A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE USE OF ARTICLES IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

by

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Abstract

Article is one of the important things when someone studies a language. In general, articles both in English and German have the same meaning, but different forms and functions will be seen in the sentences. These differences are supposed to be understood. In English, the definite and indefinite articles do not change at all in the gender and the plural forms of the words which follow, as well as in nominative case (as subject), accusative case (as direct object), dative case (as indirect object), and genitive case (as possession). On the other hand, in German, the articles change in the cases mentioned above. After analyzing the articles of both languages, the writer concludes that there are similarities and differences as well in using articles in English and German. The similarities are when we use the articles before the only one subject, for mentioning the second time, before names of group of islands and before superlative adjectives. Meanwhile, in German when we use articles for genders, singular and plural nouns, and cases, it will differ extremely from English.

Key words: articles, use, similarities, differences, English, German,

1. Introduction

In general, articles both in English and German have the same meaning, but different forms and functions will be seen in the sentences. These differences are supposed to be understood. Otherwise, the expressions in the sentence will create a big structural mistake.

Richards (1990) in his book entitled *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics,* stated that article is a word used with a noun, and which shows whether the noun refers to something definite or something indefinite.

In English, the definite and indefinite articles do not change at all in the gender and the plural forms of the words which follow, as well as in nominative case (as subject), accusative case (as direct object), dative case (as indirect object), and genitive case (as possession). On the other hand, in German, the articles change in the cases mentioned above.

And the comparison will be shown in the similarities and differences of using between the definite and indefinite articles in English and German.

2. Discussions

1. Articles in English and German

a) The Definite and Indefinite Articles in English

Article is one of the important things when someone studies a language. It is used to precede

both countable nouns and uncountable nouns. In English, according to the book entitled *A Practical English Grammar* (1990: 1-6), there are two kinds of articles.

1) The definite article "**the**"
2) The indefinite article "**a/an**" and they are accurately described as follows:

1) The definite article "**the**"

The forms and functions of the definite article "the" can be defined as follows:

a) The definite article "the" followed by a singular noun has the same form as "the" followed by a plural noun.

There are no changes for the definite article "the" in both cases. For examples:

- ***The*** *father is going to the office*
  (singular)
- ***The*** *fathers are going to the office*
  (plural)

b) The definite article "the" is the same for all genders. English does not see genders as influential to the structural components. For examples:

- ***the*** *man*
  (masculine)
- ***the*** *woman*
  (feminine)

- ***the*** *car*
  (neuter)

c) The use of the definite article "the" is the same for all cases (nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive). For examples:

- Nominative Case (as subject)

  The *boy is buying a book.*

- Accusative Case (as direct object)

  *I have bought **the** book.*

- Dative Case (as indirect object)

  *I gave a book to **the** boy.*

- Genitive Case (as possession)

  *The brother of **the** father has come.*

d) The definite article "the" is used:

- Before nouns of which there is only one, or which are considered as one. For examples:

  the *earth, **the** sun, **the** moon*

- Before a noun which has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time. For example:

  *I bought a book; **the** book is red.*

- Before a noun which, by reason of locality, can represent only one particular thing. For example:
  *The boys are playing in **the** yard. (it means the yard of this school)*
- Before superlatives, used as adjectives or pronouns. For example:
  *Mont Blanc is **the** highest mountain in Europe.*
- Before names of seas, rivers, and plural names of countries. For examples:
  ***the** Atlantic Ocean, **the** Colorado River, **the** Netherlands*
- Before a noun made definite by the addition of a phrase or clause. For example:
  ***The** boy that I met is her nephew.*
- Before an adjective used to represent a class of persons. For example:
  ***The** old and **the** young should be able to live together.*

2) The indefinite article **"a/an"**

The indefinite article **"a/an"** has the forms and functions that can be defined as follows:

a) The form "a" is used before a word beginning with a consonant sound. For examples: ***a** man, **a** university.*

b) The form "an" is used before a word beginning with a vowel sound (a/ e/ i/ o). For examples: ***an** hour, **an** egg, **an** owl.*

c) The indefinite article "a/an" is the same for all genders. For examples:

- ***a** man*
  (masculine)
- ***an** actress*
  (feminine)
- ***a** car*
  (neuter)

d) The indefinite article "**a/an**" is used:

- Before a singular noun which countable when it is mentioned for the first time and represents no particular person or thing. For example: *I see **a** man behind the tree.*
- Before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of a class of things. For example: ***A** palm tree is usually very tall.*
- With a noun complement. This includes names of

professions. For example: *He is **a** doctor.*

- In certain numerical expressions. For examples: ***a** couple, **a** dozen, **a** lot of, **a** great deal of*

- In expressions of price, speed, and ratio. For examples: *five dollars **a** dozen, sixty kilometers **an** hour*

e) The use of the indefinite article "**a/an**" is the same for all cases (nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive). For examples:

- Nominative Case (as subject)
  A girl is carrying a book.

