DETERMINING THE DETERMINERS

David Cook

David Cook in his paper seeks to unravel the mystery behind the deep-seated problems for second language speakers of English in finally grasping the subtleties in usage of the basic English determiners - 'the', 'a'/'an' and 'zero'. His reasons for these problems are attributed to certain linguistic and non-linguistic sources, but certainly not to their level of intelligence. Having identified the problems, Cook tries to find a way of remedying them. His suggestions of solutions pertain to both linguistic and applied linguistic areas based on certain requirements: an adequate pedagogical grammar of English determiners for ESL Learners, an appropriate textbook, a well-trained teacher, an appropriate learning environment, a superabundant supply of rich examples of data in different apt contexts, and an appropriate methodology.

Introduction

This paper is being presented as a contribution to a book honouring Professor Adebisi Afolayan. Of course it would be easy for me to write a whole essay on Bisi Afolayan the man, and the international scholar. I could sing his pre-eminence in the tripartite fields of Yoruba Linguistics, English Linguistics and General Linguistics. I could praise him as a great teacher and a great disseminator of knowledge in all these fields.

I could identify him as the central figure of the campaign to establish students' first language as the proper medium for the whole course of primary education: a project which is now becoming a policy; and will have far-reaching and positive effects in the entire realm of education as it becomes - as it now certainly will - more and more widely adopted. It will go far in setting to rights the lamentably widespread substitution of true education with parrot learning. As students (and teachers) start working in a medium which they fully understand, and so in which they can *conceptualize* basic notions, basic tools of thought (instead of having to learn them woodenly and largely uselessly by heart), it will go far to reverse the endless complaints about Africa lagging behind in the wide human tracts of science and technology. As now acknowledged by former deepseated sceptics (notably in the Nigerian English Inspectorate and the British Council), this policy has been shown to improve significantly students' performance in learning and discussing all subjects in English at the secondary school level. And Bisi Afolayan is at the heart of this positive educational turn-around.

I could speak of him as the instigator of the now vigorous and developing *Journal of English as a Second Language (JESEL)*, the first in the world to be unequivocally devoted to this specific field.

Indeed it was in the third issue of that journal that the Editorial Board asked me to say something about the series which we believed was on the verge of publication, to be known as *The New Africa Library of Studies in*

English as a Second Language. This is a series for which I have had the honour to edit the first seven volumes, six by no other than Adebisi Afolayan, books urgently needed in Nigeria and Africa at large. Such are the current hazards and disappointments in publication, that a clear commitment to publishing these works at that time by a major publishing house in the event came to nothing. But they will be published, of that neither I nor Bisi have any doubt, and they will become standard texts in many, if not all, Nigerian universities, and wider field.

But it is not my role here and now to broadcast again Bisi Afolayan's many signal achievements. It is my role to contribute my widow's mite to a symposium published in his honour on the occasion of his most untimely and unwelcome retirement, just when he is at the height of his powers. But if perforce he must retire from the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, happily for all of us he is not retiring from the world, nor from his key role in scholarship. And such restricted retirement may give him the chance to fulfil more completely other aspects of his destiny, not least by extensive publication and his continuing Editorship-in-Chief of *JESEL*, which I have already had occasion to mention.

The main body of this paper is organised under two principal sub-divisions - Part One and Part Two. The significance of this partitioning will be explained later at the beginning of Part Two.

PART ONE

It is generally recognised that English as a Second Language (ESL) is one of the principal fields in which Professor Afolayan has been making his most seminal contributions. To him belongs the original presentations of ESL as a lingual-cultural variety, more precisely a bilingual-bicultural variety of the English language (Afolayan 1987), as his outstanding 'retirement' lecture published in this volume reminds us. How then is my own paper related to his work?

A cardinal work in his conception of ESL is the necessity for establishing a standard ESL variety. Since he sees ESL as being primarily transmitted through formal education, there is a need for the identification and description of the grammar of the standard ESL variety for teaching and learning purposes. Unfortunately, however, there is no known standard ESL variety. So one of the primary challenges for applied linguists is to produce an ESL grammar for teaching and learning.

Those conversant with any ESL variety will readily admit the danger of classifying it as essentially a sub-standard variety, an interference variety (as in Quirk et al. 1972). Nevertheless one can readily agree with Afolayan in his identification of the nominal group, the verbal group and the prepositional group as major sub-standard features in the present ESL variety of Nigerians, specifically of Yoruba, learners and users (Afolayan 1968). In respect of the nominal group, the determiner system is one of its most intractable aspects, as Afolayan admits in almost total desperation.

