Title

A Contrastive Analysis on the Application of Definite and Indefinite Articles in the Story Texts in Persian and English Languages

Authors

Atiyeh Kamyabi Gol (Ph.D)
Ferdowsi University, Mashhad, Iran

Beheshteh Shakhsi Dastgahian (M.A candidate)
Ferdowsi University, International Branch, Mashhad, Iran

Biodata

Atiyeh Kamyabi Gol, assistant professor of linguistics at the department of linguistics, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Her areas of research include Second Language Writing, Applied Linguistics, Cultural Aspects of EFL, Perceived Culture, Anxiety in EFL Learning, Self Disclosure in EFL Teaching and Learning. She has published in the areas of Cultural Attachment and Accent Mimicry and also Home Culture Attachment.

Beheshteh Shakhsi Dastgahian, M.A student in Applied Linguistics in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. She is currently teaching English as a second and foreign language to high school and pre-university students in district 3 in Mashhad, Iran. She has participated in all educational programs related to the State Department of Education up to now, and also she has a Diploma in Computer Skills. Her main research interests include Language Proficiency and Multiple Intelligences.

Abstract

Languages have different linguistic forms which can be contrasted to explore differences and similarities among them. The present study is a contrastive analysis comparing the application of definite and indefinite articles in English and Persian languages. In this regard 10 texts including historical and religious stories in Persian and their translations into English were chosen. Among these texts 113 cases of definite and indefinite articles were compared in two languages. The results of the study showed that 43 cases of definite article "the" and 29 cases of indefinite articles "a, an" were applied to show definiteness and indefiniteness respectively. Also the results of the study demonstrated that only 3 cases of definite article "the" were used for representing indefiniteness in Persian language.

Keywords: Contrastive analysis, Definite and indefinite articles, Application

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 What Contrastive Analysis Is

Contrastive analysis (CA), a method of linguistic analysis (Jaszczolt, 1995), is concerned with a pair of languages and its main assumption is founded on the comparison of different languages (James, 1980), CA also encompasses contrastive grammar which identifies and characterizes special domain in languages (Anderson, 1987). Marton (1973), investigating the pedagogical role of CA in the classroom environment, explains that CA is a "useful technique for presenting language materials to the learner" as well as a method of teaching (Marton, 1973, p. 15) and communication (Jaszczolt, 1995).

Contrasting two linguistic systems is a popular method in language acquisition (Wardhaugh, 1970), since its main goal is to provide a "cross-language comparison" model used to determine differences and similarities between languages (Fisiak, 1990, p. 5; Krzeszowski 1989, p.56). Jaszczolt (1995) believed that in contrasting languages micro-linguistic aspects such as phonology, grammar, and lexis, as well as macro-linguistic aspects such as semantics, pragmatics, sociological, and psychological studies have to be considered. Contrastive linguistics encompasses two areas: theoretical and applied (Fisiak et al, 1978), while the former is concerned with determining universal categories (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics) between two languages, the latter focuses on applying these theoretical disciplines to language teaching, translation and different researches on language acquisition (Jaszczolt , 1995). In this regard, although James (1980) believed that CA was more applied, Jaszczolt (1995) considerd it as both theoretical and applied; however, Jaszczolt (1995) mentioned that grammatical and socio-cultural competences are two justifiable reasons in both theoretical and applied researches.

What is important in CA is equating L1 and L2 forms semantically and pragmatically, since the best way of comparison in CA is semanto-pragmatic translation equivalence (Fisiak, Lipinska-Grzegorek, & Zabroski, 1978). To have an ideal contrastive analysis, it is significant to compare one text (A) in one language (L1) with its translation in another text (B) in the second language (L2) (Traugott, 2007), this is referred to as a bidirectional analysis (Altenberg & Aijmer, 2000).Contrastive grammar (CG) is a part of CA which focuses on the grammatical analysis of languages (Devos, 1995). Devos (1995) believes that CG is also concerned with phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, and pragmatics, as in contrastive grammar, using definite and indefinite articles in English and their equivalences in Persian encompasses the area of grammar and translation together.

