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A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH ARTICLES AND THEIR EQUIVALENTS IN GERMAN, FRENCH AND YORUBA.

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List of Abbreviations.

PP Pages.
Art. Article
Adj. Adjective
NP Noun Phrase

1 Introduction

Language can be seen as a system of words or signs used either in the past or present for the primary purpose of communication. Human language can either be written or spoken and there is said to be well over 6,000[1] living languages in the world. These can also be classified under different umbrellas according to their roots or derivations and their evolution. For example, German and English come from the Germanic family of languages. The German language is from the West Germanic language, while the English language is from the East Germanic language. The French language on the other hand, is a descendant of Latin and one of the Romance languages where we have Italian and Spanish, while Yoruba is classified as a Niger-Congo Language. All these languages have gone through years of reform and restructuring before becoming what we now refer to as standard German, French, English, or Yoruba today.

Language is also an instrument of communication, which reflects the culture, beliefs, and thoughts of the people that use it. Like all arts, it has its rules and precepts which guide its phonological, semantic, morphological and lexical systems and structures. These rules must be respected not only by the speakers of the language but also by learners of the language. Inability to conform to the rules governing the structures and use of these languages may lead to errors or even misunderstanding of what is intended by the speaker. This means that the categories of one language should not be imposed on

another.

The English language was used as a yardstick for a long time in the description of some languages like Yoruba, an action which has been condemned by many linguists of the Yoruba language, as it was observed that Yoruba has its own peculiarities. Also, in learning foreign languages like German or French by English speakers, the tendency had been for the learners to adopt rules guiding the English language in their expressions or grammar of the new language.

This study therefore wishes to attempt to contrast the English articles with their equivalents in the other languages mentioned above, with a view to further showcasing the uniqueness of each of the languages (just like other languages) and note the possible errors, which may occur by imposing rules guiding the English language on the others.

1.1 Basic definitions of the Articles and Yoruba qualifiers

The English article can be defined as a word used before a noun to identify what it refers to,[2] while Samuel Ajayi Crowther, (1852) one of the founding fathers of Yoruba studies stated that there has not been any discovery of the article in Yoruba and suggested also that there probably was none. In fact, there is still no reference to the article as a part of speech in any of the Yoruba grammar books. The view of scholars of the German language about the article is that of a grammatical entity that describes the gender, number and case of nouns, with a function of identification, individualisation or generalisation.[3] The French grammarians restrict the article to a determiner that marks the gender or number of a noun which it precedes. « Mot qui, placé devant un nom, set a le déterminer plus ou moins précisément, tout en en marquant le genre et le nombre. »[4]

The article is influenced by the noun, which is marked by certain features like, gender, number, and case. However, its forms, patterns and behaviour, vary from one language to the other. In fact, if one were to limit oneself to a particular language's definition of the article, one may find oneself in a difficult situation, if one is faced with the task of teaching or learning another language.

Therefore, I will define the article as any word (or set of words as in awon...kan in Yoruba), which can be used to give generality or particularity to the noun's

application. This may be 'a', 'an', 'the', in the English Language or their equivalents in other languages. This is the definition of the article that I find suitable and acceptable for research purposes in language studies.

1.2 Types and Forms of Articles

There are two basic types of the English articles: the definite 'the' and the indefinite articles 'a' with 'some' as their plural. English articles do not change their forms to indicate difference in the number, gender or the case of the nouns they precede. The German language also has only the definite and the indefinite articles but these are marked by the gender, number and case of the noun they accompany. The German articles reflect the gender of their accompanying nouns which can be masculine, feminine or neuter and they change their forms when the function of the noun changes in the sentence. When the noun functions as the subject, it is said to be in the nominative case. When it functions as the direct object, it is said to be in the accusative case, and when it functions as the indirect object, it is said to be in the dative case. The genitive case usually expresses possessiveness.

The French articles are three: the definite article, the indefinite article, and the partitif article. These take the forms 'le'/ 'la', 'un'/ 'une' and 'de' respectively. However, they also have different forms like 'l', 'du', 'de la', 'de l'' and des, depending on their use. These are marked by the number and gender only while the Yoruba adjectives are not influenced by any of these. This can be observed as they do not change when it involves differences in gender or number.

