AGNIESZKA KRÓL-MARKEFKA
Instytut Filologii Angielskiej

SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE USE OF CONTRASTIVE DATA IN TEACHING ENGLISH ARTICLES TO POLISH LEARNERS

1. Introduction: language contrasts and language universals

The aim of this article is to shed some light on the viability and usefulness of introducing contrastive Polish-English data in teaching the English article system. I will try to look at various theories, concepts and empirical data relating to (in)definiteness[1] in the two languages from the point of view of applied cognitive linguistics.

The considerable difficulty Polish students have in the acquisition of articles is usually attributed to the absence of equivalent structures in the students' mother tongue. One line of argumentation is that the problems arise due to the negative transfer resulting from the lack of not only formal but also functional counterparts (Hulstjin and DeGraaff 1995). However, some contrastive linguists (Kryk 1987; Marton 1973; Szwedek 1976) point out that (in)definiteness is expressed in Polish by means of a range of lexical and grammatical elements, such as indefinite pronouns, demonstratives or word order. According to Arabski (1990: 12), it is this variety of formal counterparts, representing different syntactic and semantic categories that is the primary reason for the perennial difficulties in establishing adequate associations between articles and L1 structures. At the same time, the existence of functional equivalence between articles and some structures found in Polish is regarded as a great chance for language pedagogy: it is suggested that presenting students with the meaning conveyed by a particular structure in their mother tongue may help students "gain insight and understanding about the functioning of some element in the target language, and form a helpful crutch mainly at the initial stages of language use" (Marton 1973).

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[1] Other concepts relating to the article use, such as countability or genericness, are deemed to be beyond the scope of this article.

On the theoretical side, the search for equivalence is guided by the assumption that (in)definiteness is a universal concept in some forms expressed in all languages. The most famous advocate of the universality position is Bickerton (1981), who postulates two dimensions of universality in relation to definiteness: semantic, i.e. the distinction between specific and non-specific reference and the discourse universal, which relates to the presence or absence of the assumption that the referent is known to the hearer. Another cross-lingustic distinction related to definiteness that is usually mentioned is the topic / comment alignment.[2]

Gundel (1985) provides the following definitions for the topic and comment:

Topic

An entity, E, is the topic of a sentence, S, if in using S the speaker intends to increase the addressee's knowledge about, request information about, or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to E.

Comment

A predication, P, is the comment of a sentence S, if, in using S the speaker intends P to be assessed relative to the topic of S.

Finally, on the basis of the fact that all languages have demonstratives, personal pronouns and possessives, it is assumed that in some form, the concept of definiteness must be present in the minds of the speakers of all languages (see Lyons 1999: xv).

Against the backdrop of these observations, I would like to present the cognitive linguistic view on universality in language. Since, within the cognitive theory, language reflects our perception and experience of the world "filtered" through our cognitive abilities, universals are not sought on the level of language itself, but on the level of general human abilities to perceive and conceptualize. This, of course, means that cognitive linguistics would reject the idea that languages differ only in the encodings of basically the same concepts. On the basis of what is perceived and experienced, and with the use of fundamentally the same mental capacities, speakers of various languages form and conventionalise concepts, which may be identical or similar, but also entirely different from the "equivalent" concepts in other speech communities. Moreover, not all of those concepts need to become morphosyntactically expressible in a given language, which means that some semantic units might have their phonological representation in one language and lack it in another.

If we want to talk about applying cognitive linguistics to teaching, these cognitive assumptions about language must be taken for granted. Bearing them in mind, I would like to consider three questions related to the problem of using Polish as a basis for teaching the English article system:

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[2] This distinction is also referred to as "theme and rheme" (Firbas 1972) or "presupposition and focus" (Chomsky 1971; Jackendoff 1972).

1) What do articles encode? How do they function?
2) What are the so-called "equivalents" of articles in Polish? What is their form and function in Polish?
3) In what way can the analogy between English articles and Polish "article-equivalent" structures be made explicit to students? Is drawing such analogies a viable technique which facilitates acquisition?

