or her work only as one of the contributions to understanding the issue at hand.

Encoding this modest attitude by the choice of the indefinite article is occasionally buttressed by the use of vocabulary that invites the same inference. For example, in The Global Method. A Psychology of Reading by Ovide Decroly the identification of a particular scholar whose views are expounded in the book clearly make the reader expect a subjective discussion of the topic from the standpoint of a single writer and not an objective presentation of multiple theories and approaches. And that obviously induces the inference that the views of other authors are presented in other books on the same topic.
In *Toward a Psychology of Reading; The Proceedings of the CUNY (City University of New York) Conferences* the same effect is achieved by using the preposition *toward*, i.e. by making a caveat that the book is only a step in the direction of working out a full account of the psychology of reading and does not purport to present the final and definitive account itself, which obviously invites the inference that there is ample room for other books to do so. The use of vocabulary inducing such inferences is, however, optional. Obtaining the same result is guaranteed by the use of the indefinite account alone, e.g. *Europe. A History* by Davies, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* by Jespersen, *A Course in Phonetics* by Ladefoged, *A Grammar of Contemporary English* by Quirk et al., etc.

3.

A number of studies focusing on the definite article, e.g. Hawkins (1978), Kadmon (1990), Hawkins (1991) or Allan (2001), have shown that its main contribution to the meaning of nominals is indicating that their referents are uniquely identifiable on the basis of contextual information. In other words, the use of the definite article has been found to serve as a cue notifying the hearers / readers that the identity of the entities instantiated by a nominal can be inferred.

Drawing any such inferences the interlocutors can rely on a variety of information sources. Perhaps the most direct one is their immediate surroundings, e.g. “*And now please look at the blackboard*” as spoken by a teacher to the students in a classroom. The fact that the teacher said these words actually standing next to a blackboard will naturally lead the students to infer that he or she referred to that object in their classroom. Another good source of information is the encyclopedic knowledge accumulated by the hearers. For example, if an evening news anchor says on an American TV channel that “*The president remained in the capital for the Memorial Day weekend*” the general knowledge of any US viewers will easily let them infer the identity of the person spoken about, the name of the city in which that person remained and the time of the year when it happened.

Sufficient premises for working out such inferences are also furnished by previous discourse between the interlocutors and the meanings of particular vocabulary items. For instance, if a student says “*I wrote an essay on the same topic again but this time around the essay earned me an A*”, the interlocutor can easily infer that the same piece of writing is
spoken about in both clauses by drawing on its mention in the first one and is instructed by the meaning of *the same* to search his or her memory for an essay topic that was identified in a still earlier conversation with the same speaker.

The taxonomy of information sources relevant for the use of the definite article in English obviously depends on the theoretical framework adhered to by particular authors – cf. the proposals put forward in Hawkins (1978), Givón (1984) or Wilson (1992). However, irrespective of the terminology these scholars have coined and the rubrics they have introduced, all of them are in perfect agreement that the key condition on the use of the definite article is the availability of sufficient cues to draw inferences.

As has been shown in Klégr (1984), in the case of definite nominals followed by *of* the key premises for drawing any such inferences are typically supplied by the nominals governed by that preposition. For example, *Mount Everest* provides crucial information needed to work out the referent of *the summit of Mount Everest*, *Poland* facilitates inferring the identity of *the president of Poland*, etc. The accuracy of referent identification based on such reasoning will obviously depend on the availability of further contextual clues. For instance, if it is known which year and month is spoken about, it will be possible to work out which specific individual who served or serves as the president of Poland is meant by the speaker, and if no such information is available only the more abstract political role of the president of Poland will be identified. What is crucial, though, given the fact that the definite article has been used by the speaker / writer, the hearer / reader will go on searching the domain identified by the nominal following the preposition until a unique referent is found, whether specific or not (and if the article is indefinite, the search will obviously focus on finding a non unique entity as shown by the final example in section 2 above).

Book titles are not any different in that respect from other uses of English. The decision of the authors to call their work *The Psychology of Reading* instructs thus the readers that the intended referent, i.e. the topic covered by the book, is to be found within the domain instantiated by the gerundive nominal *reading*. Specifically, the topic is identified to be that subpart of this domain that subsumes all its psychological aspects. In other words the book is claimed to deal only with this facet of the process of reading that can be legitimately researched with the help of the scholarly apparatus of psychology and described by invoking psychological concepts to the exclusion of all other perspectives.
The use of the definite article in a title made up of a nominal modified by a prepositional phrase headed by of invites thus inferences that serve to narrow down the scope of the work to a single aspect of a broader field of study. The final nominal clearly identifies the superordinate category that subsumes the topic covered in the book, e.g. research on reading, and the initial nominal helps to stake out the limits of the inquiry pursued by the author(s).

