



## Basic Grammar Unit 2

These materials are only suitable for use in the Basic Grammar class. There is some information, there are some tasks, but they only make sense when used as the basis for thinking and discussing in class. The content of each unit has been drawn from a variety of sources: from various grammar books and my own ideas and teaching experience. At the beginning of the term I hand out a bibliography with details of all the grammar books I have drawn on. These books are indicated only with an abbreviation here.

### Unit 2 Using the Article

This unit deals with the problem that non-native speakers have with article usage in English by dividing it into two steps.

- Countability

This has to do with the question of whether a noun is a count noun or an uncount noun.

The question is: do I use an “a”? Can I use a plural form?

- Reference

This has to do with the question of whether the speaker/writer is referring to something specific or something general.

The question is: do I use a “the” or no “the”?

There are tasks, things to think about, and lots of information.

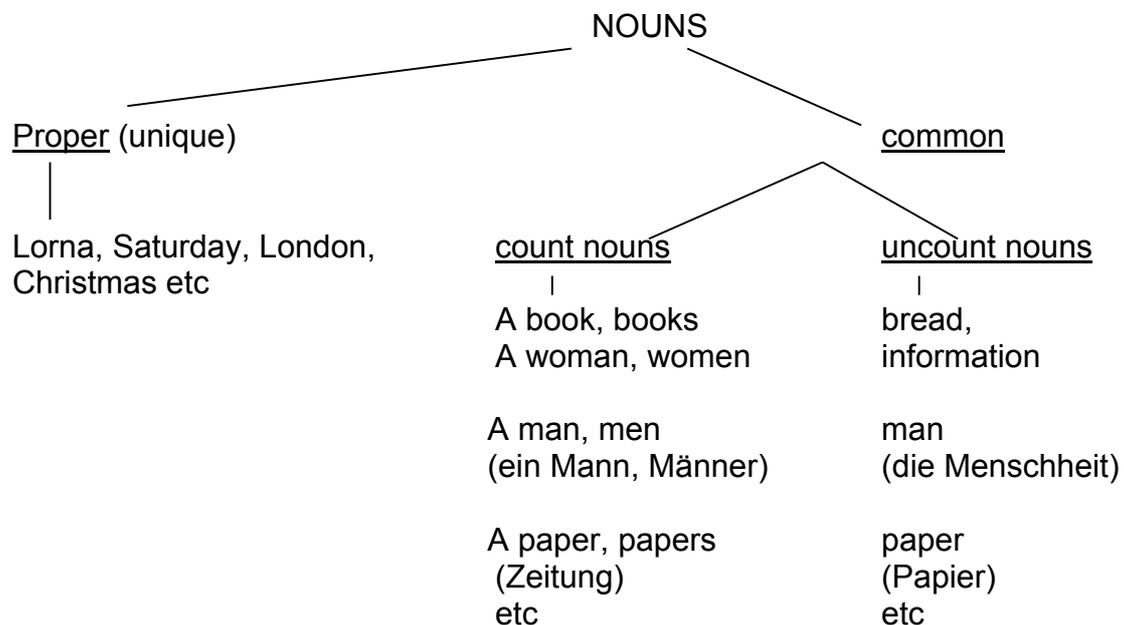
Task (1)

First of all, test yourselves. The following are all taken from students' work, and have lots of article mistakes in them. See if you can spot the article errors and correct them.

1. Children go to the primary school at age of 5 in Britain.
2. Mrs X is member of the League against the Imperialism.
3. That's why American musicians turned to the Islam.
4. I think it's a consequence of the industrialisation.
5. They only came for a visit at Christmas and at the birthdays.
6. Today the old people are the most isolated group in the society.
7. It is hard for us to believe that the liberal education really exists.
8. At this point the question of definition of loneliness arises.
9. It is a preserve of the western literature and culture.
10. The literature is the totality of all written things of one people.
11. My brother has finished the secondary school now.
12. The western technology is also an expression of culture.
13. The paragraph 218 has been changed a bit.
14. This all shows that law in this country is not just.
15. We are given a black and white picture of life and the good always wins.
16. Children in that kind of school have a greater scope.
17. As teacher later I need to have good knowledge of English language.
18. The public interest was aroused by her trial.
19. Why has this idea not succeeded in the practice?