1.2 Definite and Indefinite Articles in English Language

Article acquisition in L1 begins in early stages of learning English, before the age of 4, therefore the number of errors in this area is drastically reduced (Butler, 2002). In English, determiners are classified into sub-classes, one of which is an article (Zahedi & Mehrazmay, 2011). An article is divided into two parts: definite and indefinite, while the definite article "the" is used before both singular and plural nouns, indefinite articles "a" and "an" are applied before singular nouns (Murphy, 1989).

For L2 learners of English, there is a complexity in the usage of these articles, so they face some challenges in their acquisition (Andersen, 1984). Therefore, it seems correct to say that the number one difficult section in the pedagogical literature is acquiring the closed system of articles for ESL learners, because this system encompasses "semantic notions of existence, reference and attribution; discourse notions of anaphora and context; as well as syntactic notions of countability and number" (Young, 1996, p. 135). Definite and indefinite articles, i.e. "the, a, an" are the most common words used in English (Butler, 2002). According to Sinclair (1991, cited in Dabaghi & Tavakoli, 2009) among 20 million English words, the most frequent word is definite article "the", while indefinite articles are in the fifth place.

Definite and indefinite articles (the, a, an) in English have different applications. While the former takes into account the previous knowledge and the familiarity of a word by the reader or hearer, the latter shows unfamiliarity of reader or hearer with a given word or topic (Power & Martello, 1986). For instance, Power and Martello (2008) explain that when a speaker or a writer talks about a referent such as "rabbit", he/she has to take into consideration whether to use definite or indefinite articles, therefore if the listeners or readers are confronted with this word for the first time, they use indefinite articles, and when the listeners or readers are familiar with this word, definite article "the" is used in the text.

Maratsos (1974) made a distinction between definite article "the" and indefinite article "a(n)" in English acquisition of children. In his study, he referred to some reasons of distinction through specificity and non-specificity, as the former is concerned with specific reference and using definite article "the", the latter doesn't show reference to any member of a class, and it is related to using indefinite articles "a(n)" (Maratsos, 1974).

Celce-Murcia & Larsen Freeman (1999, cited in Mobini & Tahririan, 2007) believes that one of the most controversial issues among ESL learners, who lack "articles" in their language, is with English articles. Through investigating learners with different L1 backgrounds, Master (1987-1988, cited in Butler, 2002) asserted that on the whole, for

learners who don't have articles in their language, such as Japanese, applying indefinite article "a" is more problematic than "the". In one study done by Snape (2005), the results demonstrate that languages which lack article system, such as Japanese, overuse "the" for all indefinite contexts. After analyzing the usage of definite and indefinite articles by L2 learners, Thomas (1989) claimed that L1 children use indefinite article "a" more accurately than L2 learners, in addition, both L1 children and L2 learners overuse definite article "the". Here, Butler (2002) believes that the problem is with L2 learners, as they lack sufficient English proficiency, they use the definite article "the" in a wide range.

Through investigating definite and indefinite articles in both English and Persian languages, contrasts in their application and translation become significant. Faghih (1997) investigated 105 Persian substantives with their English equivalents. As a result, he concluded that Persian language has no equivalence for English definite article "the", therefore, the acquisition of "the" causes some problems for Persian learners (Faghih, 1997).

1.3 Definite and Indefinite Articles in Persian Language

Definite and indefinite articles have had a place in Persian researches, especially due to being one of the contrastive controversial issues between Persian and English. Contrasts observed in different areas of grammar between L1 and L2 cause some problems in acquisition of second language (Dikilitas & Altay, 2011). As Geranpayeh (2000) believed, while the role of syntax is significant in using definite article in English, semantics represent this important role in Persian. For instance, in contrasting definite and indefinite articles between a pair of languages (e.g. Polish and English), sometimes there is no article system in one language such as Polish, or there is not any bound morpheme equivalent of the definite article "the" in English with other languages such as Turkish or Persian (Ekiert, 2007, cited in Dikilitas & Altay, 2011).