The definite article in the English language is 'the' no matter the number, gender or the case of the preceding noun, while the definite article in German takes the forms 'der', 'die', 'das', 'den', 'der', 'des', 'dem' and the French article takes the forms 'le', 'la' and 'les'. What however performs exactly the same functions as the English articles in the Yoruba language is 'naa' which occurs under what Yoruba grammarians tagged as 'eyan',[5] and is referred to as either a demonstrative pronoun or qualifier. It sometimes take 'awon' as its plural marker.

The English language has the forms 'a' / 'an' as the indefinite articles while the indefinite article has the forms 'ein', 'eine', 'einem', 'eines', 'einen' in German.

The French language takes the forms 'un', 'une' and 'des' while Yoruba has the qualifier 'kan' in the position of the English indefinite articles. This sometimes also take 'awon' as its plural marker.

2. A Contrastive Analysis of the English Articles and their Equivalents in German, French and Yoruba.

2.1 The Article In The Noun Phrase

Determiners like the article usually accompany noun phrases in sentences. As simple as this fact seems to be, it is characterised by differences when different languages are involved. The position of articles in noun phrases can be influenced by certain factors, which are as a result of the structure of the different languages involved.

2.1.1 The Article in the Subject Noun Phrase.

Some articles have been observed to always come before the nouns they qualify. For example in the following:

English:
The Lady dances.
NP (Art. + Noun)

German:
Die[i] Dame tanzt.
(THE LADY DANCE)
The lady dances.
NP (Art + Noun)

French:
La[ii] dame danse.
(THE LADY DANCE)

i This is the singular form of the feminine gender of the German definite article, in the nominative case. The nominative case is the case, which refers to the subject of the sentence.
ii This is the singular form of the feminine gender of the French definite article.

The	lady	dances.
NP (Art. +	Noun)	

The Yoruba language however, operates differently. If this rule were to be applied to it, the sentence will become:

*Naa	omobinrin	n	jo.
(THE	LADY	INACC.	DANCE)
NP (Art. +	Noun)		

This structure is grammatically incorrect in Yoruba. Instead it should be:

Omobinrin	naa	n	jo.
(LADY	THE	INACC.	DANCE)
The	lady	dances.	
NP (Noun +	Art.)		

2.1.2 The article in the Subject Noun Phrase with adjectives.

When used alongside certain adjectives in the noun phrase, the article usually comes before these adjectives.

English:

The	rich	man	is	coming.
NP(Art.	+ Adj.	+ Noun)		

German:

Der[iii]	reiche	Mann	kommt.
(THE	*RICH*	*MAN*	*COME)*
The	rich	man	is coming.
NP (Art. +	Adj.	+ Noun)	

The French version is different because French adjectives usually come after the nouns they qualify with the exception of adjectives like *beau / belle, bon/bonne, mal, mauvais/mauvaise, grand/grande and petit/petite*. The structure we get in this case is therefore:

iii This is the singular form of the masculine gender of the German definite article in the nominative case

French:

L'[iv]	homme	riche	vient
(THE	MAN	RICH	COME)
The	rich	man	comes.
NP (Art. +	Noun	+ Adj.)	

However, with adjectives such as bon, it will be:

Le	bon	homme	vient
(THE	*GOOD*	*MAN*	*COME)*
The	good	man	comes
NP(Art. +	Adj. +	Noun)	

The situation in Yoruba is as before; the article comes after the adjective:

Yoruba:

okunrin	olowo	naa	n	bo.
(FATHER	*GOOD*	*THE*	*INACC.*	*GO)*
The	rich	man		is coming.
NP (Noun +	Adj. +	Art.)		

Instead of:

*Naa	olowo	okunrin	n	bo.
(THE	*RICH*	*MAN*	*INACC.*	*COME)*
NP (Art. +	Adj. +	Noun)		

Which is grammatically unacceptable in Yoruba.