My profound friendship and devoted collaboration with Bisi has, as I have mentioned in part, given me the chance to edit and discuss with him many of his writings, in particular those extensive works which are trembling on the verge of publication. In so doing I have had the chance of many long consultations and discussions with him in areas of our joint professional endeavours, and one of many such topics which have arisen in these talks, often late into the night, is the subject of my present paper: namely the deep-seated problems for second-language speakers of English in finally grasping the subtleties in usage of the basic English determiners - 'the', and 'a' or 'an' and 'zero' ('zero' being the necessary absence of either of these alternatives).

In my thirty or more years of working in African universities. I have found among all groups of the most sophisticated users of English as a Second Language - finalist undergraduates, post-graduates, and many notable and outstanding scholars - that the most persistent recurrent problem in terms of slips and minor errors in their use of English for a wide variety of purposes has involved confusions about the little words 'the' and 'a' ('an') and their proper necessary non-use (zero). Indeed among the many tens of thousands of words I have edited for Bisi Afolayan, I have found many points of content to discuss with him in depth, virtually always (often after long and tough debates) being able to resolve the issues involved to our mutual satisfaction, and only very rarely having at length to agree to differ. But he has also asked me as an incidental task in this same process to iron out any tiny hiccups in his own use of the English language (which he deemed me better placed to do as a moderately competent native user of English). And in doing so I have invariably found that something like fifty percent or more of such relatively rare hiccups have concerned the use of 'the', 'a' ('an'), and zero.

Before looking into the reasons and possible remedies for such problems, I want to go to the other end of the scale and produce opposite, but I think equally relevant, evidence. I studied for both my degrees in Birkbeck College, University of London, a full internal college of the university whose students took exactly the same exams as students of other colleges of the university at the end also of three years, but with one difference. At that time

Birkbeck was the only university college in England whose students had by statute to be doing a full-time job during the day, so that our lectures were all at night between 6 and 9 p.m. (in my case after a longish journey by train and then a bus ride across London). During those years I taught English full-time in a secondary modern school, work that I so much loved that I at first (wilfully as I was told by my own great professor) for a while turned down an offered postgraduate grant in order to return for the first time to my secondary modern students without evening 'distractions'. One aspect of my teaching which particularly preoccupied me during these years was working with classes of (as they were then unfortunately called) 'educationally sub-normal' (E.S.N.) pupils, under a headmaster who took little account of this 'E stream' as long as they were kept quiet. I was much devoted to this part of my work, and myself learnt a lot of what I know about teaching from teaching those boys, and discovering how eager they were to learn something of the art of communication in words. The point that I am leading up to is this. Those deprived lads, who had been made fun of and had, at least metaphorically, been made to wear dunces caps in primary school, were hard to tame, but at length were thrilled by their ability to get the skills of writing and reading sufficiently mastered. They had deep problems with all aspects of English - the mastery of relative pronouns was a mountain and at length a triumph for them (an issue which no sophisticated second language speaker I have known was ever troubled with) *but* one thing they had no difficulty with and barely ever made a mistake about was those little words 'the' and 'a' ('an') and zero. I want now to ask the reasons for this paradox, and see what we can learn from it.

Reasons for ESL Learners' Difficulties with Basic Determiners

To start with we must dismiss any temptation to attribute the difficulties of ESL learners with the basic determiners to their level of intelligence as if it were lower than that of native English speakers. Their general average level of intelligence is not in doubt. Rather the sources of the problem are fundamentally linguistic and applied linguistic.

It is not my intention to try and explore in detail the linguistic and applied linguistic causes here and now. It would be inappropriate to attempt this in a single paper of this nature. However, I shall seek to identify certain fundamental causes of this problem.

(a)   Linguistic Sources

Every language has its own mystique, represented by its grammar, and there is no more fundamental aspect of the mystique of English than its

system of basic determiners. This system expresses an infinite number of subtleties and distinctions of meaning, some of them truly basic. Each language shares certain aspects of its mystique with some other languages, in which respect they might be said to be de facto (whether or not literally) cognate. The mystique of the English basic determiner system is close, in some cases very close, to that of a number of other European languages; so that second-language speakers of English from such language bases will have little or no fundamental difficulty with this particular mystique since they are already 'inside' it. But this English mystique relating to basic determiners is utterly different from the mystiques of most, perhaps all, languages based in Africa. Aspects of the true mystique of an acquired language which are alien to a learner's mother tongue are by far the most difficult for him or her to grasp and become fully and finally at home with. The aspect of the mystique of English that now concerns us is one of its most basic and significant features, and one that is all-pervasive in any manifestation of English whatsoever; but is specially hard for most Africans to master.

