

The Possessive Use of Definite Articles in French and English

*Asst. Prof.Dr.Tawfik A. Abdulah &

** Lect.Osama H. Ibrahiim

تأريخ القبول: ٢٠٠٧/٩/٢٥

تأريخ التقديم: ٢٠٠٧/٨/١٩

Introduction

The use of articles ("a," "an," and "the" or zero article) is an area of special significance for multilingual writers, since it is characterized by wide variation across languages. In consequence, any error in this area will be very noticeable in any text as a mark of non-native writing. Given this fact, it is important for multilingual writers to master the use and non-use of articles and to learn the meaning their use/non-use conveys in English with reference to other languages, French in our case.

Our aim in this paper is to shed light on the use of the definite articles in English and French in general and their possessive use in particular.

In order to achieve the aims of this paper, we put forward the following hypotheses : (1) the possessive use of the definite article depends on the possibility of interpreting the article as pronoun ; (2) this possibility is marked phonologically by the concord of the features of person , number and gender. Our hypothesis to be investigated is that all languages expose the phenomenon of concord. Sentence (6a) is not grammatical when concord is not realised. This hypothesis is very interesting if it is true ¹.

General perspective

The definite article is generally used as “operator iota” ; it indicates a single object in the world of discourse , i.e it indicates “the person or thing that at the moment of speaking is uppermost in the mind of the speaker and presumably it is in the mind of the hearer as well” (Jespersen, 1976:162). The NP 'the book' in (1) is therefore assimilated with the formula (2) as far as the logic is concerned:

(1) *Le livre = the book*

* Dept. of Translation / College of Arts / University of Mosul.

**Dept. of French / College of Arts / University of Mosul

¹ Phonologically speaking , the article is not present in languages like Russian, but there is concord between adjective and noun.

The Possessive Use of Definite Articles in French and English

Asst. Prof. Dr. Tawfik Aziz Abdulah & Lect. Osama H. Ibrahiim

(2) *Le seul livre = the only book* (Ibid.)

The definite article can also have a general use. Let us consider the following:

(3) a: *La foire du livre aura lieu à Mossoul.*

The book fair will be held in Mosul.

b: *Le Livre enrichit la vie de l'homme .*

The book enriches man's life.

It is used to express the inalienability possession , like:

(4) a: *Jacque leve la main .*

Jack raises the hand .

b: *Je lui ai coupe les cheveux*

I cut (had cut) his hair .

These multiple uses create ambiguity and confusion .For example, in (4a) the article (can) has either the meaning of an “ operator iota” or the possessive meaning , while in (4b) it can be interpreted generically.

The possessive interpretation is governed by obligatory structures. The various structures from which one may extract the possessive meaning of the article are not ready- made formulae . We, for example, may say :

“Il ferme les yeux” and “Il s'est casse la jambe” , but we may not say:

*“Il casse la jambe”** to indicate the possessive meaning nor we say:

*“Il s'est ferme les yeux” **.

On the other hand , this interpretation in some contexts is not possible.

Thus, (5) is in contrast with (4a):

(5): *La main est levee par Jacque.*

If the function of the definite article as an operator iota and as a general marker exists in all languages, it will not be the same as far as the possessive function of the article is concerned . English , for example , does not function as French , according to this point . The following examples (from 6 to 9) show contrasts:

(6)a: *Jacques a leve La main (la “iota” or possessive) .*

b: *John raised the hand (“iota” only) .*

(7) a: *La tite lui tourne .*

b: *The head turns to him.*

(8) a: *Je lui ai tire les cheveux.*

b: *I pulled (her) the hair .*

(9) a: *Jacques est entre , les yeux mouilles .*

b: John entered , the eyes moist.

What we have mentioned above are answers to the following questions. Why can the definite article have a possessive meaning in French and not in English ? What are the contrasts that govern the possessive use of the article in French itself ?

The following explanation will deal with the constructive problems which we will try earnestly to analyze these problems.

The Pronominal Article:

Let us suppose that we define the “pronoun” as a combination of features: (a) number , (b) gender and (c) an interpreted person as a pronoun. This implies the independence of the notion of the pronoun with relation to syntactic constituents. Chomsky (1981:42) benefits from this definition to explicate the phenomenon called “Pron.-drop” in some languages as Spanish and Italian. The vide element (e) appears in the position of the syntactic subject of the sentence.

A: “ il/elle parle” in French , for example , corresponds to “[e] parla “ in Italian. This contrast is due to the fact that the verbal inflection is morphologically marked by person, number, and gender in these languages. It serves by itself as pronominal subject.

Therefore, we propose the same analysis for the possessive use of the article , like the verbal inflection in the Italian language. The article manifests the features of person ,number and gender in French, just like in the following sentence :

(10) *LE livre , LA chaise , LEs chaise.*

In the absence of the other syntactic “subject”, the article itself can function as the subject of the NP assuming the role of the possessor which has the pronoun at its place . Instead of "e" and "lui" in sentence (11) we find "la" and "sa" in (12).