2.1.3. The Article in the Direct Object Noun Phrase

The article retains its position even when the noun phrase functions as a direct object in the sentence. It is always found preceding the noun it stands to qualify in almost all the languages under study. This can be observed in the following cases:

English:

Abiola	saw	the	thief
		NP (Art. +	Noun)

iv The singular form of the masculine gender of the French definite article. The apostrophe replaces the e in 'le' which is followed by a vowel sound

German:

Abiola	sah	den[v]	Dieb
(ABIOLA	*SAW*	*THE*	*THIEF)*
Abiola	saw	the	thief.
		NP(Art. +	Noun)

French:

Abiola	a	vu	le[vi]	voleur.
(ABIOLA	*SAW*		*THE*	*GIRL.)*
Abiola	saw		the	thief.
			NP (Art. +	Noun)

Yoruba:

Abiola	ri		ole	naa.
(ABIOLA	*SAW*		*THIEF*	*THE)*
Abiola	saw		the	thief.
			NP (Art. +	Noun)

As usual, it can be observed that Yoruba remains different from the other languages analysed earlier. It comes after the noun and not before the nouns, as was the case in German, French and English. If it had behaved like others, it would have read thus:

Yoruba:

*Abiola	ri	naa	ole
(ABIOLA	*SAW*	*THE*	*THIEF)*
		NP(Art. +	Noun)

This, of course is not accepted in Yoruba language grammar.

2.1.4. The Article in the Direct Object Noun Phrase with adjectives.

English:

I	saw	the	old	man.
		NP (Art. +	Adj. +	Noun)

v This is the singular form of the masculine gender of the German definite article, accusative case.
vi This is the singular form of the masculine gender of the French indefinite article, accusative case.

German:

Ich	sah	den[vii]	alten[viii]	Mann.
(I	*SAW*	*THE*	*OLD*	*MAN)*
I	saw	the	old	man.
		NP (Art. +	Adj. +	Noun)

As explained earlier, French adjectives usually come after the nouns they qualify with some exceptions. *Viel* is one of these exceptions and therefore comes before the noun *homme*. In this case, the article comes before the adjective, which precedes the noun.

French:

J'	ai	vu	le[ix]	viel[x]	homme.
(I	*saw*		*the*	*old*	*man)*
I	saw		the	old	man.
		NP	(Art. +	Adj. +	Noun)

Yoruba:

Mo	ri	okunrin	arugbo	naa.
(I	*SAW*	*MAN*	*OLD*	*THE)*
I	saw	the	old	man.
	NP	(Noun +	Adj. +	Art.)

In the example above, the article is not only coming after the noun, it is also coming after the adjective qualifying the noun. This is very different from what is observed in English and German. Following the pattern of the English language, the sentence would have read thus:

*Mo	ri	naa	arugbo	okunrin.
(I	SAW	THE	OLD	MAN)
		NP (Art. +	Adj. +	Noun)

As would be observed, this is grammatically unacceptable in Yoruba.

vii This is the singular form or the masculine gender of the German definite article, accusative case. The accusative case refers to the direct object in the sentence.
viii The adjective here has undergone declination.
ix This is the singular form of the masculine gender of the French definite article.
x This is the masculine form of this adjective in French.

2.1.5. The Article in the Indirect Object Noun Phrase.

The article can also be found in certain noun phrases which function as indirect objects in the sentence. Usually, in this case the articles precede the nouns, which they accompany.

English:

The doctor gave the child the drugs.
NP (Art + Noun)

German:

Der Arzt gab dem[xi] Kind die Medikamente
(THE DOCTOR GAVE THE CHILD THE DRUGS)
The doctor gave the drugs to the child.
NP (Art. + Noun)

French:

Le médecin a donné le médicament à l'[xii] enfant
(THE DOCTOR GAVE THE DRUGS THE CHILD)
The doctor gave the book to the child.
NP (Art. + Noun)

It should be noted that the phrase *à l' enfant* is a prepositional phrase and not a noun phrase because of the presence of the preposition *à*, although it functions as an indirect object.

Yoruba:

Onisegun naa fun omo naa ni owo.
(THE DOCTOR GIVE CHILD THE HAVE MONEY)
The doctor gave the child money.
NP (Noun + Article)

Yoruba as usual takes its position after the adjective, which precedes the noun.

xi This is the singular form of the German definite article, dative case. The dative case refer to the indirect object. In this case, it is standing for the neuter gender.
xii 'à l'' is the contracted form of 'a le', which means 'to the'.

