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THE FUNCTIONS OF THE ARTICLE IN THE DISCOURSE OF TWITTER

Abstract: *the article examines the usage of English articles in the discourse of a popular microblogging service Twitter, with the aim to clarify how the functions of the articles are reflected in the discourse and if the usage deviates from grammatical norms. Articles are examined from the morphological and syntactic points of view. The number of tweets analyzed in the paper is ninety-two. The conclusion is that the articles the discourse of Twitter are used according to the standards of written communication.*

Keywords: article, computer-mediated communication, discourse, language standard, Twitter

1. Introduction

This study deals with the functions of the English article in the discourse of a popular internet service Twitter. Twitter is defined as a microblogging service with chat features [Goroshko, 2012, p. 344]. The term “microblogging” implies that Twitter messages – tweets are very short; their length cannot exceed 140 symbols [Zappavigna, 2012].

Articles play a pivotal role in the building of discourse space: they mark the information as already known or new for the interlocutors thus structuring and organizing the speech. Articles are highly frequent elements in twitter

messages written by native speakers: the definite article *the* is the second frequent word in and the indefinite article *a* is the fifth frequent [Zappavigna, 2012, p. 41-49]. Our study poses three research questions related to the usage of articles in Twitter 1) What functions do articles fulfill in the discourse of Twitter? 2) Are articles used in accordance with rules of grammar? 3) Is the limitation of the tweet's length influence the usage of articles in Twitter? The functions of articles in the discourse of Twitter were examined by comparing the collected data with the functions of the articles represented as rules in prescriptive grammar textbooks. This study is organized in the following way: the second section gives an overview of major linguistic theories on the English articles and addresses the subject of computer-mediated communication. The third section focuses on the functions of the articles in the discourse of Twitter drawing on examples from naturally occurring data. The fourth section summarizes the results of this work and draws conclusions.

2. Background

2.1 Articles

Article is defined as any of a small set of words or affixes (as *a, an,* and *the*) used with nouns to limit or give definiteness to the application [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/article]

However, its functions are not limited to the indication of definiteness/indefiniteness proper. For example, Ivanova finds concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness obscure and therefore not convenient to handle. She also points out that the binary concept does not embrace the complexity of the article semantics. According to Ivanova, it is reasonable to study the article from the point of view of its functions 1) morphological function – the article is the indicator of a noun 2) syntactic function – the article marks the left boundary of the noun phrases containing adjectives *the leaves, the green leaves; the glossy*

dark green leaves. 3) semantic function –the actualization of the concept; the article refers a notion to the reality, represented in a particular text (by text here is meant any utterance irrespective of its length) [Ivanova, 1981, p. 30-31].

The review of the literature on the articles shows that there are three key theoretical issues in the study of the article 1) Is the article a word? 2) What is the article's place in the language hierarchy? 3) What is the number of articles in English?

The first issue raised by researchers is whether the article is a word or not. Ekiert uses the term "morpheme" for referring to the article in her work. [Ekiert, 2010] Ilyish, Khaimovich, Ivanova believe that the article is not a word because there is a notion of the "zero article". [Ivanova, 1981; Ilyish, 1971; Khaimovich, 1967] In case the article is a word, there should also be a "zero word", the existence of which contradicts the essential characteristic of a word. Being a sign, the word consists of two facets - a concept and a sound-image. Ivanova explains that the word is "an independent element which can be present or absent in a sentence or a phrase but cannot be represented with a zero exponent", therefore the article cannot be included into the class of words [Ivanova, 1981, p. 30].

The second issue brought up in the study of the article is the determination of the article's place in the language hierarchy. Tseitlina points out that the article should be viewed from the point of syntax and not from the point of morphology [Tseitlina, 2012, p. 98–104]. However, most of the grammarians have the common view on the article as the morphological, syntactic, textual entity fulfilling special functions in the language system [Khudiakov, 2010, p. 193]. Ivanova outlines two major theories of the status of the article: "one of them considers the combination article + noun as the analytic form of a noun; another one defines the article as the function word and interprets the article + noun combination as a special type of phrase" [Ivanova, 1981, p. 29]. As Ivanova states, article is a morphological indicator of a noun, but it does not

form an indivisible entity with the noun unlike the analytical form of a verb. Ivanova indicates that there is a syntactic connection between the article and the noun which is impossible between the components in an analytical form. Article has no lexical meaning, but it has its own grammatical meaning, therefore it is reasonable to approach the article as the component of the phrase and as the function word [Ivanova, 1981, p. 29].