(11) *a: [e] parla .*

b: lui parla .

(12) *a: Il leve la main . b: Il Leve sa main .*

It is sufficient to put in relation (10) and (13) for concluding that the article is not pronominal in English which explains the contrast in (6) and (9)

(13) THE book , THE rose , THE roses.

The Inalienable Possession and the Theory of Anaphora

The following fact sets up an argument basing on our hypothesis that constraints on the expressions of inalienable possession are the same ones as

The Possessive Use of Definite Articles in French and English

Asst. Prof.Dr.Tawfik Aziz Abdulah & Lect.Osama H. Ibrahiim

those which govern the relation between SN and the lexical anaphora . Let us use a possessive article (a) , beside an anaphor like himself in English and examine its distribution.¹ In sentence (14) where the antecedent and the anaphor exist in the same sentence, the interpretation of inalienable possession and the reflective (reflechie) interpretation are equally possible :

(14) a: *Peter leve la main .*

b: *Peter washes himself. (peter se lave).*

But if the antecedent is missing or not present as in (15) or even if the antecedent and the anaphor are in two sentence as in (16) , neither the inalienable possession nor the inflective anaphor are possible .

(15) a: *la main est levee .*

b: *that bothers himself.*

(*cela ennuie lui- meme*).

(16) a: *Peter espere [que la main sera levee].*

b: *Peter hopes [that himself will win] (Peter espere que lui –meme gagnera).*

Here 'lui-meme' does not function always as anaphor . Under these constraints, the demonstration is certainly widely known in French. The presence of the antecedent is not sufficient for admitting the anaphoric relation . Moreover, is it necessary that the antecedent and the anaphor must be in good structural relation and the first governs the second?

This structural constraint is satisfying in (6) to (9), but not in (17). Thus , we find in (17a) a grammatically possible possessive interpretation while in (7b) is not. Let us consider the following :

(17) a: *Himself was washed by Peter* .*

b: *La main a ete levee par Peter (=5).*

To formulate our hypothesis precisely, we suppose that the definite article functions in the structures of the inalienable possession at the same time as pronoun and anaphor. The pronominal article could have the same status in NP PRON. Consequently , the relation between the antecedent and the article is subject to the "control theory" which can be summarized as in (17) .(Manzini , 1982:55).

1 The demonstration on the condition on the anaphor is more easier with " himself" than with (se or lui meme) as far as "se" does not occupy an argumentative position in syntactic structure.

(17) i: PRON. is related in the category minimal governing of its field (the field of PRON. is the first maximal projection which dominates. (ii) If not, PRON. is facultative co-index with an NP in its context or receive arbitrary indices.

(17i) describes the obligatory control and (17 ii) describes the non-obligatory. From the control point of view , the sentences in (19) are equivalent. Let us consider the following examples:

(19) a: Il leve [la main].

b: Il vent [PRON partir].

The contrasts in (30) pose a problem. Let us consider the following:

(20) a: Peter a lave la main.

b: Peter a leve la main .

if (1a) is equivalent to PRON. , the two sentences of (20) must be acceptable , just like (21) which has the same structure .

(21) Peter washed himself (Peter s'est lave) .

To solve this problem, one must consider the mechanism of the co-indexation of NP . According to the theory of relation (liage) an anaphor coincides with its antecedent . Above all , a determinant actually coincides with N according to gender (M.F.). Finally, N coincides with NP , its maximal projection. The two sentences (20 a , b) have therefore the surface structure of (22):

(22) Peter , a lave , leve [la main , NP.].

The Unexpected cases:

If the inalienable possession requires a pronominal interpretation of the article and the article is not pronominal in English , we must never have the possessive article in this language, i.e English. The following sentences show the probability of this hypothesis:

(23) a: Je l'ai tire par la main / frappe sur la tete .

b: I pulled him by the hand / hit him in the face.

(24) a: il saigne du nez / a quelque chose au bras .

b: he is bleeding from the nose / has a pain in the arm .

(25) a: Ella est jolie des yeux .

b: He is broad in the shoulders.

while, the NP "possessed" in the examples (6) to (9), is an argument of the verb, it is in the prepositional syntagm. In other words , in the first structures , the antecedent is necessary (+ anime) where it can be (- anime) .

(26) a: Peter a perdu la tet e (c.f 6 a)

The Possessive Use of Definite Articles in French and English

Asst. Prof.Dr.Tawfik Aziz Abdulah & Lect.Osama H. Ibrahiim

b: *let pot perdu le couvercele .*

There are two important similarities are there in the two classes of structures :

1) the antecedent must govern the article.

(27) a: *Sur la tete , je l'ai frappe (c.f. 23)*

b: *From the nose , he is bleeding (cf. 24).*

2) The SN "possessed " cannot be referential.

(28) a: ** il a leve la belle main .*

** Je l'ai tire par la belle main .*

3) From a semantic point of view , the "possessor" and the "possessed" are referentially not identical because one constitutes a proper part of the other and any change that happens to the element "possessed" constitutes a change to the possessor.