(b)   Applied Linguistic Sources

The fundamental problem concerns issues related to the initial learning (internalization) and subsequent use (externalization) of the mystique of English determiners. These issues are primarily three: the identification of the properties of the mystique, the process of internalizing the properties, and the capacity to perform with the internalized properties adequately.

With regard to identifying the properties of the mystique, there are two separate sources of difficulties. The first has been the changing fashions about grammar; and the second concerns the process of acquiring the grammar. Two key matters about grammar arise: the nature of grammar and the need for it. On the nature of grammar, fundamental changes have taken place. Initially grammar was traditional and prescriptive. Then in modern times it has become descriptive. But today descriptive grammar, as Quirk has pointed out, needs supplementation with prescriptivism in the classroom (Quirk 1958) in order to be effective. Again equal fundamental changes have taken place concerning the need for any grammar at all. Initially grammar was everything. Later it became the fashion in the ESL environment to reject grammar. And from what we have said so far, it can be inferred that the neglecting of the teaching of what we have called the mystique of English determiners has left ESL learners pursuing a guessing game of hit or miss which was bound to end in confusion.

Three other special matters also relate to the process of acquiring the required grammar of English determiners. These three matters distinguish the processes followed by native speakers and ESL speakers.

First, native speakers of English have so many millions of examples of more or less 'correct' use of these determiners from their very earliest years that, complex as the system is, there is no aspect of the language in which they are less likely to make mistakes. Hence the fact that the so-called 'E.S.N.' students whom I became so attached to in my secondary modern school found less of a problem in this of all areas than they did in almost any other in speaking or attempting to write their own language. In contrast, ESL speakers experience an extremely limited exposure to very few examples, and spend comparatively very little time in consciously or unconsciously mastering the mystique.

Second, native speakers start with basic learning advantages. They begin learning as very young children with uncontaminated learning capacities, whereas ESL learners start as linguistic adults with competence in their mother tongue which has, by definition, contaminated their learning capacities.

Third, while native speakers, as learners, are constantly exposed to the mystique of English determiners in all their ramifications at every turn, ESL learners are relatively deprived. Composers of textbooks for teaching them English all too often seem bewilderingly blind to the particular 'mystique' of the language they are trying to teach or enable others to teach. Unfortunately, this seems particularly true of the differences between the mystique of English and the mystique or mystiques of the languages that are the mother tongues of those unfortunate learners who are struggling to acquire English with the help of these guide books. This is why so many text-books of English in use in Africa labour points of structure or usage with which specific learners are unlikely to have difficulty since the mystique(s) of their own language(s) differ relatively little in these respects; while the same text-books skip absurdly lightly over the very features which are most at variance between English and the relevant mother tongue(s) and so most desperately need close and detailed analysis and infinitely greater practice.

As we have said, there is no feature of English that is more subtly and complexly embedded in communication than basic determiners. Yet this is an aspect which most text-books, even the best which show some awareness of the problem, pass over much, much too lightly, and on which they propose far too little exercise. Too often they simply dwell on examples of exceptions to the general usage in the language within this particular system. This is partly because they are unaware or inadequately aware of the issue I am emphasising.

But it is also because these exceptions are very much easier to illustrate and teach (though in fact altogether less important) than the basic principles that lie behind the general grasp of this extremely important peculiarity of English (and many of its cognate language). Little wonder that teachers who share the same first language as their pupils, with these text-books as their only models, follow the same easier path, and assiduously teach the incidentals rather than the fundamentals of a principle they themselves have not grasped, because they themselves have never been taught it properly.

The earliest training in all aspects and techniques of an acquired second or foreign language takes deep root and is specially hard to shift, or in the case of wrong teaching to eradicate in later life. This is why the very features with which rudimentary native-speaking learners find least problems are those with which sophisticated second language learners find the greatest difficulty.

Towards Finding Solutions to the Problems

From what has been said so far, it is clear that in my view to solve ESL problems in respect of basic English determiners, both linguistic and applied linguistic solutions must be provided appropriately. An adequate pedagogical grammar of English determiners for ESL learners is needed. Provisions are required in two forms: an appropriate text-book and a well trained teacher. Then an appropriate learning environment must be provided, with two priorities: a superabundant supply of rich examples in different apt contexts; and an appropriate methodology.

