

TRANSLATING ARTICLES

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Two incidents that happened in translation work in Sierra Leone, West Africa, made me decide to write this article. These two incidents made me realize the principles of meaningful translation apply to certain words which I had not thought about before. These words are the usually short, very frequently words that carry what we call “grammatical” information. In this article I will discuss one type of these words, the articles *a/an* and *the*. Since many translators use an English translation as the base for translation into their own language, I believe it is important for translators to have a good understanding of the function that the articles *a/an* and *the* have in a sentence.

Let us look briefly at some sentences from English which will help us to see how these articles are used. The examples and the explanations are from the fourteenth chapter of a book by Wallace L. Chafe, entitled *Meaning and the Structure of Language*.

The first two sentences which Chafe gives for us to consider are:

1. a. An elephant likes peanuts.
- b. Water flows downhill.

He explains, “In these sentences it is the entire class of elephants and the universal substance water which is being talked about.” Therefore, we have a “general” usage of the words *elephant* and *water*. The grammatical term for this usage is **generic**. When we have looked at some more examples we will comment further on the use of *an* in sentence (1.a.)

The next sentences which Chafe presents are:

2. a. An elephant stepped on my car.
- b. (Some) water dripped onto the floor.

He continues, “The nouns which are specified . . . as *elephant* and *water* do not refer to the entire class of elephants or to all water, but to just one member of the class (and to) one particular instance of the substance.” The grammatical term which is used when a particular thing or instance is indicated is the word **specific**. So here the sentences talk about a specific elephant and a specific amount of water.

Then Chafe gives the following two sentences:

3. a. The elephant stepped on my car.
- b. The water dripped onto the floor.

In these two sentences we are also referring to one member of the class of elephants and to one particular instance of the substance water. How, then, do the sentences in (3) differ from the sentences in (2)? Chafe explains that in (3) the speaker assumes that the hearer knows the exact *elephant* and the specific *water* which are being talked about. If we compare the sentences in (3) with the sentences in (2), we see that in (2) the speaker does not assume that the hearer knows which elephant or which water is being talked about. Chafe therefore says that the nouns in (3) are **definite**, since they are used with what is traditionally called the definite article. He says that the nouns in (2) are not definite and uses the term **nondefinite** to refer to them. He prefers nondefinite to

indefinite, since indefinite suggests “vagueness”—but as we noticed above, *elephant* and *water* in (2) are specific and not vague.

We can see, then, that for English one way to distinguish between referring to something that we assume the hearer can identify and referring to something that we don't think the hearer can identify is to use the article *the* for the thing that can be identified and to use the article *a/an* (or no article in the case of nouns like *water*) for the thing that we assume the hearer cannot identify.

The next question we should ask ourselves is, “What about the use of *an* and no article in the sentences in (1) above?” In those sentences the nondefinite article is used because there is no one particular elephant or one particular instance of water for the hearer to be able to identify.

What we see, then, in the examples we have looked at, is that there are three functions which the English articles have. These functions are: (1) *generic* (general usage, meaning that all objects which have that same name are included), (2) *specific* (particular usage, meaning that the speaker is referring to one particular object or group of objects), and (3) *definite* (meaning that the hearer is assumed to know which particular object or group of objects the speaker is referring to). So we have three functions but only two different articles—*a/an* and *the*. That means that there can be no one-to-one correspondence between form and function. The sentences in (1) are generic and nondefinite. The sentences in (2) are specific and nondefinite. And the sentences in (3) are specific and definite. Thus, just as with the other types of words, we discover that the function of articles depends on the context in which they are used.

This fact has relevance for Bible translation. For example, we may be faced with having to translate differently the following two occurrences of *a prophet* because they have different meaning:

4. a. And behold, a prophet came near to Ahab king of Israel . . . (1 Kings 20.13, RSV).
- b. A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country . . . (Mark 6.4, RSV).

In (4a) *a prophet* is used like *an elephant* in (2a); that is, there is a specific prophet referred to but it is assumed that the hearer is not able to identify which prophet. In (4b) *a prophet* is used like *an elephant* in (1a); the speaker is referring to all members of the class *prophet*. Translators must be aware of these two different usages of *a/an* so that they are in a position to translate the meaning properly. We cannot assume that all languages will show the difference in meaning of *a prophet* in (4a) and (4b) the same as English.

There are other usages of English articles which translators must know about too. There are cases where the presence or absence of the article *the* shows no change in meaning. For example, in American English people say that a person is *in the hospital*, even though there is more than one particular hospital that the person could be in. In British English they say a person is *in hospital*, even if there is only one hospital that the person could be in. The meaning of both phrases is the same, and here the presence or absence of *the* has no bearing on the meaning.

There are other types of situations. For example, if we look at several English translations of 1 Corinthians 10.13, we will notice that some use *a* while others use *the*. Both the KJV and the Good News Bible have “*a* way of escape/*a* way out”, whereas the RSV and the New American Standard Version have “*the* way of escape”. The original Greek has “*the* way”. Does this mean that the KJV and GNB have made a mistake in translation? Not necessarily. But before we can reach a conclusion on this, we need to know something more about Greek articles.

Greek had no word to correspond to English *a/an*. Because of this, we should immediately suspect that Greek used its word corresponding to *the* differently from the way English uses *the*. And when we look at a Greek grammar we find that this is true. The following facts about Greek grammar are taken from the book on Greek by F. Kinchin Smith and T. W. Melliush in the *Teach Yourself Series*. Smith and Melliush tell us that Greek used *the* with abstract nouns such as *wisdom, faith, courage*. English does not use *the* like this. Greek also used *the* when referring to entire classes of objects, for instance, *the* horses are noble animals, which means “all horses”. English does not have this usage, but it does have a similar usage: in English we can say “the horse is a noble animal” and mean all horses. Additionally, Greek used *the* with proper names, so that in Greek a person said “*the* Greece” and not simply Greece as we do in English.