- Accusative Case (as direct object)
  *The girl saw **a** red car in the garden.*

- Dative Case (as indirect object)
  *He showed the book to **a** man.*

- Genitive Case (as possession)
  *The car of **a** man is stolen.*

b) **The Definite and Indefinite Articles in German.**

In German, the definite and indefinite articles are adjectives that agree in number, gender, and case with the noun they modify. According to the books entitled *Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (1991: 144-150), *Deutsche Sprachlehre für Ausländer* (1988: 4-56), and *Conversational German in 20 Lessons* (1990: 197-205), there are two kinds of articles in German:

1) The definite articles "**der**/**die**/**das**" *(Der bestimmte Artikel "der/die/das")*

2) The indefinite articles "**ein**/**eine**/**ein**" *(Der unbestimmte Artikel "**ein/eine/ein**")* and they are then explained as follows:

1) The definite articles "**der**/**die**/**das**" *(Der bestimmte Artikel "der/die/das")*

The forms and functions of the definite articles "**der**/**die**/**das**" can be defined as follows:

a) There are three definite articles which indicate the three different genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter, as seen below:

MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER
der Vater (the father) **der** Stuhl (the chair)	**die** Mutter (the mother) **die** Schule (the school)	**das** Kind (the child) **das** Schiff (the ship)

Therefore, every noun must be learned with its proper article.

b) In German, the noun has three genders. Each of them has four cases expressing the different relationships of the noun and the rest of the words in the sentence.

As far as the noun is concerned, these case changes are indicated primarily by case changes in the articles. For examples:

- Nominative Case (as subject)

  Der Junge kauft ein Buch.

  (__The boy__ is buying a book)

- Accusative Case (as direct object)

  Ich habe **den** Junge in seinem Haus gesehen.

  (I have seen __the boy__ in his house)

- Dative Case (as indirect object)

  Er gab **dem** Junge das Buch.

(He gave the book to __the boy__)

- Genitive Case (as

GENDER CASE	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER
Nominative	**der** Vater (the father)	**die** Mutter (the mother)	**das** Kind (the child)
Accusative	**den** Vater (the father)	**die** Mutter (the mother)	**das** Kind (the child)
Dative	**dem** Vater (to/for the father)	**der** Mutter (to/for the mother)	**dem** Kind (to/for the child)
Genitive	**des** Vaters (of the father)	**der** Mutter (of the mother)	**des** Kindes (of the child)

possession)

Die Mutter **des** Junge**s** wohnt hier.

(The mother of __the boy__ lives here)

c) Declension of the definite articles with nouns.

The declension of the definite articles with singular nouns is as follows:

All three genders have the same article declension in the plural. The declension of the definite articles with plural nouns is as follows:

GENDER CASE	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER
Nominative	**die** Väter (the fathers)	**die** Mütter (the mothers)	**die** Kinder (the children)
Accusative	**die** Väter (the fathers)	**die** Mütter (the mothers)	**die** Kinder (the children)
Dative	**den** Vätern (to/for the fathers)	**den** Müttern (to/for the mothers)	**den** Kindern (to/for the children)
Genitive	**der** Väter (of the fathers)	**der** Mütter (of the mothers)	**der** Kinder (of the children)

d) The definite articles "**der/die/das**" are used:

e) With the seasons, the months, and the days of week. For example:

*In **dem** Januar ist moistens sehr kalt.*

(It is usually very cold in January)

f) In expressing the date. For example:

*Heute ist **der** 22. April.*

(Today is April 22nd)

g) With abstract nouns. For example:

*Sie kampfen für **die** Freiheit.*

(They are fighting for liberty)

h) With parts of the body or personal possessions when there is doubt as to the possessor. For example:

*Sie wusch sich **die** Hände.*

(She washed her hands)

i) With proper names when they are preceded by an adjective. For example:

***die** arme Marie (poor Mary)*

j) After the prepositions "in" *(in, into)*, "nach" *(after)*, "vor" *(before)*, "zu" *(to)*, in such expressions as follows:

*Sie gehen in **die** Schule.*

(They are going to school)

*Nach **dem** Abendessen.*

(After dinner)

k) If the name of the country is always used in the plural, a plural form of the definite article must precede it. For example:

***die** Vereinigten Staaten*

(the United States)

l) With names of streets and squares. For example:

***Er** wohnt in der Parkstraße an dem Potsdamer Platz.*

(He lives in Park Street on potsdamer Square)

2) The indefinite articles "**ein/eine/ein**"

(Der unbestimmte Artikel "ein/eine/ein")

The indefinite articles "**ein**/**eine**/**ein**" have the forms and functions that can be defined as follows:

a) There are three indefinite articles which indicate the three different genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter.

MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER
ein Vater (a father) **ein** Stuhl (a chair)	**eine** Mutter (a mothe) **eine** Schule (a school)	**ein** Kind (a child) **ein** Schiff (a ship)

b) The noun and pronoun have three genders. They are masculine, feminine, and neuter as mentioned above. Each of them has four cases (nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive expressing the different relationships of noun and pronoun and the rest of the words in the sentence. As far as the noun is concerned, these case changes are indicated primarily by case changes in the article:

1. Nominative Case (as subject)
   Ein *Junge kauft ein Buch.*
   (*A **boy** is buying a book*)
2. Accusative Case (as direct object)
   *Ich sah **einen** Junge im Zimmer.*
   (*I saw **a boy** in the room*)
3. Dative Case (as indirect object)
   *Er gab **einem** Junge das Buch.*
   (*He gave the book to **a boy***)
4. Genitive Case (as possession)
   *Ein Buch **eines** Junges liegt auf dem Tisch.*
   (*A book of **a boy** lies on the table*)

c) The declension of the articles with nouns is defined below:
1) The declension of the indefinite articles with singular nouns is as follows:

Gender Case	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Nominative	**ein** Vater (a father)	**eine** Mutter (a mother)	**ein** Kind (a child)

	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Accusative	**einen** Vater (a father)	**eine** Mutter (a mother)	**ein** Kind (the child)
Dative	**einem** Vater (to/for a father)	**einer** Mutter (to/for a mother)	**einem** Kind (to/for a child)
GENITIVE	**eines** Vaters (of a father)	**einer** Mutter (of a mother)	**eines** Kindes (of a child)

2) In the plural form, all three genders have the same articles declension. The declension of the indefinite articles with negative plural nouns is as follows:

Gender Case	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Nominative	**keine** Väter (no fathers)	**keine** Mütter (no mothers)	**keine** Kinder (no children)
Accusative	**keine** Väter (no fathers)	**keine** Mütter (no mothers)	**keine** Kinder (no children)
Dative	**keinen** Vätern (to/for no fathers)	**keinen** Müttern (to/for no mothers)	**keinen** Kindern (to/for no children)
Genitive	**keiner** Väter (of no fathers)	**keiner** Mütter (of no mothers)	**keiner** Kinder (of no children)

d) The uses of the indefinite articles "**ein**/**eine**/**ein**" are as follows:

1. When a singular noun which is countable and mentioned for the first time and represents no particular person or thing, the indefinite article is used. For example:
   *Ich sehe **einen Mann** in dem garten.*
   *(I see **a** man in the garden)*

2. The indefinite article is also used before a singular countable noun used as an example of class of things. For example:
   ***Ein** hund ist **ein** Tier*
   *(**A** dog is **an** animal)*

However, there are some expressions **which do not** use the indefinite articles "**ein**/**eine**/**ein**" in the following conditions:

3. In referring to vocation, nationality, and occupation the indefinite articles are not used. For examples:

Er ist Arzt.

(He is a doctor)

Mein Vater ist Amerikaner.

(My father is an American)

4. The indefinite articles are not used in expressions of price, speed, and ratio. For examples:

Zweimal die Woche

(Twice a week)

5. In certain phrases, the indefinite articles are not used. For example:

Ich habe Kopfschmerzen.

(I have a headache)

2. The Similarities and Differences of Using the Definite and Indefinite Articles in English and German

2.1. The Similarities of Using the Definite and Indefinite Articles in English and German

a. The Similarities of Using the Definite Articles in English and German

1. The definite article is used before nouns of which there is only one, or which are considered as one. For examples:

English:**the** earth

the moon

*German:**die** Erde*

***der** Mond*

2. The definite article is used before a noun which has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time. For examples:

English: I bought a book; **the** book is red

*German: Ich kaufe ein Buch; **das** Buch ist rot.*

3. The definite article is used before a noun which by reason or locality, can represent only one particular thing. For examples:

English: They are playing in **the** garden. (= the garden of the house)

*German: Sie spielen in **dem** Garten.*

4. The definite article is used before names of group of islands and plural names of

countries. For examples:

English:the United States

*German:**die** Vereinigten Staaten*

5. The definite article is used before superlatives, used as adjectives or pronouns. For examples:

English : Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in Europe.

German : Mont Blanc ist der höchste Berg in Europa.

b. The Similarities of Using the Indefinite Articles in English and German.

1) The indefinite article is used before a singular noun which is countable when it is mentioned for the first time and represents no particular person or thing. For examples:

English : I see **a** man behind the tree.

*German : Ich sehe **einen** Mann hinter dem Baum.*

2) The indefinite article is used before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of a class of things. For examples:

English : A dog is an animal.

*German : **Ein** Hund ist **ein** Tier.*

3) The indefinite article is used in referring to vocation, nationality, and occupation which are preceded by adjectives. For examples:

English : He is a good doctor.

German : Er ist ein guter Arzt.

2.2. The Differences of Using the Definite and Indefinite Articles in English and German

a. The Differences of Using the Definite Articles in English and German

The English definite article does not change in order to match the nouns they modify, while the German definite articles will change in accordance with the genders, the

numbers, and the cases of the nouns they modify, as specified below:

b. The Genders

In English there is only one definite article "**the**", that is used for all genders, because there are no genders at all for the nouns. For examples:

- **the** father (masculine)
- **the** mother (feminine)
  - **the** car (neuter)

In German, three definite articles are selected to indicate the three different genders: masculine (männlich), feminine (weiblich), and neuter (sächlich);

- *der Vater (the father) (masculine)*
- *die Mutter (the mother) (feminine)*
- *das Auto (the car) (neuter)*

c. The Singular and Plural Forms

In English, the definite article "**the**" for singular nouns is the same as "**the**" for plural nouns. It does not change at all, as seen below:

SINGULAR	PLURAL
the father	**the** fathers
the mother	**the** mothers

the car	**the** cars

*In German, the definite articles "**der/die/das**" for singular nouns are different from those for plural nouns. They all change into "**die**".*

Singular	Plural	Genders
der Vater (the father)	**die** Väter (the fathers)	Masculine
die Mutter (the mother)	**die** Mütter (the mothers)	Feminine
das Kind (the child)	**die** Kinder (the children)	Neuter

d. The Cases

In English, the uses of definite article "**the**" are the same for all cases (nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive), so there are no changes for "**the**". The form is constant in its various positions. For examples

The boy is buying a book.
(nominative)
I saw **the** boy.
(accusative)
Mother gave a book to **the** boy. (dative)
The uncle of **the** boy lives here. (genitive)

In German, the definite articles are changed according to the cases or the position the nouns take, as seen in the table below:

Gender Case	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Nominative (Subject)	*der Vater (the father)*	*die Mutter (the mother)*	*das Kind (the child)*
Accusative (Direct Object)	*den Vater (the father)*	*die Mutter (the mother)*	*das Kind (the child)*
Dative (Indirect Object)	*dem Vater (to/for the father)*	*der Mutter (to/for the mother)*	*dem Kind (to/for the child)*
Genitive (Possession)	*des Vaters (of the father)*	*der Mutter (of the mother)*	*des Kindes (of the child)*

Der Vater wohnt in Deutschland.
(The father lives in Germany)
Peter rief **den** Vater.
(Peter called the father)
Herr Schmidt gab **dem** Vater eine Zigarette.
(Mr. Schmidt gave a cigarette to the father.)
Der Wagen des Vaters ist gestohlen.
(The car of the father is stolen)

e. The Other Uses

In English, the definite article "**the**" is not used for the seasons, the months, and the days of the week, *but it is used in German.* For examples:
English   : It is usually cold **in January.**
German   : ***In dem Januar** ist es meistens kalt.*
English   : We are going to the country in Summer.
*German   : Wir fahren **in dem Sommer** auf das Land*

In English, the definite article "**the**" is not used with proper names when preceded by an adjective, *but it is used in German.* For examples:
English   : little Maissie (=there is only one Maissie)
*German   : **die kleine Maissie***

In English, for some nouns, the definite article "the" is not used after the

116

prepositions such as "in/into *(in)*", "after *(nach)*", "before *(vor)*", "to *(zu)*", *but it is always used in German in the expressions as follows:*
English: They went **to** school.
*German: Sie gingen **in die Schule**.*
English: They are **at** school.
*German: Sie sind **in der Schule**.*
English: **After** dinner
　　　*German: **Nach dem Abendessen***

2.3. The Differences of Using the Indefinite Articles in English and German.

The English indefinite article does not change in   order to match the nouns they modify, *but in German indefinite articles must be selected to agree with the genders and the cases of the nouns they modify*, as specified below:
a. The Genders

In English, there is only one indefinite article "a/an", that is used for all genders. Only the forms of "a" or "an" are used alternatively according to the sound of the first letter of the word which directly follows the article. For examples:**a** man, **an** orange, **a** university, **an** hour
In German, the definite articles are used alternatively according to the genders;

"ein", "eine" and "ein" will respectively precede the masculine, feminine, and neuter genders, as seen below:

Masculine	*Feminine*	*Neuter*
***ein** Vater (a father)* ***ein** Stuhl (a chair)*	***eine** Mutter (a mother)* ***eine** Schule (a school)*	***ein** Kind (a child)* ***ein** Schiff (a ship)*

b. The Cases

In English, the use of the indefinite article "a/an" is the same for all cases (nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive), so there are no changes for "a/an". It is constant in all positions. For examples:
A girl is buying a bag. (nominative)
I saw **a** girl behind the door. (accusative)
Father gave a doll to **a** girl. (dative)
A book of **a** girl is torn. (genitive)

Gender Case	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Nominative	**ein** Vater (a father)	**eine** Mutter (a mothe)	**ein** Kind (a chil)
Accusative	**einen** Vater (a father)	**eine** Mutter (a mother)	**ein** Kind (the child)
Dative	**einem** Vater (to/for a father)	**einer** Mutter (to/for a mother)	**einem** Kind (to/for a child)
Genitive	**eines** Vaters (of a father)	**einer** Mutter (of a mother)	**eines** Kindes (of a child)

In German, the indefinite articles "ein/eine/ein" will change to conform to the cases of the noun, as seen in the table below:
Ein alter Vater wohnt here allein.
(**An** old father lives here alone)
Dieser Hemd ist für einen Vater.
(This shirt is for **a** father)
Sie gab einem alten Vater das Geld.
(She gave some money to **an** old father)
Das Heft eines Vaters liegt auf dem Stuhl.
(The note-book of a father lies on the chair)

c. The Other Uses

In English, in reference to vocation, nationality, and occupation, the indefinite article "a/an" is used, but *in German, such will not occur.*
For examples:
English: He is **a** doctor.
German: Er ist Arzt.

In English, the indefinite article "a/an" is used in certain phrases, but *in German, such will not occur.*
For example:
English: I have **a** headache.
German: Ich habe Kopfschmerzen.

In English, the indefinite article "a/an" is used to refer to price, speed, and ratio, but *in German, such case will not happen.* For examples:
English: Twice **a** week he goes to the movie.
German: Zweimal die Woche geht er ins Kino.

3. Conclusions

Based on the analysis above, the writer can draw some conclusions, as follows:

a. The similarities of using the definite articles in English and German can be stated that the definite article is used before nouns of which there is only one; before a noun which has become definite as a result of being

mentioned a second time; before a noun which by reason or locality can represent only one particular thing; before names of group of islands and plural names of countries; and it is also used before superlative adjectives.

b. About the similarities of using the indefinite articles for both languages, the writer concluded that the indefinite article is used before a singular noun which is countable when it is mentioned for the first time and represents no particular person or thing; before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of class of things; and also used in referring to vocation, nationality and occupation which are preceded by adjectives.

c. There are some differences of using either the definite or the indefinite articles in English and German, i.e. in the genders (English nouns practically have no genders but German nouns do); in forming singular and plural (in German it deals with genders very much but English does not); the cases (in German cases hold very important roles and strictly in applying them in sentences, on the other hand, English does not)

4. Suggestions to the Readers

There are some suggestions that may be taken into consideration:

a. If the learners want to use definite or indefinite articles in sentences correctly, especially in German, they should take care of some steps. They have to consider (a) the gender of the noun, (b) the number of the noun, and (c) the case of the noun. At last they should also consider the other important uses of the language.

b. Learners are recommended to read a lot of English and German books so that they may acquire the proper usage of the articles and consequently, they may also improve in producing the two languages, especially when their main problem is using the articles.

5. Benefit Of The Study

a. Theoretically
The writer hopes that this research can contribute to the German class and it can be used by both the teachers and the learners.

b. Practically
This research can give additional input in

improving the ability of German grammar. Further more it can be used as reference for similar research.

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