However, the main problem in distinguishing and applying definite and indefinite articles in Persian and English seems to be focused on the lack of appropriate equivalences for definite and indefinite articles in Persian (Ansarin, 2004). Recognition of definite article "the" is problematic for Iranian EFL learners (Mobini & Tahririan, 2007), although they may learn it before indefinite articles. Some researchers believe that learners' innate tendency is to learn and distinguish specificity before non-specificity (Dabaghi & Tavakoli, 2009).

Learners' errors regarding definite article "the" in Persian is because of its lack in this language, while indefinite articles "a" and "an" already exist in Persian (Faghih & Hosseini, 2012). As Jamshidian (2005) mentioned in her research on the achievement of Iranian EFL learners, in learning definite and indefinite articles both kinds of these articles show

definiteness and indefiniteness in Persian language. Sabzalipour (2012) investigated the errors related to a class of ten Iranian EFL students. Her study focused on the translations from Persian to English, and she concluded that about 14 percent of errors fall in the domain of definite and indefinite articles as learners omit indefinite ones or apply them incorrectly (Sabzalipour, 2012).

The purposes of the present study are to consider the application of definite and indefinite articles in EFL learning system, as well as in different EFL translated texts. In this regard this study aims to explore the application of definite article "the" and indefinite articles "a" and "an" in some stories, since this study has been structured on the basis of contrastive analysis to determine how these articles are used in Persian and English languages.

2. Method

2.1 Instrumentation

The data analyzed in this study are chosen from 10 Persian texts in which definite and indefinite articles exist extensively. The texts chosen are mostly historical or religious short stories. These texts are translated into English language. The original religious story book was published between 1980 and 1981, and its translation into English appeared in 2011. The translated book was published by Iranians' publishing houses, also all the translators and editors were Iranian native speakers.

2.2 Procedures

Among ten Persian texts, all definite and indefinite articles were selected and compared precisely with their equivalences in English to check the similarities and differences in their application between the two languages. In order to specify the data, tables were formed to include the frequency and percent of different application of definite and indefinite articles in Persian. Finally, the data obtained were used to compare how definite article "the" and indefinite articles "a, an" are applied in two languages.

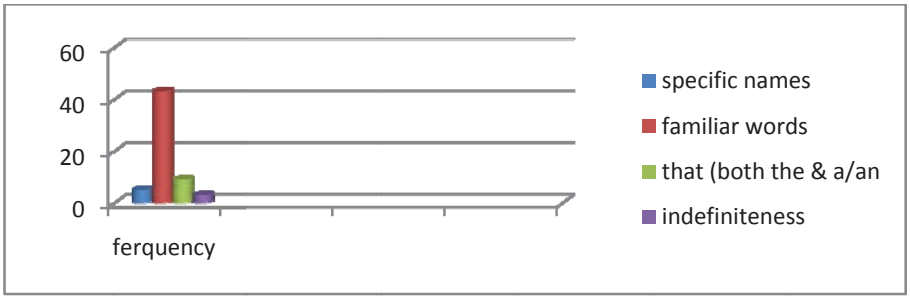
3. Results and Discussion

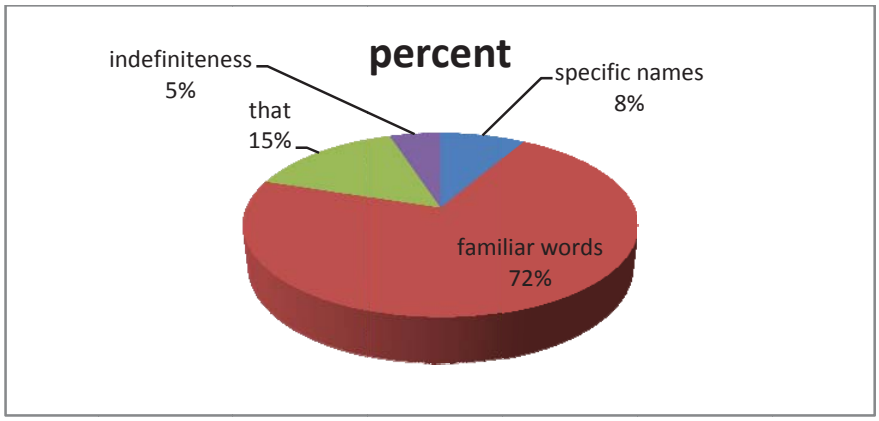
After the close analysis of 10 Persian historical and religious texts, 135 cases of application of definite and indefinite articles were extracted. The results of this study show that familiar words which exist in Persian are translated into English through using the definite article "the". According to Murphy (1989) definite article "the" is used with those clear situations in which words are used for more than first time and because of this the reader or listener is