Clearly I cannot offer detailed specifications of the solutions just outlined in this single paper. What I will now attempt to do is to add some more specific suggestions as to what I regard as the crucial omissions and misdirections which have till now disastrously warped such attempts as have been made to teach the system of basic determiners in English in ESL areas with which I am familiar.

Traditional grammar certainly cluttered and encumbered the pupil or student with a great deal of learned terminology (such as 'past pluperfect' and 'subordinate clause of purpose') which never helped anyone to use or grasp English more clearly, and often actually hindered them from seeing and deploying the real patterning of English clauses or tenses. It was a very good idea to clear the ground of a lot of this obfuscating debris. But some terminology is needed if we are to talk about language sensibly and explain its working to learners. Some new brooms swept away what was needed together with what was certainly not needed, and this related to the blank period when

were taught no grammar at all, and 'grammar' even absurdly became a dirty word. Human beings always have a regretable tendency to go from one extreme to the other. As some degree of sanity was restored, however, another different kind of impediment developed. The well-meaning new English linguists, followed by well-meaning English text-book writers (sometimes one and the same, sometimes not) decided that truly some terminology *was* needed,

that the old terms were outdated and, at least to them, illogical. But instead of getting **together and agreeing** upon a new terminology for general use that would be clearer and more effective, each expert and text-bookologist introduced his own terms, each set being different from the others. So a period of Babel ensued and many forward-looking teachers ruefully pined for the useful bits of the old terminology to be reinstated, however imperfect, so that everyone (especially teachers and students) could know what everyone else was talking about. We are not entirely out of this wood yet. I have on the whole avoided venturing on mined ground by employing 'definite article' and 'indefinite article', but as far as possible have struck unequivocally to 'the' and 'a' ('an'): but we *must* have a term for 'zero', and I have kept to the term 'zero' as being very difficult to misunderstand and also reasonably widely accepted.

There are two main distinctions between the basic determiners (another term I have retained through thick and thin): that between 'the' and 'a' ('an'); and that between employing a determiner and employing none. It is for the latter that I have kept to the term 'zero'. Both distinctions are crucial. But the latter has all too often been ignored, skirted round, or muffed in text-books and in teaching. **This neglect I am identifying as the first of the** pragmatic gaps in teaching which have seriously contributed to second-language speakers of English being bewildered about the whole determiner system in the language. In teaching one must have a term for positions in English where semantically no determiner can or should be used. The lack of such a term in much teaching has created a disastrous hiatus. 'zero' seems to be as good a **term as any.** Of course learners not specifically taught on this point are aware that there are times when no determiner is needed - one cannot get to even an **intermediate stage** of reading or otherwise using English without observing this. Consequently, through lack of proper guidance on this point, two of the commonest errors in this area is either omitting a determiner when one is needed or using one when it is intrusive. One cannot blame flummoxed second-language users for making such errors. And one cannot be surprised if they **survive** right through to the most sophisticated use of English every now and then - as they do even with Bisi Afolayan!

I sometimes used with Makerere students a comparative example of different usages with and without a determiner which may be worth repeating

here. I would write on the board these three sentences (or potentially clauses of longer sentence):

Some students are irresponsible.
The students are irresponsible.
Students are irresponsible.

I would ask which of these three statements could be regarded as inciting a riot if spoken in a school assembly by a headmaster or in a congregation of undergraduates; which of the three statements would be almost universally accepted without a murmur; and which of them could not be so assessed without knowing more fully the context and just who was present when the assertion was made. After a pause there would be almost a 100% correct response: that the first of the statements would be almost universally accepted unless particular students wanted to identify themselves as being amongst the 'some'; that the last statement would certainly be a potential incitement to riot; and that the second statement could not be pinpointed without knowing what students were being alluded to by 'the', and whether those present included those particular students, and whether others present were sympathetic to them or on the contrary rejected them as causing trouble for all.