2.2.6. The article in the Indirect Object Noun Phrase with Adjectives.

When used with adjectives, the article comes before the adjectives, which precede the nouns.

English:

I gave it to the little child
NP (Art. + Noun)

German:

Ich gab es dem[xiii] kleinen[xiv] Kind
(I GAVE IT THE LITTLE CHILD)
I give it to the child.
NP (Art. + Adj. + Noun)

French:

Je l'ai donné au[xv] petit enfant
(I GAVE IT TO THE LITTLE CHILD)
I give the money to the little boy.
NP (Art. + Adj. + Noun)

The Phrase, which functions as the indirect object in this sentence, is a prepositional phrase and not a noun phrase, because of the presence of the preposition 'a'.

Yoruba:

Mo fi i fun omo kekere naa
(I IT GIVE CHILD SMALL THE)
I gave it to the small child.
NP (Noun + Adjective +Article)

However, indirect objects can either come before or after direct objects in some languages like German and English. In any case, the articles retain their positions. For example, if in German, the sentence were:

Ich gebe dem Kind das Geld,

I give the child the money,

xiii This is the singular form of the neuter gender of the German definite article, dative case.
xiv The adjective here has been declined.
xv This is the contracted form of 'a le'.

The article found in *dem Kind* (the indirect object), retains its position despite the switch in the positions of the direct and indirect objects. These might not be exactly the same in the other languages because a switch in position of the direct and indirect objects may lead to the introduction of a preposition, which will turn the phrase in the indirect object into a prepositional phrase.

Since we are concerned with the behaviour of the article in the noun phrase, I will not go into examples of these.

2.2. OMISSION OF ARTICLES

There are certain cases where the article is omitted in sentences, but this is not always the case as each language has its own peculiarities when it comes to when and when not to use the article. Some of the major cases will be discussed here.

In German, English, and Yoruba, for example, the article is not used before proper nouns like names of people, cities, countries and continents such as, Goethe, London, Africa, Nigeria and so on.

Examples:

1. Afrika und Asien sind Kontinente. *(German)*
2. Africa and Asia are continents. *(English)*
3. Afrika ati Asia je kontinenti. *(Yoruba)*
4. Mohammed Ali ist sehr bekannt. *(German)*
5. Mohammed Ali is renowned. *(English)*
6. Mohammed Ali je gbajugbaja eniyan, *(Yoruba)*

However, there are some exceptions like:

der Libanon,
der Sudan,
(der) Irak,
(der) Jemen,
die Bundesrepublik,
das Vereinigte Königreich,
die Schweiz,
die Türkei, with other names of countries ending in ‚ei', and plural names like,

die Niederlände' and
die Vereinigte Staaten von Amerika; (German), (The) United States of America. (English) and L'états unis (French).

When adjectives and some abstract nouns are used in the accusative with verbs like 'trinken', 'brauchen', they may not take articles except in some instances in French.

For example:

1. a. Ich trinke Wasser.*(German)*
   b. I drink water *(English)*
   c. mo mu omi *(Yoruba)* but
   d. je bois l'eau *(French)*

2. a. Ich brauche Geld. *(German)*
   b. I need money. *(English)*
   c. mo nilo owo *(Yoruba)* but
   d. j'ai besoin de l'argent*(French)*

However:

3. a. Ich habe Hunger *(German)*
   b. I am hungry[xvi] *(English)*
   c. ebi n pa mi[xvii] *(Yoruba)*
   d. j'ai faim[xviii] *(French)*

In English, German and Yoruba, uncountable nouns do not take the article, whereas, this is not the case with some French nouns.

For example:

1. Wasser ist gut für die Gesundheit. *(German)*
2. Water is good for (the) health. *(English)*
3. Omi dara fun ilera. *(Yoruba)* but..
4. L'eau est bon pour la santé. *(French)*

When certain information about nationality, occupation, course of study is being given, using the verbs *'sein'* and *'werden'* or after *'als'*, in German, and with the verb *'être'*, in French., the article is usually omitted. English will normally use

xvi Literarily, this can be translated as 'I have hunger'
xvii Literarily, this can be translated as 'hunger is killing me'
xviii Literarily, this can be translated as 'I have hunger'

articles in giving any of the above information using the verb *'to be'* or *'to become'* while Yoruba will not use the article at all in any of the situations stated, no matter the verb used.