2. Articles in English: a cognitive perspective

Before discussing the issue of how definiteness is realized in Polish, it is necessary to briefly present the cognitive view on grammar and the function of articles. Firstly, in cognitive grammar the meaning (value) of a linguistic unit (whether lexical or syntactic) is equated with the image evoked by a particular expression (Langacker 1987: 5). The actual "content" of an image is specified not only by the objective characterization of the entity or situation described, but also by the manner in which it is viewed. The way in which the concept is portrayed depends on an array of factors, which are called parameters of scene construal. One of the most relevant parameters relating to definiteness (Langacker 1987: 116–134) is *perspective*, which subsumes four other facets:

1. *Viewpoint* – reflects the vantage point from which the scene is observed and its orientation with respect to the axes of visual field.
2. *Figure / ground alignment* – establishes an entity which is given greatest prominence.
3. *Deixis* – indicates elements of the ground that are taken as a point of reference.
4. *Objectivity / subjectivity* – depends on the degree to which the conceptualiser participates in the construal (the conceptualisation is maximally subjective if the speaker is entirely absent from the scene: he / she is merely a neutral observer; by contrast, the scene may by maximally objective if the speakers [conceptualisers] themselves become objects of their own observation (Langacker 1987: 128).

2.1. (In)definiteness in English

The major difference between the traditional accounts of definiteness based on the notion of the hearer's familiarity with the referent (Hawkins 1978) and the cognitive explanation of the articles lies in the shift from perceiving this structure as hearer-oriented to the speaker-oriented: in choosing an article, the speaker, rather than predicting what can be familiar / identifiable to the hearer, instructs the hearer how the referent should be perceived (Epstein 2001: 43). In other words, by using *the* the speaker not only indicates that the entity is definite for him / her, but imposes upon the hearer his / her own perspective. The use of *a*, on the other hand, allows the hearer to construe the referent in a more neutral way, without the necessity to adopt the speaker's perspective.

Therefore, cognitive linguistics defines articles in English as grammatical devices responsible for anchoring the nominal expressions in the ground (speech-act participants, time and place) by setting the parameters of scene construal, in particular, for establishing perspective (Langacker 1991: 13–14).

2.2. Definiteness in Polish

Let us now have a closer look at those elements of the Polish language that bear some affinity to the definite and the indefinite articles. The most frequently mentioned linguistic elements that encode definiteness in Polish include:
1) word order,
2) definite (demonstrative) pronouns,
3) indefinite pronouns (*jakiś, pewien*),
4) the numeral *jeden*,
5) intonation (which overlaps with word order),
6) various "referring expressions",
7) context

(Pisarkowa 1968; Topolińska 1984; Szwedek 1975).

In the beginning I would like to focus on the last item on the list, i.e. the context. Its very presence on the list of equivalents clearly suggests that there may be no overt, grammatical or lexical indications of definiteness. Also Topolińska (1984: 63) makes two important points concerning definiteness in Polish:
1) (as in English) the definite interpretation of a referent is a matter of the speaker's communicative intention,
2) in some less communicatively significant cases the referential status of a noun phrase may remain unknown to the hearer, which may lead to some discrepancies in the interpretation of the referent's (in)definiteness between the speaker and the hearer.

The above observations are supported by Tabakowska (1993a: 796), who claims that in a number of cases, the Polish language leaves more conceptual freedom in the referential interpretation of noun phrases. This is the corollary to the fact that the aspects of scene construal (perspective, figure / ground organization, subjectivity), which in English are expressed by means of precise conventional units such as articles, are not grammaticalised in Polish, where the parameters are usually established through the interaction of all constituents of the text and the context (Tabakowska 1993a: 795).

2.2.1. Word order

In article-less languages, the word order is usually assumed to be responsible for providing information about (in)definiteness of the referent. Szwedek (1976) has shown that the communicative structure of information within a Polish sentence, which initially presents elements that have already been activated in the mind (i.e. given / topic / theme) and then pieces of information that are new (comment / rheme) bears some resemblance to the definite / indefinite contrast. Szwedek

provides examples of sentences in which noun phrases in sentence-initial position were coreferential (definite, according to Szwedek) while noun phrases in sentence-final position were non-coreferential (indefinite).

These observations regarding word order are related to one of the universals that have already been mentioned, i.e. the distinction between topic (theme) and comment (rheme), which, within the cognitive framework, can be seen as a manifestation of the figure / ground organization. The problem is that the given / new alignment cannot be entirely equated with the definite / indefinite contrast. Although givenness and definiteness overlap at times, the "prototypical 'topic first, comment second' word order structure conveys no clues as to the identifiability of the two entities" (Tabakowska 1993a: 791). This is illustrated by the following examples, in which both new and given information is construed out of elements that are definite and indefinite (Jarvis 2002: 388):

1) New referent as (a constituent of the) topic: "A *woman* stole a loaf of bread."
2) New referent as (a constituent of the) comment: "A woman stole *a loaf of bread*."
3) Continuous referent as (a constituent of the) topic: "A woman stole a loaf of bread. Then *she* accidentally dropped it."
4) Continuous referent as (a constituent of the) comment: "A woman stole a loaf of bread. Then she accidentally dropped *it*."
5) Reintroduced referent as (a constituent of the) topic: … "A man picked up the bread and said that he took it, but an eyewitness came and explained what really happened. Eventually, *the woman* was arrested and taken to jail."
6) Reintroduced referent as (a constituent of the) comment: "A man picked up the bread and said that he took it, but an eyewitness came and explained what really happened. Eventually, the woman was arrested and taken to jail. The man gave *the bread* back to the baker, but later he was arrested, too."

2.2.2. Jakiś

Although there seems to be a certain similarity in the general conceptual meaning between *jakiś* and *a*, as both of them may be used to introduce one, indefinite, unspecified entity, their meaning and use, and, as might be suspected, the concepts they embody, do not fully overlap. There are two major points of difference in the use of *a* and *jakiś*. Firstly, in opposition to the indefinite article, which can introduce both specific (referential) and non-specific (non-referential) entities, the Polish *jakiś* can only imply a specific reading, which means that it is not suitable in attributive noun phrases indicating category membership (and thus pointing to no specific instance) and generic statements, cf.

1) I'm *a* teacher. ≠ * Jestem *jakimś* nauczycielem.
2) *A* lion lives in Africa. ≠ * *Jakiś* lew żyje w Afryce.

Secondly, *jakiś* can correspond with the use of *a* only in such contexts where the speaker refers to an entity which is indefinite (not identifiable) for the

speaker (*Jakiś człowiek pytał o ciebie*), but it would not be a proper equivalent of *a* used to introduce an entity identifiable (definite) for the speaker, but used with the indefinite article for the sake of the hearer (for instance in the so-called introductory use, when the hearer's point of view is assumed by the speaker), as in:

   3) There is *a* book on the table. Can you pass it?

   ≠ * *Jakaś* książka jest na stole. Podasz mi ją?

   When I was 16, I had *a* girlfriend. She was…

   ≠ * Kiedy miałem 16 lat, miałem *jakąś* dziewczynę. Była…

2.2.3. Jeden

Another lexical item that is a likely candidate for a device encoding indefiniteness in Polish is the numeral *jeden* (*one*). This is understandable, since in most Indo-European languages that developed the article system, the marking of indefiniteness usually originated in the numeral *one* used with reference to specific indefinites, which has been subsequently extended to non-specific and generic indefinites (Givón 1984: 432). As pointed out by Bacz (1990: 84) *jeden* in some contexts seems to be used to introduce referential indefinites, e.g.

   4) Krakowiaczek *jeden* miał koników siedem…

   Przychodzi *jeden* górnik do lekarza i mówi:…

According to Bacz (1990: 84) this may mean that perhaps the Polish language "has entered the stage when the specific indefinite can be expressed by the value 'a certain' present in the meaning of the numeral *one (= jeden).*" Although *jeden* may in future develop into a true indefinite article, its meaning and function in contemporary Polish are limited to specific indefinites and thus *jeden* is only partially equivalent to *a.*

2.2.4. The demonstrative ten

A similar observation can be made about the demonstrative *ten*,[3] which, from the diachronic perspective, has gradually acquired some characteristics of the definite article. As indicated by Bacz (1990: 86), "from the point of view of the article system development Polish today is at the stage comparable to Old English. The definite article-like anaphoric functions of the demonstrative *ten* are detectable, but they are often hard to distinguish from the clearly demonstrative functions of the pronoun." For that reason, *ten* would not be a proper and reliable counterpart of *the* in all non-demonstrative contexts in which the definite article can be used, e.g.

   5) *The* end of *the* Second World War was *the* beginning of *the* communist regime in Poland.

   ≠ * *Ten* koniec *tej* drugiej wojny światowej był *tym* początkiem *tego* reżimu komunistycznego w Polsce.

To conclude, it might be stated that each of the aspects of the Polish language usually presented as equivalent to *the* or *a / an* only partially overlaps with the definite / indefinite distinction: word order in some cases reflects the

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[3] And all its other forms (*ta, to, ci, tych, tymi*, etc.).

juxtaposition of given (familiar) and new (unfamiliar) information; indefinite pronouns refer to specific entities which are not identifiable by the speaker, and the demonstrative *ten* in some contexts is used as the definite article. Also contextual information gives some indications concerning the aspects intrinsically related to definiteness such as viewpoint, figure / ground organization and subjectivity. However, as I have tried to show, none of the structures considered separately, nor the collection of all of them taken together, coincide fully with the meaning and the function of the English article system.

3. The use of contrastive data in explicit instruction

This section examines the possible applications of the contrastive data in the explicit instruction on English articles. The overriding question that needs to be answered is whether learning how to use English articles can be facilitated by drawing analogies between English articles and the modes of expressing (in)definiteness in Polish.

An important argument often quoted in favour of the application of Polish equivalent structures, even though they do not embody (in)definiteness, is that they can be used as advance organizers, i.e. as cognitive anchors which will help learners integrate new information about the use of articles to what they already have in their minds. According to Ausubel (1963), an advance organizer, as its name suggests, should be based on major concepts, generalizations and principles. In view of what has been said about the contrast between Polish *jakiś* and *ten* or word order and the definite and indefinite articles, it seems that the meaning of these structures will not provide learners with a general framework of reference for all uses of *a* and *the*. Therefore, there are no grounds for the assumption that the Polish "equivalents" can function as advance organisers for the concept of (in)definiteness.

The second problematic issue concerns the instruction that follows the introduction of such a faulty advance organizer. As stated by Ausubel (1963), the meaningful learning instruction following the evocation of an advance organiser should be based on progressive differentiation and integrative reconciliation. The former means that content should be organized and presented in the beginning with the most general ideas and concepts and then through gradually increasing detail and specificity, whereas the latter requires relating new ideas to previously learned information. In the case in point, learning new information about (in)definiteness would not only fail to proceed from the most general to the more detailed (as the meaning of *jakiś* or *ten* is narrower than that of *a* and *the*), but it would demand teaching new rules of use which would diverge from those originally presented (e.g. the meaning of *jakiś* or *ten* would be at odds with the meaning of *a* and *the* in generic statements).

Another major area of difficulties related to teaching contrastive features such as articles by drawing analogies with the mother tongue pertains to the practical,

pedagogical presentation of the contrast. Marton (1973) suggests that when students' attention is to be drawn to the L1 / L2 contrast, the teacher has to:
1) show the similarities and differences in usage in the language,
2) set up limits for drawing analogies,
3) warn about the areas of possible negative transfer and confusion.

Even if a teacher would be able to explicitly and clearly formulate the similarities, differences, and establish limits for drawing analogies, the question would remain if such explanations are capable of facilitating comprehension. Fulfiling Marton's requirements would necessarily involve presenting students with a great amount of metalinguistic information not only about the foreign language, but also about the student's L1. It might be supposed that an overt account on how definiteness is encoded in Polish will appeal only to those users of Polish who show high language awareness. This suspicion has been corroborated by some empirical data I have gathered from 67 students at the upper-intermediate level of proficiency. The students were asked to translate the following text into English:

> Około siódmej przyjechałem na przyjęcie. Dookoła domu zaparkowane były samochody gości. Zapukałem do drzwi. Po chwili otworzyła mi jakaś kobieta. Kiedy wszedłem do holu, zobaczyłem gości siedzących przy stole w jadalni. Mężczyzna stał przy oknie i rozmawiał z gospodarzem. Chciałem z nim porozmawiać, ale podeszła do mnie kobieta z kieliszkiem szampana i poprosiła, żebym poszedł do kuchni. W kuchni było ciemno. Kiedy zapaliłem światło, zobaczyłem człowieka, z którym wczoraj rozmawiałem na lotnisku. Walizka i pistolet leżały na stole.

Having completed the translation, the students had to report whether they consciously thought about the choice of the article. In the sentences *Mężczyzna stał przy oknie i rozmawiał z gospodarzem* (*The man was standing by the window and he was talking to the host*) and *Walizka i pistolet leżały na stole* (*The suitcase and the gun were (lying) on the table*) the word order suggests definiteness of the initial nouns *mężczyzna, walizka, pistolet* (*the man, the suitcase, the gun*). As I suspected, the students were not unanimous in the interpretation of their referential status: among those who used *the* (19 students), only five students justified their choice of an article by saying that the referents must have been previously known to the speaker. More students wrote that the referents were new and indefinite.

Table 1. The use of articles vs. word order

	the used + rule quoted	*the* used "by feel"	*a* used + rule quoted	*a* used "by feel"	No article used + rule quoted	No article used "by feel"
mężczyzna (the man)	**5**	14	**10**	22	0	11
walizka (the suitcase)	**5**	19	**7**	17	0	12
pistolet (the gun)	**5**	16	**7**	16	0	17

The justifications suggest that at least some students may not be sensitive to the information about the referential status encoded in the position of the noun

in the Polish sentence. Similar conclusions have been obtained by two research-
ers whose studies focused on the role of discourse universals in the L2 patterns
of the English article use. Sharma (2005) examined the use of such articles
among non-native speakers of English in India. The results have shown no trans-
fer of the students L1 positional marking of discourse status,[4] which means that
the topic / comment alignment does not influence L2 English learners' article
usage. Similarly, Jarvis (2002) found that the so-called discourse universals (e.g.
topic continuity) may not have any direct influence on the patterns of article use
among learners of English (Jarvis 2002: 387).

The evidence presented above allows me to formulate a hypothesis that ana-
lysing the definite / indefinite distinction through the word order can cause more
confusion, as students may not grasp the underlying function of the sentence-final
and sentence-initial positions and rely only on superficial translation, i.e. use *the*
for nouns in sentence-initial position and *a* for nouns in sentence final position.

4. Conclusion

Summarizing, it seems that definiteness is such a complex issue, both in English
and in Polish, that tracing the ways in which it may be encoded in both lan-
guages would place a double cognitive burden on the learner's mental process-
ing. Although there is some evidence that students can benefit from the explicit
instruction on how articles are used in English (Master 1994), going one step
further, that is making students aware of the devices which they automatically
use to express (in)definiteness in Polish is likely to introduce unnecessary com-
plications and, consequently, hinder rather than facilitate language acquisition.
Having said this it must be added that, naturally, the theoretical considerations
presented in this article need to be further verified by evidence from research
and actual teaching practice.

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    perspective: A theoretical note on the teaching of English intonation. – Fried V. (ed.) *The
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[4] As in Polish, in Indo-Aryan languages the topic / comment distinction is marked *via* word order.

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Streszczenie

Wybrane zagadnienia teoretyczne związane z użyciem gramatyki kontrastywnej w nauczaniu przedimków angielskich

Artykuł poświęcony jest kwestiom związanym z zastosowaniem analiz polsko-angielskiej gramatyki kontrastywnej w nauczaniu angielskich przedimków. Autorka omawia funkcję angielskich przedimków z punktu widzenia językoznawstwa kognitywnego, a następnie porównuje znaczenie *a* i *the* z tymi leksykalnymi i morfoskładniowymi elementami języka polskiego, które pełnią role zbliżone do roli przedimka. Następnie rozważane są zalety i wady związane z wprowadzeniem do nauki gramatyki informacji metajęzykowych, dotyczących podobieństw i różnic między przedimkami a ich odpowiednikami w języku polskim. Na podstawie teoretycznej analizy problemu autorka wysuwa wniosek, że użycie analizy kontrastywnej w nauczaniu nie tylko nie pomogłoby uczniom w zrozumieniu problemu, ale dla wielu byłoby prawdopodobnie utrudnieniem w opanowaniu przedimków angielskich.