Title

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

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Biodata

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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.

**Table 1. Use of "the" in English Translations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Specific names</th>
<th>Familiar words</th>
<th>That (both the &amp; a/an)</th>
<th>Indefinite in Persian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percent</strong></td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total cases</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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: "mardi ke" (Persian) and "the man who" (English).

3. Adding the suffix "e" to some nouns in colloquial language makes them definite: "pesare" (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.

**Table 2. Using "a/an" in English Translation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No indefinite articles</th>
<th>Number 1</th>
<th>Indefinite article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>54.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cases</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Bar graph showing frequency of indefinite articles, number one, and indefinite article usage.](image)

![Pie chart showing percentages of no indefinite articles, number one, and indefinite articles.](image)
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
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