Was the usage of *the* in 1 Corinthians 10.13 a Greek usage with an abstract noun (such as *courage*)? Or was it a usage whereby *the* indicated all possible ways of escape? In any case, we can see that in the context of 1 Corinthians 10, the phrases *a way of escape* and *the way of escape* have the same meaning.

Let me now present two examples from Sierra Leonean languages, which do not have the same articles as English. These are Kono and Themne.

In the Kono language there are no articles at all. The question then arises as to how the meanings of generic, specific and definite/nondefinite are shown in Kono. We will discuss here only how the meaning of definite is shown.

The way that Kono expresses the idea of definite is to use a demonstrative. Demonstratives are words like “this”, “that”, “these”, and “those”. For example, if a Kono speaker is referring to a particular object, the speaker will probably say something like, “Call *that* boy we were just talking to” or “do you see *that* house over there?” or “Look at *this* book.” In English the speaker has a choice of using the demonstratives or of saying, “Call *the* boy we were just talking to”, “Do you see *the* house over there?” or “Look at *the* book.” But not all occurrences of English *the* can be combined with a demonstrative. We cannot say “He went to *that* hospital” every time we can say “He went to *the* hospital.”

What, then, should a Kono translator do when he comes to Luke 4.16: “. . . and he went to *the* synagogue, as his custom was, on *the* sabbath day”? The first thing that a translator must ask himself is what meaning does *the* carry in the phrase “to *the* synagogue”. In order to answer this question for ourselves let us look again at the different English examples we saw above. They are repeated here:

5. a. The elephant stepped on my car.
- b. John is in the hospital.

We are concerned with the *the* in these sentences. In (5a) a speaker uses *the* because he assumes the person listening knows exactly which elephant is being talked about. In (5b), however, *the* is used even though the exact hospital may not be known, but going to hospital is a customary thing, such as going to church, and *the* can be used here.

The phrase “to the synagogue” corresponds to the use of *the* in (5b). It is not possible to say “he went to *this/that* synagogue” in Luke 4.16 since no synagogue has been mentioned and the hearer does not know exactly which synagogue is being referred to. Therefore, the Kono translator would translate “he went to synagogue”, in the same way that English says “he went to church”.

The same thing is true for the use of *the* in the phrase “on the sabbath day”. Kono does not use a demonstrative here either, since no specific sabbath day can be identified by the hearer.

The Themne language, on the other hand, has both a definite and a nondefinite noun form. But they are not used in the same way that definite and nondefinite nouns are used in English. So the translator must guard against automatically substituting Themne nondefinite forms for English ones and Themne definite forms for English definite forms. We will use the following passage to show that Themne and English usage are not parallel:

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

(Gen 2.10-14, RSV)

In translating these verses the native-speaking Themne translator decided not to use the Themne expressions for *second*, *third*, and *fourth*, since they sound awkward here. Instead, he decided to use the word *other* for introducing each of the river names after the first one. A back-translation of the relevant parts of verses 13 and 14 is the following:

The name of *the* other river is Gihon . . . the name of *the* other river is Tigris . . . and *the* other river is Euphrates.

We note that *the* is used for all three rivers. English, however, uses *an* for the second and third rivers and *the* only for the last river.

The missionary adviser immediately “corrected” the Themne to make it parallel proper English. Later, however, he thought better of it, when he remembered that most Theme people who speak English use “the other” in their English in places where standard English has “another”. He decided to ask the translator about this and found out that it is proper Themne to use the definite noun form in Genesis 2.13-14. The missionary adviser still has to learn the conditions under which the definite and nondefinite Themne noun forms are used!

I hope that this discussion will help other translators to avoid the pitfalls involved in understanding and “translating” English articles. (You see, I was the missionary adviser mentioned in the paragraph above.) The situation will be similar for those translators who work from French translations or directly from the Greek.

PEARL SJÖLANDER AND JAMES RYE
HOW CLEAR IS A SIMPLIFIED VERSION?

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During the last 20 or 30 years much study and effort has been put into simplifying the language of Bible translations so that they will be understood by those who perhaps cannot read so well or who have no previous knowledge of the Bible. Many rules and theories have been produced in order to help translators to make their texts more readable. Rules are not always enough, however. It is just as important to study how much the reader himself actually understands of the simplified text. It is for the reader that the text is produced, and he should therefore have a definite place in judging its effectiveness. It is only when the reader is actually confronted with the text that the translator can judge whether the reader actually understands it in the way the translator thinks he should.

The simplest and most effective way of finding out how much a reader can understand of a text is by means of “Cloze Procedure”. This technique requires that you type out the text to be tested, but leave out every 5th, 7th or 10th word, putting a line about 3 cm long in its place. The reader then has to try to guess, with the help of the context, what the missing words are, and write them in on the lines provided. The larger the number of correct answers (different words of similar meaning are generally NOT counted) the better the reader has understood the text. (This type of testing is also very useful if you want to find out which draft of a translation is the clearest. It also helps you to see where in your translation the weaknesses and difficulties are.)

The test

We decided to make a test using Cloze Procedure on four versions of the New Testament made into clear and simple English. We wanted basically to find out how clear and simple they actually were. The versions used were Annie Cressman’s *New Testament in Worldwide English* (1969), made particularly for adult new readers in Liberia; Gleason H. Ledyard’s *The Children’s New Testament* (1969) with a controlled vocabulary of 850 words; Frank Laubach’s *The Inspired Letters of the New Testament in Clearest English* with a vocabulary of around 2000 different words; and the *Good News Bible* (1976 British Edition TEV) which works in clear direct everyday English.