

THE DEFINITE ARTICLES IN ENGLISH AND MOD GREEK: A COMPARISON

THANASIS KAKOURIOTIS

University of Thessaloniki

0. Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to examine the *definite article* in two languages, namely, English and Mod Greek. More specifically, it will consider the articles of those two languages first from a syntactic point of view within a theoretical framework which gives prominence to the head-modifier relationship. Then, a contrastive taxonomy of the article use in English and Mod Greek will follow. Finally, a semantic analysis of the article use will be attempted whereby a justification for the presence/absence of the definite article will be offered.

1. The Syntax of the Articles

In Mod Greek there is a fairly wide range of determiners which appear to correspond to the English definite article *the*. This range includes *o* (Singular, Masculine, Nominative), *i* (Singular, Feminine, Nominative) *to* (Singular, Neuter, Nominative and Accusative) etc., etc. In other words, cases, number and gender are reflected in different lexical specifications for various determiners in Mod Greek all of which are reflected in the single form *the* in English. As far as the indefinite articles are concerned, what roughly corresponds to the English article *a(n)* is the unstressed numerical *éna*, (*mia*, *éna*), "one".

The next step that this paper will take is to try to justify a certain claim in connection with the status of the article within the structure of the noun phrase. There appears to be a kind of asymmetrical relation between words in the sense that there exists a subordination of one element to another. This sort of relation whereby one element is subordinated to another in terms of part

to part and not whole to part (as in the case of constituency structure) we call *DEPENDENCY*. In dependency the subordinating element is the *HEAD* whereas the subordinated one is the *MODIFIER*. To give a concrete example, in a phrase like *clever boys*: the position of the word *clever* is fixed relative(ly) to that of *boys* and not the other way round; that is, *clever*, as an attributive adjective occurs before the noun to which it attributes a quality. In that sense, if *boys* had occurred in any other position, *clever* would still have occurred just before it. Furthermore, the fact that *clever* can appear in this phrase is due to the fact that *boys* is also present. Finally, and most importantly, the noun *boys* provides the morphosyntactic locus for the whole phrase: it is the noun which marks the plurality and in languages like, say, Mod Greek it is the head-noun with which the adjective-modifier would agree in person, case and number. Now, the problem posed here is this: what is the function of the article in that respect? Is it a head or a modifier?

There seems to be some controversy over this matter. Matthews (1981) seems to regard articles as modifiers, whereas Brame (1982) and Hudson (1984) clearly consider them to be heads. The reader should bear in mind that we are dealing with syntax and therefore the fact that articles appear to be "empty" words, almost in the sense that, say, the auxiliary *do* is an empty word, has nothing to do with the syntactic status of the articles. We shall therefore examine them from a purely syntactic angle.

In considering the Mod Greek articles, first, we observe that the article is the morphosyntactic locus given that in many nouns (in which foreign loans are included) it is the article which determines case and gender. Compare for example (1) and (2) with (3) and (4) below:

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (1) <i>o gramatéas.</i> | (2) <i>o vuleftis.</i> |
| Art.-Masc. secretary. | Art.-Masc. Member of the Parliament. |
| (3) <i>i gramatéas.</i> | (4) <i>i vuleftis.</i> |
| Art.-Fem. secretary. | Art.-Fem. Member of the Parliament. |

It is only the article differentiation (o vs. i) that marks gender here.

Note that the same thing applies to grammatical case with a considerable number of nouns and adjectives; thus, we have *i areti* vs. *tin areti*, "virtue" *i palikarjá*, "bravery" and a host of other nouns in which the difference between the nominative, normally the case for subjects, and the accusative, the case for objects is marked by the article alone, (i.e. *i* vs. *tin*).

Even more importantly, word order in Mod Greek noun phrases seems to be determined by the presence of the article: The presence of an indefinite article allows either order when the noun phrase contains an adjective, or the article is totally absent, but it allows only the sequence Adjective followed by Noun if a definite article is the head. Note that in all these cases the position of the article is fixed.

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| (5) a. <i>éna ómorfo koritsi.</i> | (5) b. <i>éna koritsi ómorfo.</i> |
| A pretty girl | *A girl pretty. |
| (6) a. <i>to ómorfo koritsi</i> | (6) b. <i>*to koritsi ómorfo</i> |
| (7) a. <i>ánðropi timii de vriskonde éfkola simera.</i> | |
| Men honest not are-fount easily today | |
| b. <i>timii ánðropi de vriskonde ékola simera.</i> | |

Note that (6b) above can become grammatical if both the noun and the adjective have a definite each as their head (i.e. *to koritsi to ómorfo*).