It may now be best to hurry on to my second pragmatic failure in teaching which is equally serious as I see it: it will also cover so far neglected aspects of the 'zero' issue. It may seem at first illogical in what follows to include 'some' among the basic determiners to be considered, while I say nothing of the many other less basic determiners. There is a reason for my so doing. It is not so much that 'some' may stand in proxy for the other determiners that I do not mention (though this is true). It is rather that in a number of slots where 'zero' is applicable, it would be easy for quicker and better informed students to fault the proposed grid if 'some' is not immediately admitted as a possible alternative. In teaching one could readily make it clear that there are other possible determiners, and these could be listed and discussed. But in this paper I am concerned with the basic determiners 'the', 'a' ('an'), and zero; and I have brought in 'some' only for the reason just given. It seemed, however, more illogical and confusing to include 'some' in those slots where its absence might seem to discredit the whole lay-out, as I have said, but not to include it in other slots where it is a possible alternative but the same caveat would not apply. So I have included it wherever it might occur.

There is one other anomaly involved in what follows which I should mention briefly. It stems from my limiting myself to familiar terms (where terms must be used). It is an apparent contradiction to talk of 'plural non-

countable nouns', since the traditional term 'non-countable' should logically rule out plurality. The paradox can be resolved only by exploring the secondary and tertiary degrees of subtlety of determiners, and will be touched on in Part Two below. For the moment it seems most practicable to keep to the familiar term 'non-countable' without further comment.

The second widespread specific hiatus in the presentation of basic determiners to ESL learners that I seek to foreground is the failure to re-integrate two parts of the system after they have been separated. Normally text-books, and therefore classroom teaching, break down the introduction of determiners into two discrete sectors to make the process easier for the text-book writer, for the teacher, and thus, it is hoped, for the learner.

I must first make it very clear that I am very far from having any objection to the two separate parts of the system being taught and explained separately; namely the distinction between specific and non-specific nouns and their determiners, and between countable and non-countable nouns and their determiners. The only rider I would add here is that I have found it clearer to distinguish nouns which can best be classified under 'mass' like water, which seldom have real plurals other than theoretical examples, from abstract entities which often have real plurals. I do not intend to bore or seemingly insult my present readers by going over methods of teaching each of these sectors of the topic separately. Every text-book at least does this, and every English teacher knows how to do it.

What I am concerned to insist upon here is the need to integrate these two sectors firmly and clearly as parts ultimately of a single system, the two sectors of which interlock inextricably. And I want to suggest that the failure to integrate the two sectors *for* ESL learners leaves them juggling on their own with two complex concepts which they *cannot* yet properly understand in isolation from each other, and will never be able to integrate coherently and effectively for themselves (unless they are linguistic geniuses). Nor will they, similarly, ever be able properly and finally to disentangle these two parts of the system in later and more advanced stages, once the system as a whole has become confused for them and has been allowed to turn into a seemingly intractable problem. Once the teaching system has integrated the two halves of this profoundly important aspect of the English mystique, it needs careful and endless practice and revision, not just a few cursory exercises which are hurried over as if the problem were neither very difficult nor very important.

The pre-requisite for all this, of course, is that teachers themselves shall be properly taught and allowed to fully assimilate this intricate part of the mystique of the English language; and prior to that again that writers of text-

books should realise how fundamental this aspect of English is; and how complex it can be to put over to those whose mother tongue has no hint of this mystique - unless it is properly taught and properly practised at length and continuously in the earlier stages of learning.

I now set out a table which seeks to integrate the whole basic determiner system. I agree that it is somewhat more complex than the usual ineffectual way of presenting the subject. But on careful study it will be seen to be much simpler than might be expected, and to have in-built patterns which are not so very difficult to grasp and internalize.

	SPECIFIC		NON-SPECIFIC	
	COUNT-ABLE	NON-COUNTABLE	COUNT-ABLE	NON-COUNTABLE
SINGULAR	the	the	a/an	zero some

some	some	some	some

It now remains for me to suggest sample sentences of each of these slots to avoid any possible misunderstandings:

Specific

Singular Countable: **The brown** cow is mine.

Mass: The water in that bucket is not for drinking.

Plural Countable: The cows in that field look unhealthy. Some cows in that field look unhealthy

Singular Non-Countable: The patience needed in tending the sick is considerable.

Plural Non-countable: The thoughts passing through one's head may soon forgotten.

Plural Non-countable: The thoughts passing through one's head may soon forgotten.

                               Some thoughts passing through one's head are soon forgotten.

Non-specific

Singular Countable: A cow is a valuable possession.

Mass: Water is indispensable.

                               Some water must be obtained from somewhere.

Plural Countable: The cows Mr. Grimble bought were over-priced.

                               Some cows that Mr. Grimble bought were over-priced.

Singular Non-Countable: Patience is a virtue.

                               Some patience will be needed.

Plural Non-countable: Daydreams come and go.

                               Some daydreams make better sense than others.