The third theoretical issue raised by the grammarians is the number of articles in English. As Ilyish states, there are three articles in English: definite, indefinite and zero article, which is the absence of the article. [Ilyish, 1971, p. 50] Ivanova shares Ilyish's point of view but adds that it would be fair to use the system of two articles and the term "absence of the article"[Ivanova, 1981, p. 30]. A completely different approach to the number of articles in English is taken by Chesterman. He represents definiteness as a graduated scale with five points on it. The leftmost point represents the degree of the least definiteness, it is the zero article. Zero article in that case means the absence of the article before the uncountable nouns and nous in plural. E.g. That drink is made of milk. Cats catch mice. [Chesterman, 1991, p. 63-64] The level of definiteness increases with the following points: *some, a, the*. The indefinite article *a* possesses the level of definiteness higher then the pronoun *some* because it retains its quantitative meaning "one". The scale's rightmost point represents the highest level of definiteness and it is marked as the *null article*. The *null article* here means the omission of the article before singular proper nouns and some singular common nouns – E.g. to go to school, at night, in winter [Chesterman, 1991, p. 55] Chesterman explains that definiteness conveyed by the definite article *the* is of deictic nature and close to the pronoun *this* in meaning whereas the null article possesses the meaning of uniqueness.

The review of the literature showed that there are no unified approaches to the study of the article in English. The opinions about the number of the articles in English, the status of an article in the language system and the functions of

articles are very diverse. Not all of the researches define the definite article in opposition to the indefinite article. The number of the articles found in contemporary research literature varies from two to five. In our study we used the system of two articles (definite and indefinite ones) and the omission of the article.

2.2 Articles in Discourse

The commonly accepted point of view on the functions of the articles in discourse is that the indefinite article introduces new referents to the discourse and the definite article marks the referents which are already known. The articles serve as the guiding lines helping the hearer to receive the information in an organized way. [Heim, 1988]

Khlabutina L. states that the thema-rhematic usage of articles cannot be simplified to the scheme indefinite article – rheme, definite article – theme. In Khlabutina's research, which is based upon the scientific discourse texts, it is argued that there is the relation between the grammar category of definiteness and the logical category of theme. According to Khlabutina, in the scientific discourse the articles used in prepositional rhematic constructions are distributed as follows: 22,2 % of indefinite article, 47% is the absence of the article and 30,8% is of definite articles. This finding shows that the formation of rheme in the scientific discourse is more common with the usage of definite articles than with the usage of indefinite articles [Khlabutina, p.182-186, 2011]

From the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics the articles contribute to the construction of the mental space of discourse. Discourse space is built with various interconnected elements which are either shared or not shared by the interlocutors. Article along with the others referring expressions indicate the shared concepts. [Langacker, 1987]. When a speaker/writer chooses the definite article in discourse, he presumes that the element followed by that article can be

identified by the hearer/reader. The default shared information in the basis of discourse space may be the present reality [Langacker, 1987].

Usage of articles in discourse varies from genre to genre and registers as well. For example, written speech contains significantly more articles than the conversation [Biber et al., 1999]. As far as the registers of written speech are concerned, here the distribution of the articles is the following: the highest frequency of articles is found in the academic writing, the second high frequency is found in the news and fiction register and the lowest frequency is found in the conversation. The ratio of indefinite to definite articles in all the registers is approximately 1 : 2.

Bieber hypothesize that the written speech registers contain a bigger quantity of articles because they are saturated with nouns whereas the conversation register is dominated by pronouns [Biber at all, 1999]

2.3 Computer-mediated discourse

"Computer-based discourse is the communication produced when people interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers." **[**Herring, 2001, p. 612] The computer-based discourse emerged in the 1960s when first instants of computer-mediated communication took place.

As Herring points out, the language standards used in the computer-mediated communication can be influenced by the following factors: 1) economy on typing efforts 2) representation of non-verbal sounds in the text 3) the oral speech features such as unconventional orthography and grammar. However, the influence of these factors is evident only in synchronous modes of computer-mediated discourse – the ones with communication process occurring in real time (chats, instant messengers, etc.) The asynchronous genres according to Herring are those which enable the users to have unlimited time in constructing and editing messages. Such genres of computer-mediated communication include, for example, blogs and e-mails. Language standards in

asynchronous genres of computer-mediated communication as a rule are the same as in traditional written communication **[**Herring, 2001, p. 616].