Step 1 COUNTABILITY: count/uncount nouns

Remember about English nouns: count/uncount?



If you know that “information” is an uncount noun, then you know it cannot have an “a” in front of it and it cannot have a plural form! (Even if you think it should!)

If you use a good dictionary you will find there are many words which are both count and uncount nouns, with different meanings, like “man” and “paper” above.

(cf verbs like “have” with state meaning and event meaning in Unit 1)

Here are some more dual identity nouns:

Count

- Have you got an evening paper?
- It’s useful to speak a foreign language.
- I saw a man running away from the bank.
- A successful business person has contacts in many cities.

Count nouns show the speaker as being able to distinguish these items as separable entities.

Uncount

- I wrapped it up in brown paper – not very pretty but environmentally friendly!
- Language is a distinctive feature of man.
- What are man’s chances of survival on this planet??
- Contact between staff and students is good / bad / non-existent/.../

Uncount nouns express things as continuous entities.

Do you notice that:

Count nouns tend to be the expression of concrete things;

Uncount nouns tend to be the expression of more abstract things.

### Task (2)

Look up the following words in the Collins Cobuild, check whether they are count or uncount, and with which meanings.

worry

society

experience

training

rest

advice

behaviour

damage

game

Recap: What does the division of nouns into count/uncount have to do with the article?

### Task (3)

Can you translate the following into good German.

One of my biggest worries is .....

Worry makes your hair turn grey.

You look tired. Have a rest.

Doc: I'm not going to prescribe any medicine, just rest and relaxation.

Scotland has a flourishing economy.

Rich Europeans no longer understand the value of economy.

After the accident he claimed damages.

The storm caused considerable damage.

Step 2 REFERENCE: specific reference / generic reference

Task (4)

Here is the opinion of a young woman about education and life in general:

"Formal school education is a complete waste of time. The real education of a child takes place outside school. Society simply imprisons children in schools and tries to stamp a pattern on them. I can divide the children I know into two main groups: One lot is too meek now to think for themselves; the others so aggressive outside school in the subconscious protest against authoritarianism that the result is a public outcry for discipline. I can only say that the discipline we were subjected to at school just made us more refractory. Teachers simply don't understand what children need or what young people want nowadays.

Society is changing at such a pace that the values held when they were younger have become completely outdated. We are constantly hearing that industry is going downhill because people are lazy, and that society is going downhill because young people are irresponsible. My guess is that young people get so fed up with life at school, being told what to do and what to think, that they lose all enthusiasm to work for such a system. Work is just the next prison along the line."

Which of the following express the content of the passage:

1. Schools are inadequate and unnecessary.
2. Schools are inadequate but necessary.
3. Schools aim at teaching children to think for themselves.
4. Schools aim at teaching children to conform.
5. The writer can see the need for more discipline.
6. Public opinion considers schools to be too lenient.
7. Public opinion considers schools to be too authoritarian.
8. Children have more freedom at school than they should have.
9. A lack of freedom inside schools is leading to aggression outside.
10. Young people are finding it difficult to keep up with changing values.
11. The problem is that the education system is finding it difficult to keep up with changing values.
12. Work gives young people the freedom to develop.
13. Work is no better than school.

Why does she say "Formal school education" but "the real education"?

Possible answers:

- **Specific reference** is used when you are talking about something specific.

Example: The English I heard on the streets in London was quite difficult to understand.

Question: Which English was quite difficult to understand?

Answer: The English I heard on the streets in London.

- **Generic reference** is when you are talking about something in general

Example: English is really interesting to learn.

Question: Which English is really interesting to learn?

Answer: English (in general).

---

### **Specific Reference:**

With **count nouns**:

The bus into town leaves from just outside the University.

Question: Which bus?

Answer:

The dictionaries you need are all available in the library.

Which dictionaries?

Answer:

With **uncount nouns**:

The music in "Lola rennt" is good.

Question: Which music?

Answer:

The food in the Canteen is (.....)

Question: Which food is .....?

Answer:

The history of the British Isles is long and complicated but very interesting.

Question: Which history is long and complicated?

Answer:

So the rule is: (fill it in yourselves!!)