In summary, I hope to have demonstrated my theses as follows. That the English system of basic determiners is complex. That this system is significantly different from the system of the first language of most African learners of ESL; and the same is true for many other regions of the world. No system in English is more frequently deployed in all contexts and in all registers than this; and that therefore native speakers with even the most rudimentary grasp of their language find few difficulties in this area because of the multitudinous examples of its acceptable use that they hear and start copying from the very earliest age. That exactly the opposite is true from second and foreign language learners of English whose mother tongues have no similarity whatever to English with respect to this system, and they therefore find the system extremely difficult to grasp and master. Because of

the facts just re-stated, there has been a built-in blind spot in this matter for almost all native speakers involved in education in and through English in and for ESL areas. That this blind spot has been inherited by African Anglophone education systems and educators in ESL areas, including writers of relevant text-books. Consequently in the main the only part of the system that has been fairly thoroughly taught involves exceptions to the basic system, not the basic system itself. That the first requirement in resolving this widespread and deep-seated problem is for the facts to be recognised. Following this, key failures in the teaching of the English system of basic determiners need to be identified: in this paper I have attempted to isolate what seem to me to be the two most crucial failures in this respect. The teaching of the system of basic determiners in English needs to be rethought at all levels along linguistic and applied linguistic lines, as suggested in this paper, from text-book writing through teacher training to teaching. I have attempted to show in Part One of this paper that the difficulties and past blind spots in teaching the basic features of this system can fairly readily be identified and rectified once the nature, scope and importance of the problem are recognised. Beyond this, elementary and intermediate learners hardly ever need to go.

PART TWO

Once first things have been put first, one will then be justified in looking further. The original concept of this paper did not extend beyond what I have now called Part One, ending by pointing to the need for further papers to look afresh at the more complicated and sophisticated aspects of the subject which need to be analysed anew in the interests of more sophisticated ESL users. If the basic system of English determiners is so complex and subtle as to have caused such a degree of confusion in ESL learners - following a general pedagogic failure to pinpoint the true problems, it is only to be expected that the secondary and tertiary degrees of delicacy within the system must prove even more intricate. When the present Part One was scrutinized editorially, the question was raised as to whether this paper could not be extended at least tentatively along such lines.

Indeed, Bisi Afolayan and I had not only (as mentioned earlier) often discussed this ESL mine-field, we had mooted working on it together. Times had not proved propitious for this up to my retirement from Nigeria in 1989; but we - specially Bisi - had mapped out some ideas and I had a copy of his relevant notes probing into the secondary and tertiary levels of the use of determiners in English, which were much more advanced than any jottings of mine. A full-scale collaborated paper seemed impossible in the present context; but for all Professor Afolayan's open-handed generosity as a scholar, I could

not of course silently appropriate his work. Then some editorial to-ings and fro-ings made it clear that Bisi was keen that I should use the notes in question as an immediate advanced guard to work in progress - which I knew I could do only if I had the chance to make these circumstances plain as I am now doing. And the end-product thanks to the editorial grape-vine was Part Two of this paper, which now follows.

This section suggests that for any pedagogical grammar of English determiners to be adequate for inculcating the English mystique into all ESL learners, it must reflect not only the primary but also the secondary and tertiary degrees of delicacy in its descriptive capacity. Of course, grammar alone, however adequate, cannot inculcate the mystique. The applied linguistic requirements stated in Part One must also be met.

Indeed by the time *some* was introduced in Part One (for reasons there explained) the description had already stepped beyond the primary degree. And now we shall be able to face the already identified paradox of recognizing 'the plural of the non-countable': if something cannot be counted, how can it have a plural form distinct from its singular form? Two points about the mystique of English explain this paradox. The first is that each determiner appropriately accompanies a particular class of nouns; yet the criteria for classifying nouns criss-cross, producing a cross-classification. The second is that some subtleties and fine distinctions within the mystique run counter to the basic classification. Yet ultimately both basic and fine distinctions need to be mastered by advanced ESL users. Explicating these truths is no mean task. Indeed, the task cannot be fully tackled here; all that can now be done is to identify the salient points.

The Cross-Classification of Nouns for Determination

Nouns constitute one of the three sub-sets of word classes expounding the nominal group in English, the other two being pronouns and nominalizations.

Examples

Subject	Predicator	Complement	Adjunct
(Nominal Group)	(Verbal Group)	(Nominal Group)	(Adverbial Group)
Men	eat	vegetables	daily.
I	eat	apples	everyday.
Seeing	is	believing	anyday.