The computer-mediated communication service Twitter is defined as microblogging service with chat features. [Goroshko, 2012, p. 344]

Most of the tweets (Twitters messages) are written in English. The most active users of Twitter reside in America, therefore the dominant variety of English is American English. [Herring, 2009; Zapavigna, 2012] M. Zappavigna conducted the research on the language of Twitter using the HERMES corpus which contains data gathered from American Twitter. The volume of HERMES corpus as on 2010 was 100 281 967 words. [Zappavigna, 2012, p. 43-44]

The analysis of most frequent elements in HERMES conducted by M. Zappavigna demonstrated that the most used symbol in Twitter is @ word which belongs with the metadata. The definite article *the* is the second frequent word in the corpus and the indefinite article *a* is the fifth frequent.

Michelle Zappavigna points out that the highest frequency of @ word in the discourse of Twitter indicates its dialogic nature because @ word is used to address the tweet to another user. Also, the frequency of pronoun I and its form ME provides evidence of the personal nature of most of the tweets.

3. The analysis of the articles usage in the discourse of Twitter

Data for our research were gathered from 10 twitter accounts during one-year period (from 1.04.2012 to 1.04.2013). The twitter accounts which supplied us with empirical data for our research were chosen based on the user's publicity level. "Publicity level and social influence of these persons attract to their tweets a certain number of followers who read the entries can comment on them in their twitters." [Glazkova, 2011, p. 28] In order to find out the publicity level of Twitter users we referred to the Twitter Counter analytics service [http://twittercounter.com/pages/100] and selected the top ranked users as well as users with a moderate rank. The three most followed users at the time the

selection took place (on the 01.04.13) were Justin Bieber @justinbieber, Lady Gaga @ladygaga, Katy Perry @katyperry.

In addition to the top ranked users we selected the tweeter accounts of two linguists: Michelle Zappavigna and David Crystal, the account of writer Joan Rowling and twitters of four more users with a substantially lower publicity level. All of the users on the list were native speakers of English. Table 1 represents the list of selected accounts with the worldwide rank in the Twitter Counter.

Tab. 1

The list of Twitter accounts selected for the research in descending order of their publicity (on 01.04.13)

#	Username	Number of followers	Worldwide rank
1	@justinbieber	37,304,240	#1
2	@ladygaga	35,987,088	#2
3	@katyperry	34,789,258	#3
4	@jk_rowling	1,662,323	#783
5	@cedricbixler_	28,735	#210,638
6	@jeordiewhite	24,967	#246,010
7	@alexgreycosm	19,397	#318,745
8	@GenesisBPO	4,135	#1,483,273
9	@davcr	1,864	#3,282,134
10	@SMLinguist	117	#47,067,501

We analyzed the tweets created by the selected users during one year period (from 01.04.2012 to 01.04.2013). For our research we collected only tweets containing articles; the number of tweets under examination was 92.

The study of functions of articles in the discourse of Twitter was conducted on the basis of “Grammar of English language” by Kaushanskaya

[Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47] and «English Grammar Reference and Practice» by T. Drozdova [Drozdova, 2009, p. 196-222], The functions of articles in the discourse of Twitter were examined by comparing the collected data with the functions of the articles represented as rules in the grammar textbooks. The following subsections of the work provide the prescriptive rules of the article usage and the corresponding examples from the collected data complying with the rules or violating them.

3.1 Use of articles with common nouns

The use of the indefinite article with class nouns.

Class nouns are used with the indefinite article:

1. When the speaker presents the object expressed by the noun as belonging to a certain class. [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47]

(1) **Alex Grey @alexgreycosm 29 March**

I posted a new photo to Facebook http://fb.me/2fyTWkQgm

(2) **Lady Gaga @ladygaga** 15 Nov

it is my LIFE DREAM to be in a Disney movie...im one step closer!!! :) this is a short film they did for BARNEY'S http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=jU01jBw9HB4 …

(3) **Cedric Bixler Zavala @cedricbixler_ 21 Mar**

Just a thought: calling anyone Yoko Ono is a compliment. Her records defy humanity in all it's inhibitions and redefined music.

(4) **Genesis B. P-ORRIDGE @GenesisBPO** 16 Jan

Got a new doggie, meet Musty Dagger! pic.twitter.com/CXXl48WS

(5) **jeordie white @jeordiewhite** 7 May

Driving into Des Moines, IOWA I actually lived here. On a farm. Had a pet goat. Seriously

2. Indefinite articles used with a predicative noun, when the speaker states that the object denoted by the noun belongs to a certain class [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

(6) **Justin Bieber @justinbieber 1 Apr**

april is a fun month. #ImNotDone :)

(7) **Katy Perry @katyperry** 10 Apr

- the joy of something verbally said being taking out of complete context in PRINT. This is why there's a continuous ♥/☹ for the media world

(8) **Alex Grey @alexgreycosm 6 Mar**

Happy Birthday Michelangelo! His last Pieta is a strange, beautiful, pitiful thing of rough-hewn hopeless grandeur. pic.twitter.com/hlgDx5qTPB

(9) **Alec Sulkin @thesulk 21 Mar**

Just because you're an avid reader doesn't mean you're an avid understander.