<b>Specific Reference:</b>	
With count nouns singular	With uncount nouns
With count nouns plural	

Remember: The reference is specific when we have in mind something specific or specific specimens of a class.

Some more notes on Specific Reference (from CGE, GCE)

We have seen that specific definite reference is signalled by the definite article "the".

There are basically two different kinds of specific definite reference:

- 1) because of the text (= on linguistic grounds)
- 2) because of the context (= on situational grounds)

1) The following can all be called specific definite reference on linguistic grounds as they have to do with the structure of the text.

a) Which elephant did you like best?

The young, playful one. (premodifying adjective)

b) Which elephant did you like best?

The one with the really enormous ears. (postmodifying prepositional phrase)

The one that kept on throwing the hay around. (relative clause)

c) I was sitting in the cafeteria the other day when a young man and a young woman came and sat down together, but then the young man started arguing, so loud, and shouting at the woman ... (anaphoric reference, pointing back to a previous mention)

2) The following can be called specific definite reference on situational grounds. This involves the use of "the" with nouns whose reference is immediately understood by the users of the language. They require no further specification.

It is used:

a) when the object or group of objects is the only one that exists or has existed: the stars, the earth, the Equator etc. This is the unique or indexical use of "the".

It is also used when you refer to something which is "understood" as unique in the context: the sun, the moon, the kitchen, the Queen, the President. We could say " Look at the moon belonging to the earth. Isn't it beautiful tonight?", " if you go into the kitchen of my flat you'll find some super chocolate biscuits", "The Queen of the United Kingdom opened Parliament with the traditional Queen's speech" - but it would be laborious and unnecessary.

b) when you refer to an institution shared by the community e.g. "What's on the radio / the TV / in the cinema / tonight?"

c) when it is clear to the speakers which object is being referred to (as in a))  
"How did you like France?"

"Fantastic. The wine was great ..."

Here, in the context of talking about a specific holiday in France, it is clear that "the wine" can only refer to the wine enjoyed in France.

Similarly, if the wife says to her husband "Did you put the rubbish out?" it is clear from the context which rubbish she is talking about!

### **Generic Reference:**

With **count nouns**:

Buses are a good alternative to cars.

Question: Which buses?

Answer: All buses/any bus/buses in general.

Dictionaries are absolutely necessary if you want to learn a language really well.

Question: Which dictionaries?

Answer: All dictionaries/any dictionary/ dictionaries in general.

Giant pandas are in danger of extinction (= will probably die out)

Question: Which giant pandas?

Answer: All giant pandas.

The giant panda is in danger of extinction.

Question: Which giant panda?

Answer: All giant pandas.

A panda is a beautiful animal.

Question: Which panda?

Answer: Any panda, all pandas.

With **uncount nouns**:

Music is good for the soul. Some people can't do their homework without music.

Question: Which music?

Answer: All music/any music.

Food is one of the basic necessities.

Question: Which food?

Answer: All food/any food.

American History isn't as difficult as British History as there isn't so much to learn.

Question: Which history?

Answer: American history.

So the rule is (fill it in yourselves):

<b>Generic reference</b>	
Count nouns singular	Uncount nouns
Count nouns plural	

Remember: the reference is Generic when we have in mind something general, or what is normal or typical of all members of a class.

Note that although it is possible to use both articles "a" and "the" in generic reference, with singular count nouns, there is a difference in meaning.

"the tiger" (generic) refers to the species as a whole.

(This is conventionally used in scientific, technical writing e.g. technical inventions: "The steam engine was invented before the diesel engine.")

"a tiger" (generic) refers to any member of the species.

Thus you can say

"The tiger is in danger of extinction" but you cannot say \*"A tiger is in danger of extinction" as this would be interpreted as "There is a tiger which is in danger of extinction", which doesn't make sense.

For this reason, if you want to play safe, learners should keep to the use of the plural form of count nouns with zero article to express generic reference.

Exception: nationality words (See GCE p 152)

As we have already seen:

When they have generic reference, uncount nouns and usually plural count nouns are used with the zero article.

e.g.

count plural: I like long historical novels, pearls, friendly people .....

uncount: I like sunshine, English china, Cheddar cheese, white wine ...

In contrast to some other languages, English tends to make a liberal interpretation of the concept "generic" so that the zero article is used even where the reference of the noun head appears to be restricted by premodification

e.g. I like short stories, friendly people, Scottish folk music, Asian food

or postmodification

e.g. students at this university, people who wear designer clothes, architecture in the Middle Ages.

The decisive point seems to be the idea the speaker/writer wants to get across: something in general or something specific. (GCE, CGE)

There is, however, one really powerful postmodifier, namely an "of" phrase. It seems to point out the specific nature of the thing referred to

e.g.

Chinese history

*the* history of China

American society

*the* society of America

early mediaeval architecture

*the* architecture of the early Middle Ages

animal behaviour

*the* behaviour of animals"

(CGE, 1994, p54)

Task (5)

Underline the noun phrase, then translate the whole sentence.

European wildlife is in danger.

Student life in Konstanz is not exactly exciting ...

Deprived children from broken homes have life-long problems.

Novels which clearly deal with social problems are very popular.

The life X led as a spy in Russia was far from dull.

The novels being dealt with in X's seminar this term are a bit dreary.

Recap: which article is used?

Definite specific reference	Count	Uncount
Generic reference		

Task (6)

Go back to the young woman's opinion on education and try using two different colours to highlight all the specific references to things, and all the generic references. Of which are there more?

Can you arrange all the things she talks about in two columns; one column for those she considers positive, the other for those she considers negative.

**Unique reference:**

Proper nouns have unique reference as they can refer to only one unique person or place or thing.

Examples:

Personal names, with or without titles: (Catherine, Sir Alec)

Geographical names: (Edinburgh, Vienna),(Scotland, Cameroon) (Lake Constance, Mount Everest)

Temporal names: (January, December), (Friday, Monday), (Christmas, Easter)

Buildings, streets: (Westminster Abbey, Times Square)

As they have unique reference they do not occur with "a" or "the" or in the plural. They are written with an initial capital letter. So also, frequently, are a number of common nouns when they are used with unique reference e.g.

Fate, Heaven, Hell, Paradise, Nature.

(CGE, 1994, p 55-56; PP 357 - 359)

So why do we talk about: The New York Times? The Suez Canal? The British Museum? The Thames, the Danube?

Task (7) based on Steps 1 and 2:

Put in the right article – a / the / 0

- ..... linguistics
- .....anthropological linguistics
- .....Second World War
- .....German literature
- .....20<sup>th</sup> century German literature
- .....German culture
- .....German economy
- .....history of linguistics

Task (8) based on Steps 1 and 2

In the blanks in the following texts, insert

a / an

the

zero article (leave blank)

(1) I went straight from ..... school into the Army, so I missed..... period when most people were sharing ..... flats. Afterwards I went to work in Africa and shared ..... room with ..... bloke. We did whoop it up then - but I got fired from ..... job, so I came home to England. I've lived on my own ever since, and in ..... same bed-sit I'm living in at ..... moment for ..... 14 years. I'm rather introspective by ..... nature so living alone doesn't really bother me. I think it's a matter of ..... temperament.

(from an article in The Sunday Times)

(2) For ..... ages ..... impure drinking water has been ..... primary cause of ..... disease in much of ..... Third World. Now, in what may be the biggest public health effort ever mounted, ..... United Nations has launched ..... campaign to supply ..... clean wells and ..... sanitation to every nation by 1990. (!!)

(from an article in Newsweek)

(3) ..... study of ..... 18th century literature at ..... Oxford after ..... First World War owed its unpopularity to its Frenchness. ....anti-French feeling among ..... most ex-soldiers amounted almost to ..... obsession. Edmund, shaking with ..... nerves, used to say at this time: No wars for me at any price! Except against ..... French. If there's ever ..... war with them, I'll go like ..... shot.

..... pro-German feeling had been increasing. With ..... war over and ..... German armies beaten, we could give ..... German soldier ..... credit for being ..... most efficient fighting man in ..... Europe.

(CGI)

(4) The Prime Minister's handling of ..... foreign policy, ..... industrial relations and ..... inflation also won ..... approval; but on ..... unemployment and ..... education (s)he scored badly with 58% of Party voters disapproving of his/her record.

Task (9)

Now go back to the error spotting task at the beginning. Would you change anything? Try to give a reason for the corrections you made.

Updated March 2008