Any thought to replace the nominal group in the first column with the nominal group in the third column at once leads to a consideration of the criteria for the classification of nouns. Since nouns and pronouns will most clearly indicate the criteria, we shall restrict the exercise to them with only two examples of each.

Examples

	Subject	Predicator	Complement	Adjunct
1.	Men	eat	vegetables	daily.
*1a.	Vegetables	eat	men	daily.
2.	A lion	killed	a hunter	yesterday.
2a.	A hunter	killed	a lion	yesterday.
3.	I	eat	an apple	everyday.
*3a.	An apple	eats	I	everyday.
4.	She	sees	him	everyday.
*4a.	Him	sees	she	everyday.

Among these examples, it is only sentences 2 and 2a that allow interchange of nouns to their two positions without any qualms. Lexical considerations alone disallow 1a; syntactic considerations alone disallows 4a; but both lexical and syntactic considerations disallow 3a. Thus it is clear that lexical as well as grammatical (syntactic) criteria underlie the basic classification of nouns. Consequently, both lexical and syntactic criteria are used to classify nouns.

Lexical features such as concreteness versus abstractness, animateness versus inanimateness, commonness versus uniqueness and countable versus non-countable are used to obtain the following primary classes of nouns:

1.   Concrete: water, stone, tree, chair, dog
   a.   Animate: tree, dog.
   b.   Inanimate: water, stone, chair.

2.   Abstract: wisdom, dancing, growing, growth.
   a.   Process; dancing, growing.
   b.   Attribute: wisdom, growth.

3.   Common: water, stone, patience, tree, chairs, dogs
   a.   Mass: water, patience.
   b.   Countable: stone, tree, chairs, dogs.
     1.   Singular: stone, tree.
     2.   Plural: chairs, dogs

4.   Proper noun: Lagos, London, Mary, John
   a.   Animate: Mary, John.
     1.   Feminine: Mary.
     2.   Masculine: John.
   b.   Inanimate: Lagos, London.

Syntactic features such as 'direct naming' versus 'representative naming', 'subject' versus 'complement', and 'countable' and 'non-countable' are used to obtain the following primary syntactic forms for different classes of nouns and pronouns.

1.   Direct naming: nouns;

   a.   Subject countable singular: a tree, a table.
   b.   Complement countable singular: a tree, a table.
   c.   Subject countable plural: trees, tables.
   d.   Complement countable plural: trees, tables.
   e.   Subject mass: water.
   f.   Complement mass: water.

2.   Representative naming: pronouns:

   a.   Subject countable singular inanimate or mass inanimate: it.
   b.   Complement countable singular inanimate or mass inanimate: it.

c. Subject countable singular animate: I, you, he, sh[

  1.   1st person: I.
  2.   2nd person: you.
  3.   3rd person: he, she.
      a.   Masculine: he.
      b.   Feminine: she.

d. Complement countable singular animate: me, you, him her:

  1.   1st person: me.
  2.   2nd person: you.
  3.   3rd person: him, her.
      a.   Masculine: him.
      b.   Feminine: her.

e. Subject countable plural animate: we, you, they:

  1.   1st person: we.
  2.   2nd person: you.
  3.   3rd person: they.

f. Complement countable plural animate: us, you, them

  1.   1st person: us.
  2.   2nd person: you.
  3.   3rd person: them

g. Subject countable plural inanimate: they:

  1.   1st person:
  2.   2nd person:
  3.   3rd person: they

h. Complement countable plural inanimate: them:

  1.   1st person:
  2.   2nd person:
  3.   3rd person: them

Now, as has been earlier stated, nouns are determined syntactically according to their classes. In particular, to obtain the primary determiners, three pairs of contrasting features operate: 'specific' versus 'non-specific', 'selective' versus 'non-selective', and 'total' versus 'partial'. Thus the primary determiners are:

1. Specific: Non-selective: *the*.

2. Non-specific:

  a.   Total: *each, no*.
  b.   Partial: non-selective: *a, some*.