We call this relation "referential intersection" . It is a term which engenders a side of inalienable possession , and from the other side , the relation between part and whole .

According to the status of the article , this does not apply. However, according to our hypothesis , it is pronominal , because the structures of (1 and 2) are grammatical in English.

If we suppose that a chain can have only one referential NP and the operator *iota* creates the reference, it cannot be the operator *iota* either ; then it is generic.

The NP "possessed" contains an anaphoric article in the first studied structures and a generic article in the second structures. The case of the two classes of the NP, is their status non-referential which allows making part of a lexical chain contain a referential SN. This is the notion of chain of two lexical members. (a lexical chain which is crucial , the non- referential of NP having one of the necessary conditions of its structures . Our final hypothesis is then:

The referential intersection is expressed by way of lexical chain. The following examples introduced by Chomsky (1981:57) pose a problem.

29. a: *John heard [the stories about him]. 'John a entendu les histories a son sujet' .*

b: *John told [the stories a bout him].*

(John a raconte les histories a son sujet).

The contrast in 29 indicates that if '*the*' has the status of a pronoun co-indexed with John in '29 b' but not in (29 a). Example (29 b) is , therefore,

will be excluded from the theory of binding which allows only one pronoun which is related in its dominated category. This explanation implies that the article can function as a pronoun in English, contrary to our hypothesis. Really any determinant, like: *some, these, no ...etc* can hold the position of 'the'; in (29). Now none of the morphological arguments allow to identify all these determinants as pronouns.

Conclusion:

We have proposed that referential intersection is expressed by means of a chain having two lexical elements. French is different from English in that the article can be interpreted in French as a pronominal element. If we suppose that the only interpretation of the article as an operator iota marks obligatory SN as referential, it follows that French offers more than one possibility than English for producing the NP non-referential and then the lexical chain. French engenders NP with non-referentials, which does not exist in English. This is shown by the contrasts having nothing to do with the inalienable possession.

(30) a: Ella demande le silence .

b: * She requested the silence.

(31) a: le manger, c'est tout ce qui l'intéresse.

b: * the (to) eat, that's all that interests him.

In English, if the definite article cannot be interpreted either as an operator iota nor as a generic marker, it never appears. That is why (30 b) and (31 b) are not grammatical sentences. In French, on the contrary, there is a possibility of interpreting the article as a pronoun. Grammatically speaking, the validity of (30 a) and (31a) is explained if we interpret the article in those examples as a pronoun non-argument equivalent to (IL) in the: "IL est venu quelqu'un".

References

- Chomsky, N. (1981). Lectures on Government and Binding, Dordrecht: Foris.
- Jespersen, Otto (1976). Essentials of English Grammar. London: Longman Ltd.
- Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, Svartvik and G. Leech. (1985). A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language. London: Longman Group Ltd.

References consulted

The Possessive Use of Definite Articles in French and English

Asst. Prof.Dr.Tawfik Aziz Abdulah & Lect.Osama H. Ibrahiim

Christian Nique (1976). Initiation methodique a la grammaire generative. Paris : Armand Colin.

Dubois, Charler , Françoise (1970). Element de linguistique anaglaise syntaxe. Larousse .

Kayne , R. (1975) . French syntax : the transformational cycle . Cambridge : MIT Press.

Manzini , R. (1982). "On Control and Control Theory " in Linguistic Inquiry. P. 66.

Leclere , C. (1973). "Sur une classes de verbs datifs". Langue Française 39, Larousse.

Williams , E. (1981). "Argument structure and Morphology". In the Linguistic Review.

الاستعمال التملكي لأداة التعريف في الفرنسية والانكليزية أ.م.د. توفيق عزيز عبد الله و م. أسامة حميد إبراهيم المستخلص

لاستعمال أدوات التعريف والتذكير أهمية كبيرة، خاصة بالنسبة لأولئك الذين يكتبون بلغات عديدة لأنها تتسم باختلافات كبيرة، وبالتالي فإن أي إخفاق في استعمالها سيكون دلالة على أن الكاتب لا يكتب بلغته الأم، وإذا ما أخذنا بنظر الاعتبار هذه المسألة فإن من الأهمية بمكان للكتاب بلغات عديدة أن يحسن معرفة استعمال أدوات التعريف ودلالة كل استعمال وهو ما نتطرق إليه في اللغة الانكليزية بالإشارة إلى اللغة الفرنسية في هذه الدراسة .

تهدف الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على استعمال أدوات التعريف في اللغة الانكليزية والفرنسية مع التركيز على المعنى التملكي لهذه الأدوات .

ومن ابرز ما توصلت إليه الدراسة إمكانية تفسير أداة التعريف في الفرنسية بوصفها ضميراً وبالتالي يمكن إضفاء صفة التملك على هذه الأداة على العكس من الانكليزية حيث لا تمتلك أداة التعريف هذه الإمكانية.