But the most important piece of evidence comes from what Brame (1982) calls "lexical primitives" like the French *au*, formed from *a* and *le* and the Mod Greek *ston* (*stin(n)*, *sto*) consisting of the preposition *se* plus the article. Any theory favouring the analysis of the article as a modifier is bound to face problems in view of the following facts: It is by now universally accepted that a preposition is the head of prepositional phrases. In traditional grammars, the noun it modifies is called the "object" of the preposition, in TG grammar, the preposition is the dominating node, in dependency theory (Matthews (1981)), it is the head of a prepositional phrase. Given, then, this syntactic status of the preposition, it is impossible to account for prepositional phrases containing a lexical primitive. Take for instance the phrase *stin ákri*, "at the end", "on the edge". It is impossible to state that the noun *ákri* is both dependent on *stin* (preposition) and head (of the article). No problem faces an analysis taking both the preposition and the article to be heads of the noun *ákri*.

As far as English is concerned, the evidence supporting the analysis of the article as head is poorer but worth considering, nevertheless. In the first place, one can consider the determiner in general and the article in particular as a kind of subcategorising. Thus a common noun appears to be obligatory after the definite article *the* and optional after other determiners such as *this*, for instance. It is also the morphosyntactic locus in some sense, notably with respect to the categories *DEFINITENESS*, *WH-NESS*, *COUNTABILITY* and *PERSON*. Following Sommerstein (1972), and Hudson (1984), we can analyse *the* as an allomorph of *he*, *she*, *it* and *they*, none of which can occur before a lexical noun, unlike *we* and *you*, which can (cf. *we men*, *you men*, **he man*).

Having accepted this somehow controversial but nevertheless not unreasonable view of taking articles to be heads and *not* modifiers, we shall proceed to deal with the actual use of both the definite articles in English and in Mod Greek. The list of the various uses of them is not meant to be exhaustive but it will give a fairly clear picture and it can certainly be read independently by those who are not interested in issues that have to do with linguistic theories.

2. The Use of the Definite Articles

In both languages the definite article is used as the head of a noun that has been defined earlier either by previous mention in the discourse (explicit contextual basis) or with nouns the referents of which are mutually known from previous discourse (implicit contextual basis), or with a noun whose referent can be indicated without having been previously mentioned (cf. Christophersen (1939), Stephanides (1978) and for the Mod Greek use A. Tzardanos (1946)).

- (1) a. Once upon a time there was a king. The king had two sons.
 b. *mía forá kjéna kjeró itan énas vasiljás. o vasiljás ixé tris jús.*
- (2) a. There is a football team in our village. The players are all under twenty except for the goalkeeper who is twenty two.
 b. *ipárxi mja podosferiki omáda sto xorjó mas. i péxtes ine óli káto apó ikosi ektós apó ton termatofilaka pu ine ikosidio.*
- (3) a. i. Fetch me the iron.
 ii. When is the conference taking place?
 iii. The sky is always blue in those islands during the summer
 b. i. *fére mu to sidero.*
 ii. *póte tha jini to sinédrio;*
 iii. *o uranós ine pánda yalanós se aftá ta nisjá to kalokjéri.*

In (3), the referent has not been previously mentioned but its definiteness is clearly determined by the context. For instance, in (3) the speaker can be a housewife who has got some clothes that need ironing. The hearer in that case can easily infer to which iron the speaker uttering (3ai) refers.

2.1. English and Mod Greek Definite Articles Compared

In what follows, we shall examine the main aspects of the article usage in the two languages. The first thing to notice is that in English, but not in Mod Greek, the article and whatever else is included in the category *DE-TERMINER* are mutually exclusive. For example in English there is no definite article in between the demonstrative and the dependent noun. In Mod Greek on the other hand, this is in fact the case.

- (4) a. This man — That woman. (4) b. *aftós o ándras — ekini i jinéka.*

Again re possessives, in English, they precede the noun; in Mod Greek on the other hand, the possessive is an enclitic and the article still precedes the noun, as witness:

- (5) a. My friend. (5) b. *o filós mu.*

Finally, it should be noted that in Mod Greek, even the non-complementizer relative pronoun is preceded by an article (cf. Kakouriotis (1979)):

- (6) *o ándropos o opíos ynortzi polá* (cf. *o ándropos pu ynortzi polá*).

The man the two knows a lot ("The man that knows a lot").

The next step to be taken in this subsection will involve an examination of the definite article within the structural framework of NPs functioning as subjects, object and complement. For the case of article non-occurrence we shall use the commonly accepted term \emptyset , in prose this means zero article.

Uncountable nouns functioning as grammatical subjects and denoting material things are normally without article in English but with article in Mod Greek:

- (7) a. Blood is thicker than water. (7) b. *to éma neró déjínete.*

Thus we can have our first contrastive rule concerning definite articles:

- (8) E $\rightarrow \emptyset$
 / -N [-Count, +Concr]
 MG \rightarrow Def Art

Secondly, an uncountable noun representing an abstract idea takes zero article in English but definite article in Mod Greek:

- (9) a. Time flies. (9) b. *o xrónos pernáti.*

- (10) E $\rightarrow \emptyset$
 / -N ([-Count, -Concr])— — — —
 MG \rightarrow Def Art

However, when uncountable nouns are grammatical objects and refer to either material things or to abstract notions, they take zero article in both languages (although there seem to be a few exceptions to this rule).