This list more or less corresponds to what has earlier been presented as the table of basic determiners, particularly when 'zero' as a term is also introduced and accepted. Interestingly in respect of usage at this primary degree of distinguishing English determiners, as Afolayan (Afolayan 1968) has clearly pointed out specifically for Yoruba Nigerian learners and users and generally for Nigerians, only *a* presents difficulties. This is because the use of 'zero' and the use of the equivalents of *the* and *some* are syntactic features of Nigerian languages which, as positive learning features, facilitate the learning of English. In contrast, instead of employing any equivalent of the determiner *a*, the use of 'zero' is the order of the day for Nigerian languages. Thus the determiner *a* constitutes a negative transfer learning problem. Consequently, to master the use of the basic determiners of English calls for a great deal of practice resulting from an exposure to a rich variety of contextualization of the determiner *a*, particularly in contrast with 'zero'. Fortunately, again as Afolayan has pointed out, this problem is easy to overcome because any problem arising from the total dissimilarity between the target and the source languages is comparatively easy.

As has been said earlier, it is at the secondary and the tertiary levels of distinction that almost intractable difficulties arise. This situation arises from two sources. First, since at the primary degree the impression of learners is that the source and the target languages are similar in their use of the specific determiner, the differences at the secondary or the tertiary level about the same determiner appear rather subtle and elusive. Second, the usage at those levels

are indeed subtle, introducing new seemingly contradictory distinctions which are characteristic of English but alien to the learners' source language.

As I have said earlier, it is not here possible to do more than identify the nature of the problems and recommend a great deal of practice of the problematic usage points in their rich varieties. What then are the problematic usage points?

At the primary degree only one specific determiner *the* is recognized, but at the secondary degree, the determiner *the* has to be seen as belonging to three sub-classes which, furthermore, do not constitute a system. These are the anaphoric, cataphoric and homophoric sub-classes.

Examples

1.   *Anaphoric*: I can see a boy there. *The* boy is standing. (pointing to *boy* already mentioned in the text. Consequently, it is unacceptable to have *the boy is standing* as the first or only sentence in a text, unless the context shows that the *the* is homophoric).

2.   *Cataphoric:* Mary puts on *the* large hat or Mary puts on *the* hat that has been placed on a table. (Pointing to *large* or *that has been put on a table* as a syntactic element that further specifies *hat* after the *the*. Consequently *Mary puts on the hat* is unacceptable unless the context shows that the *the* is homophoric).

3.   *Homophoric:* '*The* boy is standing' or 'Mary puts on *the* hat' or 'The sun is bright today'. (indicating that there is only one *boy* or only one *hat* in the environment or that the existence of the *sun* is unique).

The further sub-classification of *the*, which contrasts with *a*, thus introduces a complication that must be mastered by ESL learners.

Again at the tertiary level, the further sub-classification of "the" into *generalizing* (or generic) and specializing sub-classes brings further complications. "The" is normally in contrast with "a", thus emphasizing the

choice of the "specific" and the "non-specific" features of nominal groups respectively.

Examples

I can see *a* palm tree.
I can see the *palm* tree.

But at the tertiary level "the" can also reflect the choice of the *generalizing* aspect of generic countable nouns. Though countable nouns are either singular or plural, interestingly in the particular respect only "the" and not "a" or "an" can express the singular.

For instance,

The *palm tree* is native to West Africa.

OR   *Palm trees* are native to West Africa

NOT   *A palm tree* is native to West Africa.

However, "a kind of" or "a type of" can occur with a generic countable noun.

Examples

NOT   *A palm tree* is native to West Africa.

BUT   *A type of palm tree* is native to West Africa

What is more, the complications introduced at the secondary and the tertiary levels of distinction are not restricted to the further sub-classification of *the*. Qualification of mass or proper nouns can be carried out. Thus singular and plural forms of mass or proper nouns are admissible under certain syntactic conditions. Similarly, some which has had only one oral form /s m/ that can go with either countable plural or non-countable (mass) nouns can now admit of another form /s m/ that can go with a singular countable noun (e.g. *Some*

boy stole my pen, indicative of new nuances of meaning such as *a boy unknown to me* or *a boy known to me but whom I would not identify for one reason or the other*).

Conclusion

Let me repeat that this presentation cannot pretend to be exhaustive, greater space would be required for an exhaustive treatment. However, it is hope that not only the general concept of ESL with reference to its required pedagogical grammar but also the more specific provision of a pedagogical ESL grammar of the English determiners has been advanced a little. If so, I shall have honoured Bisi Afolayan by confirming the usefulness of his persistent demand for an ESL grammar. Similarly, I will have illustrated how to apply his fundamental applied linguistic bilingual-bicultural studies to the provision of a pedagogical grammar of English determiners required by users of the ESL variety if English is ever to become the instrument of developing them adequately through the initial emergence and the subsequent perpetuation of a standard ESL variety.