(10) **Genesis B. P-ORRIDGE @GenesisBPO** 11 Mar

Now we have a few daze to catch up.After both my laptops died, MERCURY RETRO we are a believer now.Lost a manuscript,Vol.1 of poems & lyrics

(11) **Lady Gaga @ladygaga** 27 Jan

My bones hurt from all the shows But I dont feel the pain cuz Im a pro I sink in then Im ok cuz my body belongs to u when Im on stage

(12) **Cedric Bixler Zavala @cedricbixler_ 21 Mar**

Just a thought: calling anyone Yoko Ono is a compliment. Her records defy humanity in all it's inhibitions and redefined music.

3. Indefinite articles used with a descriptive attribute to describe an object or to give some additional information about it. [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47]

(13) **jeordie white @jeordiewhite** 13 Jun

Missing a friend who's not here anymore..

4. The indefinite articles follow *quite*, *such*, *what* (*what* in exclamatory sentences) [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

(14) What **a** wonderful piece of luck!

Lady Gaga @ladygaga 5 Dec

(15) i have never felt such a serge of inspiration, **#NorweigianSongwritingMachine**

5. After the conjunction *as* a predicative noun is often used without an article [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47]. (Drozdova also advocates the usage of the definite article in that case) [Drozdova, 2009, p. 196-222].

(16) **Cedric Bixler Zavala @cedricbixler_** 20 Feb

I am currently writing a tell all about my brief stint as a key grip for TELEMUNDO

(17) **Lady Gaga @ladygaga** 13 Jan

My letter to **@MissKellyO** was open, because her statements on cyber-bulling were public & as a youth activist I'm compelled to be involved.

(18) **jeordie white @jeordiewhite 10 May**

Watching "V" the 80's version. How true the Reptilian Agenda really is. They are using our fear as an energy source. 100% fact

6. The indefinite article denotes the noun is used in a general sense. What is said of one representative of a class can be applied to all the representatives of the class. The article has the meaning of ‘every’. [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47]

(19) **QuoteHive @QuoteHive 21 Nov**

"A record deal doesn't make you an artist; you make yourself an artist." -Lady Gaga

Retweeted by Lady Gaga

7. There are cases when the indefinite article preserves its old original meaning of ‘one’[Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

That meaning of the article can usually be found with:

(a) nouns of time, measure and weight

(20) **jeordie white @jeordiewhite** 11 Jul

Should I go see The Last Supper today ? It's here in Milan. Whats the deal? Wait in line for hours , look at for a second then leave?

(b) with numerals *hundred, thousand, million* and nouns *dozen, score.*

(21) **Genesis B. P-ORRIDGE @GenesisBPO** 20 Jan

4,000 followers! Ahead is really a chance to shift the future of art and redirect the means of Perception! Thank you a million(or so) times

Names of days are used with the indefinite article when we mean one of many Mondays, Fridays, etc [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

(22) **Katy Perry @katyperry** 27 May

They'll get you for wearing red on a tuesday...()

3.2 The use of the definite article with class nouns

Class nouns are used with the definite article:

1. When the noun denotes an object or objects which the speaker singles out from all the objects of a given class .

An object is singled out in the following cases:

(a) when the speaker and the hearer know what particular object is meant. No special indication is necessary [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

(23) **Genesis B. P-ORRIDGE @GenesisBPO 7 Jan**

The website is back up. Be sure to check out the news section for an exciting announcement!

(24) **jeordie white @jeordiewhite 28 Jun**

I just fix the fridge with Gorilla tape.

(25) **jeordie white @jeordiewhite 6 Jun**

Bill Nash is a true artist. Thank you for the guitar and the message.

(26) **Katy Perry @katyperry 5 Jan**

I am severely embarrassed that I just now discovered the Ikea monkey. I need to get it together.

(27) **Justin Bieber @justinbieber 21 Mar**

love to fans i met today. thanks for the letters. #muchlove

(28) **Justin Bieber @justinbieber 10 Mar**

slept good last night. hanging with the boys today. #goodtimes

(b) when the situation itself makes the object definite.