- (11) a. I never take sugar in my tea. (11) b. *poté de vázo záxari sto tsái mu.*

- (12) a. I never expected kindness from you. (12) b. *poté den períména kalostíni apó séna.*

- (13) E&MG $\rightarrow \emptyset$ / -N [-Count, \pm Concr]

It should be noted here that things are not so clear, as far as Mod Greek is concerned in connection with the use of the definite article in front of nouns representing abstract notions. Thus, along *apeté sevazmó*, "I demand respect" and *thélo eleftheria*, "I want freedom", we can also have *ayapó tin eleftheria*, "I love freedom" and *thavmázo tin ilikrinia*, "I admire sincerity". It seems that in cases like those above the speaker "concretizes" an otherwise abstract

noun with a modifying phrase which is not overtly expressed. For example "I admire the sincerity that some people have".

Concerning subject complements which are uncountable nouns expressing material things (i.e. *gold, silver, etc.*), no article is used in either English or Mod Greek:

- (14) a. Water becomes steam when it boils.
 (14) b. *to neró jínete atmós ótan vrási.*
 (15) E & MG → Ø / -N [-Count, +Concr]

Nouns used in a generic sense are of particular interest to the learner of English. A Mod Greek noun takes an article whether it is in the singular or in the plural; on the other hand, nouns used in a generic sense take an article if they are in the singular in English:

- (16) a. The dog is a faithful animal.
 (16) b. *o skilos ine pistó zóo.*
 (17) E & MG → Def Art / -N [+Count, +Concr, +Generic, +Sg]

Note, however the difference between the two languages when the generic nouns are in the plural:

- (17) a. Dogs are faithful animals.
 (17) b. *i skili ine pistá zóa.*
 (18) E → Ø
 / -N [+Count, +Concr, +Generic, -Sg]
 MG → Def Art

We shall finish this subsection with a glance at the proper nouns. These nouns which stand for names of people, countries, cities, towns etc. receive zero article in English whereas they must take a definite article in Mod Greek. (Note some rather important exceptions in English concerning names of seas, rivers, etc. where the definite article is used).

- (19) a. England is an EEC member.
 (19) b. *i anglía ine mélos tis kinís ayorás.*
 (20) a. Martha is a clever girl.
 (20) b. *i márða ine éksipno korítsi.*

Note, however, as far as English is concerned, some particular exceptions. (21) presents a special interest given that proper nouns are normally antecedents to relative pronouns in non-restrictive relative clauses.

- (21) The Mary I know is fat and short not tall and thin.
 (22) Speaker A: I met Tom Jones in Soho the other day.
 Speaker B: You mean *the* Tom Jones!

As a matter of fact Mod Greek has been influenced by this particular use of the article in (22) where it is pronounced in its unreduced form, that is, *ði:* (not *ðə*) and with a rather heavy stress. One can hear sentences in which the article is heavily stressed to express uniqueness, best quality etc., sometimes, however, in an ironical sence (i.e. *ine ó diefθindís*, "he is *the* manager", *ine í yúna*, "it is *the* furcoat", a furcoat of unique quality.).

Despite the exceptions, we have mentioned, in connection with the English use of the article with proper nouns the, rule still applies:

- (23) E → Ø
 / -N [+Proper]
 MG → Def Art

In the subsection to follow, we shall deal with some very special uses of the definite article in English and Mod Greek for which we cannot provide semantic features as we have done so far. However given that our discussion is informal and descriptive to the best of our ability, we might just as well proceed to talk about those uses.

2.2. Extending the Contrastive Description

Before finishing the article description we will mention some further uses of it that are of particular interest, especially to the learner of Mod Greek.

Let us first mention the case that concerns a special use of the definite article in English. Only in this language, and not in Mod Greek, can a noun denoting a musical instrument take a definite article if this noun is the object of the verb "play" (Mod Greek *pézo*). Compare below:

- (24) a. I play the violin/the guitar/the piano.
 (24) b. *pézo vjolí/kiθára/pjáno.*

Now to the more important part of our description which concerns the Mod Greek definite article. In this language, a whole complement clause can have a definite article as its head:

- (25) a. *to óti ipárxi anerjía óli to ksérume.*
 The that exists unemployemnt it all we-know
 Art.
 "We all know that there is unemployment".
 b. *to póte tha érθi ine áynosto.*
 the when will he-come is unknown
 Art.
 "It is unknown when he will come".