familiar with them, or it is used to point to specific referents (Serban, 2004). Therefore, although there is not a definite symbol in Persian language as in English (Boyle, 1966), Persian translators have considered this application in their translations into English. Table 1 shows the frequency and percent of the application of definite article "the" in different cases. According to the table, the frequency of familiar words is 43 and its percent is 72.

Table1. Use of "the" in English Translations

	Specific names	Familiar words	That(both the & a/an)	Indefinite in Persian
Frequency	5	43	9	3
Percent	8.3	71.6	15	5
Total cases				60





According to the results, 17 remained cases of the application of definite article "the" are observed in a position different from familiar words (43 cases), as 5 cases for specific names, 3 cases show indefiniteness, and interestingly 9 cases show using "that" for both "the" and "a, an". In translation from Persian to English, specific names, involving the names of specific places or popular figures, are followed by definite article "the". This issue would demonstrate the confusing usage of definite article "the" among Iranian translators. As Boyle (1966) asserted in his book, in Persian there is no place for the article "the".

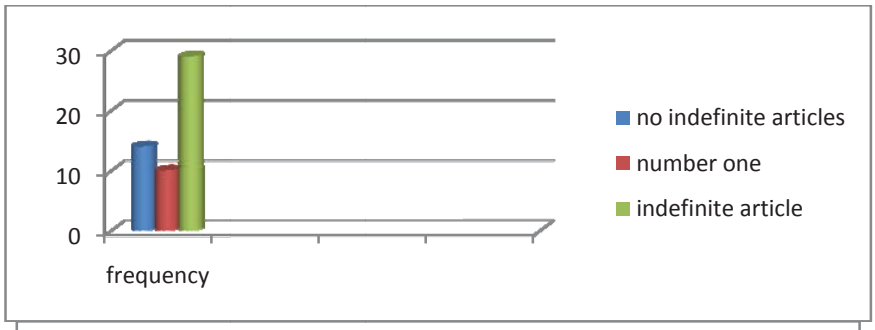
In this way Boyle (1966, p. 16) tried to show that definiteness in Persian is different from English as it may be shown in the following cases:

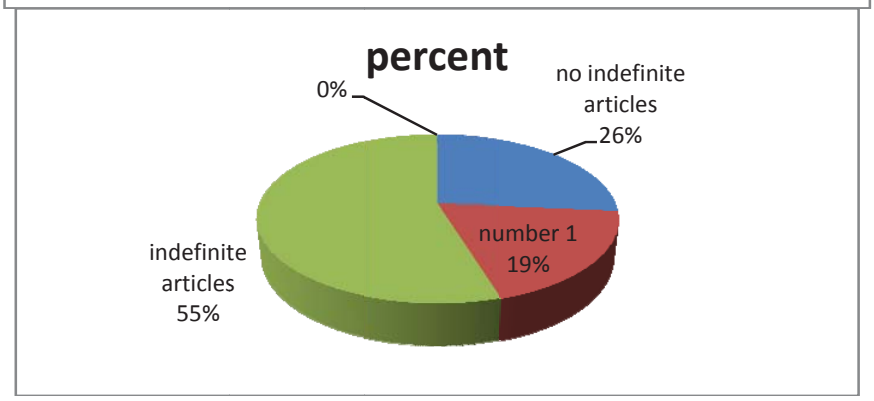
1. Using a preposition in Persian sentence is as using definite article "the" in English, for instance, while the term "ra" in Persian is a definiteness marker (Ghomeshi, 1997), it is used to show definiteness in Persian sentences: "ab ra biavar" (Persian) is equal to the English sentence "bring the water".
2. Adding a relative suffix as "i" to some nouns in restrictive clauses in Persian put them in the definite situation, so this makes them be equivalent with "the" in English: "mard**i** ke" (Persian) and "the man who" (English).
3. Adding the suffix "e" to some nouns in colloquial language makes them definite: "pesar**e**" (Persian) is equal with "the son" in English.