(29) **Lady Gaga** @**ladygaga** 30 Nov

SAFARI PICTURES: the lion pride even woke up at one point and let us come closer :) (on the left) pic.twitter.com/dqstspT1

(30) **Lady Gaga** @**ladygaga** 23 Nov

#MONSTERFACT when gaga is asleep try to break into the garage, sing loud as possible, + ring the doorbell repeatedly **#happeningnow** **#badkids**

(31) **Genesis B. P-ORRIDGE @GenesisBPO 18 Oct**

@damienechols Also was in Barnes & Noble, bought LIFE AFTER DEATH,excited to read it on the plane to Montreal. Hope the book tour is success

2. The definite article is used with substantivized adjectives and participles [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47]:

(32) **Justin Bieber** @**justinbieber** 6 Mar

so make up stories about fake fines and make no mention of the positive....

3. The definite article is used with nouns modified by adjectives in the superlative degree:

(33) **Alex Grey @alexgreycosm 6 Mar**

Of all Michelangelo's masterpieces I love his "Last Judgement" the best. Once Allyson and I stayed all day drawing it in the Sistine Chapel.

(34) **Lady Gaga @ladygaga 24 Jan**

I had the most amazing evening with The President, First Lady & The Whitehouse staff. Some pictures from the ball!

4. The definite article is used when a noun is modified by an attribute which shows that a particular object is meant, i. e. by an attribute which might be called a particularizing attribute. A particularizing attribute is used to single out an object from all the objects of the class, to point out one particular object or group of objects [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

(35) **Alex Grey @alexgreycosm** 9 Mar

Do you hear the call God planted in your heart to realize your soul's creative mission?

3.3 Omission of the article

1. When abstract nouns are used in a general sense, no article is used [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

(36) **Alex Grey @alexgreycosm** 20 Mar

Art is an echo of the creative force that birthed the galaxies. Creativity is a way the cosmos evolves. pic.twitter.com/HwmU85OMF9

(37) **jeordie white @jeordiewhite** 21 May

Life is good . I'm a lucky man

2. With nouns of material used in a general sense, when a certain material as such is meant, no article is used [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

(38) **Katy Perry @katyperry** 4 Jun

(39) RT **@shannonwoodward**: RT **@kanyewest**: I hate khaki cargo shorts

3.4 The omission of the article which violates the norms

Sometimes the article is not used where we naturally expect to find it in accordance with the rules. No change of meaning is observed in these cases.

The article is often omitted in newspaper headings, telegrams, in stage directions and in the oral speech for the economy of the speech efforts [Kaushanskaya, 1963, p. 25-47].

(40) **J.K. Rowling @jk_rowling** 18 Mar

Very happy with today's news - clear win for Miliband-Clegg led coalition. Here's to freedom of speech with accountability!

(41) **Genesis B. P-ORRIDGE @GenesisBPO** 15 Sep

@Crissy11823862 Shocked me to see rednecks & poor demonstrating AGAINST Health Care!!! EUROPE its free and no communists took over. CRAZY !!

(42) **Lady Gaga @ladygaga** 23 Nov

then found Nanny Poppins **@emmaadaoui** trapped in basement between the fans and food. i rescued her, she's ok now.

(43) **Lady Gaga @ladygaga** 15 Nov

good story: monster in brazil gave me a necklace engraved with lyrics from The Manifesto of Little Monsters. Have never toured there :)

(44) **Genesis B. P-ORRIDGE @GenesisBPO** 15 Mar

Nearly 4am and dentist in a few hours to replace 2 gold teeth that fell out...Oh what fun alchemy can be !

4. Conclusions

To address the research questions posed in this paper we analyzed 92 tweets created by 10 users with different publicity levels during one year period. The first research question of the study asked: 1) What functions do articles fulfill in the discourse of Twitter? The study found that the functions of the articles normally fulfilled at the morphologic and syntactic levels are fully observed within the data collected from selected Twitter accounts. The second research question posed was: 2) Are articles used in accordance with rules of grammar? The study showed that the majorly of tweets analyzed are written

with accordance to the grammar standards of written communication. The third question of our research was: 3) Is the limitation of the tweet's length influence the usage of articles in Twitter? The answer to the research question 2 indicates that the short length of a tweet does not seem to influence the usage of articles in the discourse of Twitter. Twitter belongs with the synchronous modes of computer-mediated communication; however, violations of the grammatical norm typical for synchronous modes are very rare. In our opinion, those findings characterize the discourse of Twitter as a non-typical synchronous mode of computer-mediated discourse and makes it worth further investigating.

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