Examples are:

1. Ich bin Ingenieur. *(German)*
2. Je suis ingenieur. *(French)*
3. I am an engineer. *(English)*
4. Mo je enginia. *(Yoruba)*

Where the German, French, and English Languages however allow the use of the article with common nouns like sun, moon, and sky, Yoruba language does not.

For example:

1. Die Sonne scheint. *(German)*
2. Le soleil brille. *(French)*
3. The sun shines. *(English)*
4. Oorun ran. *(Yoruba)*

2.3 Errors Involving the Wrong Use of the Articles

To Nigerians who are native speakers of Yoruba and whose first foreign language (or second language as the case of Nigeria is) is English, it is not uncommon to see a clear transfer of certain rules from the mother tongue into the English language. This could perhaps be that such a person had noted a few cases of similarity in the language .structure, orthography or use. The situation becomes more severe when such a Nigerian takes up an additional language like French or German or any other foreign language with the same attitude. This may also be by simply using a particular category which belongs to a language in another language where such normally does not exist.

Some of the mistakes that have been observed by the author to have been commonly made by some Yoruba natives include:

- *I go to market*
- *He went to farm*
- *We need sun to make our plants grow*
- *The governor is going to pay courtsey call to his royal highness, Oba Okunade Sijuade.*
- *He will be participating on OSBC T.V. programme Adunduntan by 6 p.m.*

- *I'm travelling to US*
- *I want to buy Punch Newspaper*
- *The film will be shown at K.S. Motel, Ibadan*
- *I am learning German Language*

Such errors are however not restricted to Nigerians alone as one must but remember the famous speech of the late American president to the German people while speaking about the unification of Germany. In an attempt to show that he identified with the plight of the people of Germany, who had been separated from their families because of the 'Wall' created by the eastern powers (i.e. the then Soviet Union), Kennedy ended his wonderfully prepared speech with the sentence *"Ich bin ein Berliner"*, which was not appropriate in the German language and clearly showed his inadequacy in the language. One would note a clear transfer from the English language here as the Englishman would say: *'I am a Londoner'*. However, in German, the article would be omitted. One could propose that whoever prepared the former president's speech saw such minute details as unnecessary but he would have learnt his lesson on seeing such a minute detail being noted in various newspapers and discussed by many people in Europe.

Examples of similar error would be:

- *Je suis un Nigerian*
- *Ich wäre ein Millionär, wenn ich President wäre.*

One may ask what the *'big deal'* about making such errors is, but when one remembers that a sentence like *'He went to farm'* may mean that the person in question actually undertakes the farming process whereas He went to the farm does not necessarily mean that such a one does the farming himself. In this way, there may be a misunderstanding of what is intended. Also, it does not only suffice that one learns a language to communicate, it is also necessary that the learner of a new language learns it the way it is spoken by the owners of the language. Such a situation does not only help to preserve languages of the world and avoid language death but it also helps in preserving the culture of the people whose language is being learnt.

Conclusion

The study concludes that these languages have shown uniqueness in the rules guiding the formation and use of their articles (or their equivalents), therefore the parameters for their use must also differ. It has also shown the importance of the article (or its equivalent) as a mark of definiteness, whereby its wrong use can cause ambiguity or misunderstanding. The paper proposes that in learning a new language, effort should be made to learn the language as it is used by its speakers and not try to apply the rules found in one's native language (or any other language) as a yardstick for the new language. Therefore using the English language as a parameter in describing or studying other languages, especially Yoruba should be discouraged to avoid error. Anybody who therefore desires to learn a new language, or carry out a research on a language must remember to respect the uniqueness of each language to another and approach the process of learning or research accordingly.

NOTES

1 http://www.ethnologue.com/

2 Joyce M. Hawkins, The Oxford Paperback Dictionary, Oxford University Press, London, 1983.

3 see Reimann (1996) pgs.104-107 and Griesbach (1986) pp. 337-340, among others.

4 Georges Gougenheim, Dictionnaire Fondamental de la langue Française, Paris, 1958

5 See Adeboyeje, A.; Yiwola Awoyale; Tunde Ekundayo and Martins Oni. 1978. pp.55-56.

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