Table 2 shows indefiniteness in two languages. According to Murphy (1989) indefinite articles are used in sentences to show unfamiliarity of readers or learners with some words or phrases since they are mentioned for the first time. Based on table 2, among 53 cases of application of indefinite articles in Persian, 29 cases are devoted to the correct usage of showing indefiniteness in English that can be 55 percent.

Table2. Using "a/an" in English Translation

	No indefinite articles	Number 1	Indefinite article
Frequency	14	10	29
Percent	26.4	18.8	54.7
Total cases			53





According to the obtained results, 24 remained cases have different applications. While 10 cases are used instead of number one in English translation, 14 cases of application of "a, an" are used in English texts without their existence in Persian texts. This shows that Iranian translators might have decided to omit indefinite articles "a, an" while translating in order to make more beautiful or understandable texts. In some models of text conversion, "a, an" in English are translated to "yek, meaning number one" in Persian (Feili & Ghassem-Sani, 2004). In this regard, Afzali (2012) believes that numeral "yek" in Farsi shows indefiniteness in English.

4. Conclusion

This study compared the application of definite and indefinite articles in English and Persian through comparison of 10 historical and religious short stories. According to the obtained results, the application of these articles didn't show full compatibility in two languages; however we discovered that most cases which showed the definiteness and indefiniteness in Persian resembled the English equivalents, for instance, based on the obtained results, familiar words showed the highest percent for definite article "the" with about 72 percent, and indefinite articles with about 55 percent demonstrated indefiniteness in Persian. However, the present study is restricted to historical and religious short story texts, so further researches might investigate the application of definite and indefinite article in other genres of writing, such as scientific ones.

References

Afzali, P. (2012). Marking definiteness in Farsi and English by Farsi speaking EFL learners. Masters Abstracts International, 34.

Altenberg, B. & Aijmer, K. (2000). The English-Swedish parallel corpus: A resource for contrastive research and translation studies. In: Mair, Christian; Hundt, Marianne (eds.). *Corpus linguistics and linguistic theory. Papers from the 20th international conference on English language research on computerized corpora (ICAME 20) Freiburg in Breisgau 1999*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Rodopi, 15-33.

Andersen, R. W. (1984). The one to one principal of interlanguage construction. *Language Learning*, 34, 77-95.

Anderson, J. (1987). Case grammar and the localist hypothesis. In: Dirven and Radden, eds. 103-121.

Ansarian, A. A. (2004). Karborde gheire generice harfe taarife englisie *the* be vasile zaban amuzane Farsi zaban. [The application of non-generic definite article *THE* by EFL learners]. *Publication of Faculty of Letters and Humanities (Tabriz)*, 47(190), 1-12.

Boyle, J. A. (1966). *Grammar of modern Persian*. Otto Harrassowitz. Wiesbaden.

Butler, Y. G. (2002). Second language learners' theories on the use of English articles. An analysis of the metalinguistic knowledge used by Japanese students in acquiring the English article system. *SSLA*, 24, 451-480.

Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL teacher course*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Dabaghi, A. & Tavakoli, M. (2009). A comparison of the effects of corrections on definite/indefinite articles and regular/irregular past tense forms: A case of Iranian EFL learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 11(4), 90-114.

Devos, F. (1995). Contrastive Grammar: Tenets and criteria. University of Gent.