The pattern is then cautious and followed by a variety of scholars, e.g. *The Philosophy of Grammar* by Jespersen, *The Sound Pattern of English* by Chomsky and Halle, *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics. The Semantics of Human Interaction* by Wierzbicka or *The Sounds of the World’s Languages* by Ladefoged and Maddieson, which preview discussing particular aspects of grammar, English, human interaction and the world’s languages, respectively. The same structure supplemented by article ellipsis in the second constituent is also used in the title of the article quoted at the outset of this study: *The Acquisition of the Articles and Hierarchy of Difficulty*.

4.

The use of no article is by far one of the most neglected areas of English grammar research but it is only logical to expect that it follows wherever the use of the definite and indefinite articles is ruled out. The former cannot ground indefinite nominals which fail to meet the numerical condition briefly discussed in section 2, e.g. the plurals, and the latter cannot be used with definite nominals if the identification of referents does not necessitate drawing any inferences.

Standard examples of such nominals are found in vocative utterances, e.g. “*Doctor, please be seated*”, where the identity of the interlocutors is given to them directly by participating in the same act of speech and need not be indirectly inferred from contextual clues. The speaker and the addressee interact, which makes them uniquely identifiable for each other on the basis of purely sensory data and renders achieving the same goal by deductive reasoning redundant. Consequently, the definite article is not used because it would provide a false cue to utterance understanding. As has been noted in section 3, its main contribution to text comprehension is indicating that the identity of referents is inferable, while in the example at hand it is not the case.
Crucially, though, the definite article has to be used any time the same utterance is reported for a person who has not been directly involved in the verbal interaction, e.g.: “He asked the doctor to sit down”. The addressee of the reported version also has to know who is meant by the speaker if the text is to be understood but all the information he or she can rely on in establishing the identity of the referent is only indirect in that it is derived from witnessing the speech event, having been told about it by somebody else, etc. and not from participating in it. The use of the definite article in the reported utterance follows thus from the general principles outlined in the previous section and serves to reassure the hearers / readers that referent identification is feasible if they to use their brains to work it out.

As noted above, the identification of entities instantiated by article free nominals is, however, independent of any such contextual considerations. Specifically, in the case of nominals followed by of, the entity designated by the initial nominal is not to be looked for in the domain instantiated by the object of that preposition. The referent is not intended to be a subpart of this domain, as has been the case with nominals grounded by the definite article and examined in section 3, but an independent entity whose designation happens to be made up of a nominal modified by a prepositional phrase. For example soup of the day is not an aspect of the day but a dish named after its French model, Journal of Linguistics is not a subfield of the study of language but a periodical devoted to language research, etc.

Book titles following this pattern directly identify thus independent areas of study without the mediation of superordinate categories that subsume them and supply premises for inferring the scope of the topics actually covered by the authors. Consequently, if the authors choose to call their work Psychology of Reading, they do not view psychology as merely one of the angles at which the process of reading can be researched but treat psychology of reading as a fully fledged discipline in its own right. In other words the title proclaims that the book will survey an entire existing branch of knowledge or create a new paradigm of research.

Even though the pattern is quite bold and / or audacious, it has been selected by a number of scholars. For instance: Principles of Phonetics by Laver, Aspects of the Theory of Syntax by Chomsky, Foundations of Cognitive Grammar by Langacker or Mental Spaces. Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language by Fauconnier, offering either

comprehensive surveys of a particular field of study, e.g. phonetics, or breaking the ground for completely new modes of studying syntax and semantics, respectively.

5.

The choice of the article pattern in book titles is thus not random or automatic and reflects the attitude of the authors to their works. The selection of the indefinite article implies a modest and detached perspective by indicating that the book constitutes only one of many different contributions to the study of the problem it discusses. The use of the definite article reveals an equally cautious approach in that the scope of the topic covered by the book is narrowed down to a single aspect of an area of scholarship. And the use of no article at all in the environment of the preposition of betrays a bolder attitude by intimating that the book either surveys or proposes an entire paradigm of research. While even the most careful reading of titles obviously cannot replace perusing the books they name, it is then certainly sufficient to uncover the approaches their authors have assumed.

References: