

Using Old English to Teach the Articles *a* and *the* in the Classroom: An Etymological and Visual Approach

Ken Eckert

Keimyung University

Abstract

Instructors of composition for Korean students often contend with the difficulty of teaching indefinite and definite articles and the tendency of students to omit them in writing. Students need to parse a grammatical concept absent in Korean, and may encounter teachers who intuitively use them but do not conceptually understand them. The situation may be helped by a look at Old English, which also lacked articles and which was generating them out of its demonstrative and determiner set while evolving into Middle English. An analysis of Old English's fission of an into modern *a* / *one*, and *se-seo-þæt* into *the* / *that*, may yield a clearer picture of the language's distinction between generality and specificity. Pedagogically, we see that an informed ability to teach the etymological logic behind articles may assist students to see the strong visual and physical nature of English articles but also to re-see the concept of visual specificity as a progression running from zero article through *a* and *that* toward *the*.

Key words: Old English, articles, etymology, Korean language, academic writing

I. Introduction

As a composition professor responsible for both freshmen and supervision of thesis projects in an all-English program, my correction marks on student papers are usually insertions and additions of missing words, whether pronouns, prepositions, markers of number agreement, or the

dreaded indefinite and definite articles *a* and *the*. Korean, as a high-context language (see Harris, 2003, ch. 4), normally omits pronouns and plurals and omits prepositions where they are obvious within the context of the spoken discourse: “I’m going to church” in Korean, 교회 가요, “church-go” would typically omit the *-eh* 에 preposition (to) in order to avoid a less-euphonic double vowel. The two-word statement would be nearly meaningless in English without a preposition or pronoun referent.

Articles also fare badly with Korean users of English, often forming the largest category of errors (Chin, 2001). In conversation they are usually unstressed and easy to miss, and when reading English aloud Koreans may skip over *the* both to avoid pronouncing the non-native /ð/ and because of their “grammatical expectations” of what statements require for meaning (Swan and Smith, 2006, p. 327). Whereas prepositions have some correspondence in Korean as postpositional particles (전치사), Korean has no articles and no need for them. At most, there are demonstratives such as *this* (이) and *that* (그, 저) used to indicate relative proximity.¹⁾ Syntactically, the English article system “stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, which constitutes a considerable burden for the learner who usually looks for a one-to-one correspondence between form and function” (Bataineh, 2005, p. 57). Krashen categorizes *a* and *the* usage as a ‘difficult’ rule, as opposed to the ‘easy’ one of plural and possessive *-s* (cited in Pica, 1985, p. 215).

Students are certainly capable of learning the rules and conventions of English articles by rote, but often lack a native-like intuition for their use as a result of language interference. Like an English speaker learning Martian who is told that nouns need to be marked for whether the listener has green or purple antennae, the use of *a* and *the* seems to serve no useful purpose. I have encountered students who gave up and simply put *the* in front of every noun as a *modus vivendi*: “The student in the classroom gave his the classmate her the pencil and then went to the home to eat the supper.” Master (1997) similarly

1) For simplicity the term *demonstrative* (지시어) is used, although these may take the form of determiners or pronouns. Articles are usually (but not universally) considered a subclass of determiners.

notes that speakers of non-article languages often temporarily lose proficiency in zero articles (\emptyset) as they learn *a* and *the*; after understanding that “ \emptyset is not always appropriate, their first hypothesis appears to be that all nouns require *the*” (p. 218).

Teaching materials for Korean students and the class instruction given by foreign teachers may be well-meaning but often fails to grasp the conceptual hurdle faced by Korean speakers who lack both a clear understanding of the function of articles as well as a justification for their seemingly arbitrary and capricious use. Their error patterns may reflect both language interference (*interlingual* mistakes) and *intralingual* mistakes, a failure to understand or apply concepts (Chin, 2001, p. 101). This may be because native speakers themselves often use articles automatically from childhood without a theoretical understanding of their function, and with no knowledge of their history. Consequently, teaching articles can be as difficult and frustrating for the instructor as it is for students. While much has been written about articles from broad viewpoints of educational and linguistic theory, as a specialist in Old and Middle English literature I would like to use my rather rarified discipline to both explain the development of the English article system and to suggest alternative or supplementary strategies for better instruction of its rationale and application for Korean students.

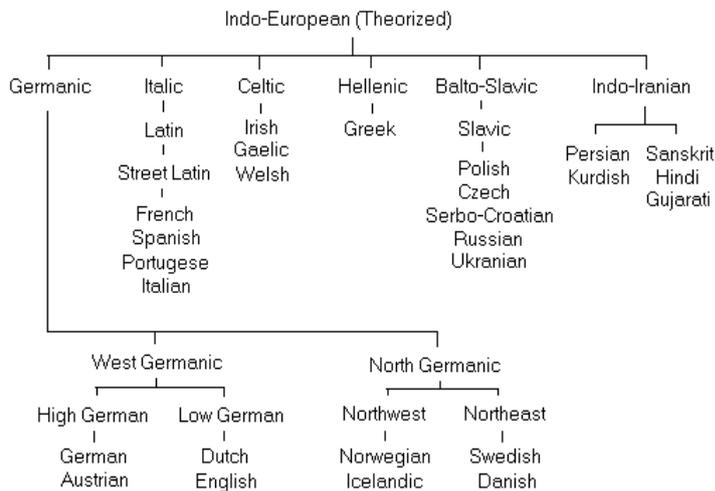
Why bother? Scholars lack agreement on the value of explicit correction of grammar errors (see Ellis, 2002). Pica (1985) claims that classroom teaching is “of no consequence” in improving usage of *a*, although her sample set is speakers of Spanish, an article language (p. 217). Some theorists dichotomize mistakes as *global*, those which cause rejection of the statement as incomprehensible, or as *local*, phrasings which are awkward but understandable (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 204). Master claims that article errors “rarely lead to miscomprehension” (1997, p. 216), conceding only that poor usage of articles creates a negative impression in the professor who grades the work. Nevertheless, one reason article mistakes are prevalent is that articles themselves are so omnipresent - in written English *the* is the most-used word in the language. While lower-level learners have other priorities, advanced writers grasp with issues of credibility in supporting arguments or writing for professional purposes. The shibboleth of being stigmatized as a

non-proficient user of articles in possibly every sentence requires that they be taught. For this we might profitably turn to an overview of Old English.

II. A Brief History of English and Its Article System

A perennial source of vexation for the Old or Middle English²⁾ scholar is the necessity of explaining to every new class, whether native speaking or second-language, that English does not derive from Latin. As the following simplified table demonstrates, it is a Germanic language which co-descends with Latin from a lost and theorized language called Indo-European:

FIGURE 1
Indo-European descendants (Millward, 1988, p. 52-3)



2) Following Millward, I categorize Old English as the Anglo-Saxon English spoken from 450-1100, Middle English as 1100-1500, and Modern English as 1500-PDE (Present Day English). All such dates are of course generalizations.

English thus began as a dialect of Low German imported to the island around 400 AD and has a relationship with Latin and the Romance languages closer to that of younger sibling or cousin rather than parent-child.

Nevertheless, Millward's chart does not itself indicate the deep extent of word-trading and cross-pollination between languages in the medieval period. England, and English, absorbed Latin missionaries, Norse invaders and settlers, and ultimately Fresh-speaking Vikings who conquered the island in 1066. While British languages such as Welsh remained relatively isolated behind mountain ranges (McCrum *et al.*, 1986, p. 53), the Old English language, with its intricate Germanic system of conjugations and endings, broke down under the linguistic confusion into a language relying more on prepositions and word order to create meaning. As its endings simplified or disappeared, English grammatically became less of an *inflectional* language, like Greek and Latin, and more of an *isolating* language, like Chinese and Vietnamese (Millward, 1988, p. 42).

Technically, Old English also had no articles, relying on a rather messy set of demonstratives and determiners where necessary. Modern *a* descends from Old English *an*, usually meaning "one" (cognate to German *ein* and Latin *unus*), but its usage is erratic: the indefinite article is often omitted in literature - "holtes on ende," "at the edge of a forest," or may have a nuance stronger than one: "þæt wæs an cyning," "that was one peerless king" (Mitchell and Robinson, 1992, p. 107). At times *an* simply means *alone*.

Generally *an* served as both a numeral and pronoun, as *one* does in modern English, before dividing into *one* and indefinite *a / an*. In *Beowulf* (c. 800-1000) the poet tends to omit articles, but in places he anticipates modern usage: it is the custom of the retainers "þæt hie oft wæron / an wig gearwe" - "that they were always ready for a battle" (1248). Later the poet describes a grief-stricken father "sorhleod gæleð / an æfter anum" - "singing dirges, one after another" (2460-1). Aelfric's translation of Genesis (c. 1000) has God causing Adam to fall asleep and taking "an rib of his sidan" (Gen. 2:21). *An* and *one* gradually fully separate, although some texts mix them: in *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c. 1200) the poet sees "an ule and one nyhtegale"

(4).³⁾ By the time of *Havelock the Dane* (c. 1285) we have both modern *one*: “nouth the worth of one nouthe” - “not worth one nut” (1333) and indefinite *a*: “fil me a cuppe of ful god ale” - “fill me a cup of your best ale” (13).

The is decidedly more complicated in origin. Old English had *þes* (this) and *se* (that) and variations based on gender or case, including *seo* (feminine), *þæt* (neuter), and *þa* (plural). Thus, *se* could mean modern *the* (*Iohannes se godspellere*, “John the Evangelist”) but also *that*: “se wæs betera ðonne ic” - “that was a better (man) than me” (*Beowulf*, 469), or even have the sense of relative *who / that*: “eart þu se Beowulf / se þe wið Breca wunne” - “are you the Beowulf who (i.e. “that one which”) competed with Breca?” (506). *Se*, *seo*, *þæt*, and *þa* thus did not exactly correspond to modern *the* or *that* but simply had the loose function as a marker of “definitiveness” (Millward, 1988, p. 86).

Old English already had the word *þe*, but it served different functions, either also as relative *who / that* or as *thee*. In the twelfth century a mysterious act of fission happened by which *þe* also became an alternative form to *se / seo* and then took on a separate function as the modern definite article *the*. In a very early example, the Peterborough Chronicle (c. 1121) has “þa munecas of þe mynstre” - “the monks of the monastery” (anno 656). The first printing presses to arrive in England lacked English *þ* and *ð*, representing /ð/ and /θ/, and printers at first made do with *ye* (it was never pronounced /ji:/⁴⁾ and then settled on modern *the*. Correspondingly, by Middle English the old forms of *se* and *seo* had died, leaving only *that* to evolve into its more limited modern function. *The / þe* remained indeclinable, so that plural demonstratives *these / those* developed without interference.

The same process happened in the breakup of Latin into Street

3) *An* was evidently clipped over time to *a* before consonant sounds for easier pronunciation. The *Nightingale* poet similarly uses *an* for pre-vowel *ule*, *owle* and *one / a / o* for preconsonant sounds. The *a / an* distinction evolved early in Middle English and seems generally accepted by 1200; the MED lists a first citation from 1150.

4) *Ye* as a typographical form of *the* should not be confused with *ye* as the plural form of *you* in Middle English.

Latin and then the Romance languages. Street Latin also had the demonstratives *ille* (m), *illa* (f), and *illud* (n), *that*, which began to take on greater and more specialized use as articles. As the dialects diverged into their modern descendants they evolved into French *le* and *la*, Spanish *el* and *la*, and Italian *il* and *la*, all meaning *the*. By the fourth century, late Roman texts employ variations of *ille* as proto-articles, hugely overused by Classical Latin standards, and by the eighth century the article is “a fully grammatical category” in Romance vernaculars (Alkire and Rosen, 2010, p. 205).

The question still unsatisfactorily resolved is why. Why did all of these languages suddenly need specialized articles at that time? Many language systems have articles - the Arabic definite article *al* (ال) gives English *al Qaeda* but also *algebra*, *alcohol*, *alchemy*, and *alcove*, reflecting the Arabic influence on science and engineering in the west. But Latin had none, nor does Russian, Turkish, or Hindi. Most of Korea’s neighboring languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and Tagalog, have no need of articles. The concept seems largely limited to Indo-European and Semitic languages.

One commonality between the Latinate languages and English is that they both experienced enormous linguistic intermingling and flux in the early medieval period following the decline of the western Roman empire as their inflectional systems became confused and the conservative role of writing temporarily declined. These factors seem to have contributed to the much more vital role of prepositions, articles, and word order in their modern versions. While certain expressions in English have been “grandfathered” - we still say “I’m going home” (Old English *ic ga ham*) - the more complex grammar of modern English, which has an increased use of complex sentences, subordinate clauses, and passive voice, all tend toward a more inflexible requirement of specificity.

III. Techniques for Teaching Articles

Bearing in mind this mini-etymology lesson, there are several ways in which articles can be better taught to Korean writers in composition classes, or even conversation classes. A casual hagwon⁵⁾ student can

normally get by with a sufficiently proximate ability in using articles modeled from the teacher, but a composition student lacks both the immediacy of the teacher's voice and encounters more difficult and abstract uses of articles. Thus, one technique for students with a higher proficiency, or for Korean speakers or fluent non-native speakers of Korean, is to explicitly teach the origins of the English articles from their genesis as counting and directional words toward more precise functions. Such a historical summary might enable some students to at least realize the vital importance of articles in English during the past 900 years.

Such an approach, of overtly presenting the etymological history of English articles, may also answer the claim that instruction in the application and controlled practice of articles lacks efficacy in building fluency. Rod Ellis (2002) speaks of consciousness-raising as the pedagogical approach of teaching grammar concepts formally as theoretical constructs in order "to equip the learner with an understanding of a specific grammatical feature - to develop declarative rather than procedural knowledge of it" (p.168), as opposed to simple repetition of rules or exercises, though ideally the two processes may reinforce each other. Ellis adds two provisos - one that such a technique is best applied to older and higher-level learners, and two that consciousness-raising is not necessarily "lectures on grammar" (p. 172). Students might be given exercises to deductively apply or inductively articulate a rule of usage. Nevertheless, advanced students may benefit from an actual explanation of Old and Middle English article usage.

Such a lesson might begin by laying out the three article scenarios of common nouns in order to help students visualize the continuum from generality to group membership to individuality:

5) Hagwons, or hogwons (학원) are the ever-present private academies found throughout Korea which teach children and adults various academic or leisure subjects, with English fluency the most prevalent. In 2009 there were approximately 70,000 hagwons in the country (Moon, 2009).

<i>Zero article (∅)</i>	<i>Indefinite article</i>	<i>Definite article</i>
nothing, -s	a, an	the

Such a graphical presentation might have the objective of demonstrating that English technically adds an article to nearly all nouns, a zero article (nothing) being a concrete grammatical option. Students may also realize that English nouns in practice usually have *some* addition to their base forms: Many schools require school uniforms. My daughter has *a* uniform. *The* uniform was very expensive. There are exceptions such as non-count or compound nouns or other situations where nothing is required: “When spring is here the flowers come.” But nouns do usually not occur alone without *a*, *the*, or *-s*, and students may graphically see that the burden of proof is against using the base form of nouns in their writing, even if it is the default usage in Korean.

Once zero articles are grasped as an actual grammatical form, the teaching sequence might move to indefinites. Korean and other non-article language students tend to have equal difficulty with using *a* in writing, often even mastering it after *the* (Master, 1997, p. 218). Its middle position in the spectrum between marking category or class (zero article) and recognized individuality (definite article) can be confused. The standard explanation that *a* denotes a member of a possible group or kind might be clarified by drawing a parallel between *a* and *one*, which are functionally similar in meaning as determiners even if they have different shades of sense and conventions in usage. It might also be helpful for the purposes of stressing *a*’s “indefinite” quality to note that *any* (Old English *ænig*) and *one* (*an*) also derive from a common Proto-Germanic word (**ainaz*). The etymology forms a simple sequence for classroom depiction: *any* → *an* → *one* and *a*.

Yet the greater prevalence of *the* in English leads to the numerical majority of errors in student writing, especially where abstractions or complex sentences are involved. Korean has no definite article, though it has demonstratives. Interestingly, Korean uses three, *this* (이), *that here* (그) and *that over there* (저) matching the Romance triplets of proximal, medial, and distal demonstratives (e.g., Spanish *este*, *ese*, and *aquel*), whereas English has only two and needs separate or archaic

words to emphasize distance (*over there, yonder, yon*).⁶⁾ Korean *that* (그) even shares with English *the* the quality of indicating a noun already mentioned or known to the listener. Lacking separate terms to distinguish “that here” (medial) from “that over there” (distal), perhaps English evolved *the* as a solution. The theory is plausible, but the paucity of texts makes verification difficult. English’s growth of articles was itself geographically uneven. As a language lacking official sanction, let alone standardization, *the* was slower to gain acceptance in the linguistically conservative north of England as opposed to the more dynamic southern lands.

An explanation of these historical relationships may be interesting or useful to students in providing long-term context. Yet a more focused teaching strategy might attempt to then relate the etymology to practice by looking at English demonstratives and *the* as fundamentally *visual* words. Old English was a rough and ready language well suited to physical, earthy uses; in Churchill’s wartime vow that “we shall fight them on the beaches” the only non-Germanic words in the series are *surrender* and *street*. The ignorant cliché of the “dark ages” dies hard - the Anglo-Saxons were not anti-intellectuals; but serious academic work was conducted in Latin. Old English, the language of the farmer and warrior, was less suited to abstractions and usually used loan-words for such applications. Its poetry was elegant and euphonic but oral and grounded in sense experience. *Pes* and *þæt*, in a generally non-literate culture, would have been used chiefly to manually indicate physical objects for spatial deixis: in Aelfric’s *Genesis*, Eve tells the snake that God has warned them “ðæt treow ne hrepodon” - “not to touch that tree.”

Teaching articles in a classroom may require a strongly visual approach of using hands and fingers and many whiteboard arrows to emphasize the fundamental physicality of English articles - to underscore

6) In both Latin and Korean the proximal, medial, and distal demonstratives (*hic, iste, ille*, 이, 그, 저) correspond to first, second, and third person uses. *Pes* and *þæt* had no such personal correspondences in Old English but possibly did in Proto-Germanic (compare *he-here* and *his-this*).

that Old English articles indicated visibility first and abstract relationships second. *That* desk or door or tree in the window is unique and individual for the concrete reason that the teacher's observable finger is pointing at it. From there an even finer specification follows; if indeed *the* developed in order to add an additional sense of nearness, the desk or door or tree perhaps also gains a cognitive closeness in being known to both speaker and hearer, thus satisfying the grammatical demands of *the* in denoting an object both unique and previously established to the hearer. English often employs a two-statement sequence of establishing and then indexing objects: I went to a café; the café was crowded. I encourage students to see the first statement as creating a mental image and the second as 'pointing' to that image. Whether or not this is good psycholinguistics, it conforms to Old English's sensory nature.

Graphically, our progression from generality to specificity now includes four elements, which admittedly mix grammatical categories but form a conceptual and visual straight line:



IV. Conclusion

This brief study has been written not to replace theoretical or pedagogical principles in disciplines such as TESOL and applied linguistics, but to provide a fresh supplementary approach. Its intent is to encourage correction as well as dialogue. Nevertheless, a short discussion of the seemingly unrelated discipline of Old and Middle English provides both a theoretical background for the development and meaning of the modern English article system as well as possible instructional techniques and applications. Several conclusions might be drawn:

1. Korean composition students may benefit from a visual depiction or lecture on the development of articles in English and their functional relationship to demonstratives *this / that*.

2. Students may benefit from seeing the etymological link between *a / an* and *one* and *any*.
3. Students may benefit from an instructional approach emphasizing *that* and *the* as strongly visual markers, perhaps through physical demonstration or pictures rather than text.
4. While grammatically mixing articles and demonstratives, students may benefit conceptually from being taught zero article, *a / an*, *that*, and *the* as a progression from general categories toward unique and established objects.

Such prolonged instructional attention to articles may seem pedantic or trivial in light of the multiple issues Korean students face in language interference, leaving alone matters of pronunciation or conversational fluency. Obviously, the lesson can be scaled up or down depending on student ability or time constraints. But for high-level writers of English, particularly those concerned with research papers or thesis projects for possible publication or entry to western graduate programs, functional or near-native grasp of articles yields an immediate index of the writer's perceived competence or credibility. At present, more is needed for these students than photocopies listing examples of articles and exceptions for lakes and rivers. Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) lament that "we have seen English reference grammars that present over 40 different rules for the use of the definite article" (p. 206). What is better is the fostering of a reasonably workable intuition for article usage, and teachers might best model replication of this native instinct by understanding themselves their etymological origins and development.

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Ken Eckert

Keimyung Adams College, Keimyung University
eng@keneckert.com

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