Dikilitas, K. & Altay, M. (2011). Acquisition sequence of four categories of non-generic use of the English definite article *THE* by Turkish speakers. *Novitas-ROYAL (research on Youth and Language)*, 5(2), 183-198.

Ekiert, M. (2007). The acquisition of grammatical marking of indefiniteness with the indefinite article *a* in L2 English. *Teachers College, Columbia University Working Papers in TESOL and Applied Linguistics*, 7(1).

Faghih, E. (1997). A contrastive analysis of the Persian and English definite articles.*IRAL*,35,127-138.

Faghih, E. & Hosseini, S. B. (2012). Asynchronous computer-mediated corrective feedback and the correct use of definite/indefinite articles. *International journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 9(1), 21-36.

Feili, H. & Ghassem-Sani, G. (2004). An application of lexicalized grammars in English-Persian translation.

Fisiak, J. (1990). On the present status of some metatheoretical and theoretical issues in contrastive linguistics. In J. Fisiak (Ed.) *Further insights into contrastive analysis*, 3-22. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins publishing company.

Fisiak, J., Lipinska-Grzegorek, M. & Zabroski, T. (1978). *An introductory English-Polish contrastive grammar*. Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

Geranpayeh, A. (2000). The Acquisition of the English Article System by Persian Speakers. *Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*, 10, 37-51.

Ghomeshi, J. (1997). Topics in Persian VPs. *Lingua, Elsevier Science*, 102, 133-167.

James, C. (1980). *Contrastive analysis*. Longman Group Ltd.

Jamshidian Ghale-Sefidi, T. (2005). Karborde harfe taarif tavasote zaban amuzane khareji: Iham dar moghabele marefe. [The application of article by EFL learners: Indefiniteness against definiteness]. *Research on Foreign Languages*, 27, 165-182.

Jaszczolt, K. (1995). Contrastive analysis. In: J. Verschueren, J.-O. Ostman & J. Blommaert (eds), *Handbook of Pragmatics: Manual*. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins. 561-565.

Krzeszowski, T. P. (1989). Towards a typology of contrastive studies. In: W. Oleksy (ed.), *Contrastive Pragmatics* (Pragmatics & Beyond New Series, 3), 55-72. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Maratsos, M. P. (1974). Preschool children's use of definite and indefinite articles. *Child Development*, 45(2).

Marton, W. (1973). Contrastive analysis in the classroom. Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan.

Master, P. (1987). *A cross-linguistic interlanguage analysis of the acquisition of the English article system*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

Master, P. (1988, March). *Acquiring the English article system: A cross-linguistic interlanguage analysis*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Chicago, IL.

Mobini, F. & Tahririan, M. H. (2007). Farsi-speaking learners' differential command of definite types: A cross-linguistic study. *The Linguistic Journal*, 2(2).

Murphy, R. (1989). *Grammar in use: Reference and practice for intermediate students of English*. Cambridge University Press.

Power, R. J. D. & Dal Martello, M. F. (1986). The use of the definite and indefinite articles by Italian preschool children. *Journal of Child Language*, 13, 145-154.

Sabzalipour, B. (2012). Error analysis on students' Persian-English translation. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1(4).

Serban, A. (2004). Presuppositions in literary translation: A corpus-based approach. *Translators' Journal*, 49, 327-342.

Sinclair, J. M. (Ed.). (1991). *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Snape, N. (2005). The use of articles in L2 English by Japanese and Spanish learners. Newcastle and Durham Working Papers in linguistics, 11.

Thomas, M. (1989). The acquisition of English articles by first-and second-language learners. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 10, 335-355.

Traugott, E. C. (2007). Discussion article: Discourse markers, modal particles, and contrastive analysis, synchronic and diachronic. *Catalan Journal of Linguistics*, 6, 139-157.

Wardhaugh, R. (1970). The contrastive analysis hypothesis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 4(2).

Young. R. (1996). Form-function relations in articles in English interlanguage. University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Zahedi, K. & Mehrazmay, R. (2011). Definiteness in Sorani Kurdish and English. *Dialectologia*, 7, 129-157.