How come that a complement clause can take a definite article then? Note that a complement clause is both a noun and a verb. As far as the noun function of such a clause. There seems to be a scale of "nouniness" which can be seen in the difference between a *that*-clause and gerundive complement in English:

b. *Did that she was singing arias surprise you?

As it appears above, the gerund clause is "nounier" than the *that*-clause given that it can invert like any noun in questions (26a), something that the *that*-clause is unable to do (cf. 26b).

Note, however, that this sentence can become perfect if *that*-clause the is preceded by such phrases as *the fact*, *the idea*, etc.

(26) c. Did the fact that she was singing arias surprise you?

The presence of the definite article (neuter gender, nominative) has an almost similar function: to make the complement clause look "nounier", something which appears to be needed in cases like those of (25), where a topicalization process has taken place. For instance the definite article is more necessary in (25a) above than in (25c) below in which the title is more necessary in (25a) above than in (25c) below in which the clausal *á*ject, that is the *that*-complement has not been topicalized:

(25) c. *óli ksérume óti ipárxi anerjta.*

Thus the definite article is needed when the noun function of the complement is more prominent than the verbal function. Compare (25a) with (25c) and notice the fact that the former does not only have a definite article but also a clitic object (the second *to* in that sentence), which is actually coreferential to the topicalized *that*-clause (i.e. *óti ipárxi anerjta.*). This proves better than anything else that the complement clause behaves like any other object NP, hence the justification for the presence of a definite article.

3. Explaining the Crosslinguistic Differences in the Use of the Article

In an interesting article, written in 1976, F. Klein had claimed that there is no a priori reason to accept that the inventory of meanings available in one language should be exactly the same as in another (Klein, 1976 : 417). Our analysis follows the spirit of her comparison of English with the Spanish article. For it appears that there is much in common between Spanish and Mod Greek in what has to do with the use of the article.

As far as English is concerned, the sign \emptyset posits the meaning "identification

not needed" whereas the actual use of the article the will mean "Identification needed and (sufficiently) made in the given context".

In Mod Greek, on the other hand, things appear to be different. More specifically, there seems to be no evidence whatever suggesting that the absence of a definite article is associated with any particular meaning in the way it is in English. In other words, Mod Greek has no explicit sign for "lack of need for identification". But this can imply that the converse also holds true: if there is no signal "identification not needed" there is no signal "identification needed", either. Thus, although the definite article *o* does posit the meaning "identification sufficiently made in the given context" it does not necessarily imply that it was needed, as it always does in the case of *the* in English.

We have already pointed out that although articles are heads, syntactically speaking, they are also empty words coreferential with the entity they modify. Now it happens that this entity either needs differentiating from other-like entities or it does not because it appears in its totality, that is it has a general sense, in which case differentiation is not necessary, as for instance in (7a) repeated below as (1a):

(1) a. Blood is thicker than water.

In this example the entity "blood" is in fact "self differentiating" (cf Klein, 1976 : 418).

In Mod Greek, however, where, as we have⁶ pointed out, there is nothing to signal "identity not needed" when the referent is taken in its totality, a similar case of entity will be signaled as something "sufficiently identified", hence the use of the article in (7b), repeated below as (1b):

(1) b. *to éma neró de jinete.*

Note that our analysis will also account for cases in which both languages want their nouns to have articles as their heads, as in (2) below:

(2) a. The blood that runs in his veins is royal.

b. *to éma pu réi stis üéves tu íne vasilikó.*

In (2a), the article is there because identity is needed and also it has to be sufficiently made within the given context; in (2b), on the other hand, though identity is not needed, the entity has to be sufficiently identified within the given context, hence the use of the definite article *to* in the Greek example above.

REFERENCES

- Brame, M. 1982. "Head selection theory". *Linguistic Analysis* 10.4. 321-25.
Christophersen, P. 1939. *The articles: a study of their theory and use in English*, London: Humphrey Milford.

- Hudson, R. A. 1984. *Word grammar*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kakouriotis, A. 1979. *Some aspects of Modern Greek syntax*. Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, London University (SOAS).
- Klein, F. 1976. "Same vs. different" crosslinguistically: the "articles" in English and in Spanish". *CLS* 12. 413-25.
- Matthews, P. H. 1981. *Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sommerstein, A. R. 1972. "On the so-called definite article in English". *Linguistic Inquiry* 3. 197-209.
- Stephanides, E. H. 1978. "The use of the article in English and Hungarian: a contrastive analysis". *PSiCL* 6. 79-93.
- Τζάρτανος, Αχ. 1946. *Νεοελληνική Σύνταξις (της Κοινής Δημοτικής)*. Οργανισμός Εκδόσεως Βιβλίων. Αθήνα. Tzartzanos, A. [*Modern Greek syntax* (of Demotic language). Organization of the Publication of School Textbooks.]