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Co-occurrence of the Definite Article and the Qualifier

In discussing the various uses of the definite article, most grammars express the opinion that a qualified noun (a noun followed by a restricting element) is statistically more likely to occur with the definite article than an unqualified noun. The present paper proposes to try and establish, in a very general way, how much truth there is in this statement. Instead of comparing qualified and unqualified head-nouns as to their response to the definite article, we have chosen to concentrate only on qualified nouns assuming that if the coincidence of the definite article with qualified nouns is low it will remain low also when qualified nouns are compared with unqualified, and the fact of a noun being qualified will be no indication of the likelihood of the same noun being modified by the definite article.

The term "co-occurrence" is used here to signify the simultaneous occurrence of two distinct formal items. The term is based on the assumption that two different items can have a semantic feature in common and, therefore, be likely to occur together. The adverb (or preposition?) *ago* refers to the past in some way, also the preterit refers to the same period of time; consequently, these two quite different formal items often occur together. This does not mean that the occurrence of one item is the function of the occurrence of the other; that is that if one item occurs the other must also occur or that the occurrence of one item is contingent upon the occurrence of the other item. The occurrence of the word *ago* is not always accompanied by the preterit and every preterit is not always accompanied by *ago*.

There are certain minor difficulties in deciding whether a postnominal element is in fact a qualifier or not. In the example

The three Negroes were momentarily blotted out *in the whirl of dust*
it is obvious that prepositional group "of dust" qualifies the head-noun "whirl".

In the example

He put the book *on the table*
It is not possible for the qualifier to precede its head-noun: "table" does not qualify the noun "book" and that it is a clause-structure element rather than a group-structure element. But in the example

The girl was arranging papers *on the great square desk*
the prepositional group "on the great square desk" is ambiguous. It can mean either "the papers were on the desk and the girl was arranging them" (the prepositional group is an adjunct) or "the girl was arranging papers which were on the desk" (the prepositional group is a qualifier).

The clause-element function allows of the shifting of the prepositional group to a position before its verb:

On the desk, the girl was arranging papers.
It is not possible for the qualifier to precede its head-noun:

*The girl was arranging *on-the-desk* papers

In certain contexts the definite article solves the ambiguity.

In

The man built a house *near the village*
the prepositional group is ambiguous — "built near the village" or "a house near the village"; but in

The man built the house near the village
only one interpretation of the prepositional group is likely — the group is a qualifier.

Some more examples in which the prepositional group can be interpreted as constituting a clause-structure element or a group-structure element:

they fed one another sandwiches *out of paper bags* /she got talking to a gentleman *in the train* / stepping down from the high curb at the intersection *above Sudwich Square* (qualifier?)

All the instances of ambiguous distribution of the prepositional group I have collected concern only prepositional groups indicating place.

Types of qualifiers. The most frequent qualifier is the prepositional group:

(1) women *in the sunbonnets* stoked wood

(1a) the march *to the sea* was such a success

Of the prepositional groups, the most frequent is the one introduced by the preposition of:

(2) she began to demonstrate less enchaning aspects of *her character*

(2a) a thing of clay thrust aside to await recurrence of *the sculptor's mood*

(2b) it was a small suitcase of *imitation crocodile hide*

(2c) the car was instantly swallowed in the trees of *a negro settlement*

Another, less frequent type, of the qualifier element is the clause:

(3) it was going to be another "just dandy" day — as they all had been in the eight years *since he had taken over the U. S. Sector*

The most frequent clause found in this function is the relative clause:

(4) with a sense of approaching a doom *that wouldn't be altogether doom*

(4a) the only vestige of their "alien" origin remains in names *which still have a faintly foreign sound*

(4b) he looked down at the small bay *where the village of Guanadera ribboned along the shore*

The relative-clause qualifier is frequent in various abbreviated forms:

(5) he smiled tolerantly at the children *he passed*

(6) a hollowed-out gutter that lay hidden in the path of shadow *cast by one of the village's few surviving elms*

(6a) the hell of an atom *exploded in anger*

(6b) the initials *stamped on it in Gothic characters* were not his

(7) the black iron pots *already steaming*

(8) women often have ideas *so unorthodox* that men would hardly dare to entertain them

(8a) he approached the dark with a sense *familiar to him from far back*, of approaching a doom

(8b) a breief glimpse of the Venus rocket *squat and silvery on the Arizona sand*

Another qualifier type is the infinitive of various derivations:

(9) with a wife in good health, two daughters safely married, a grandson *to soothe these last best years*, what had he to worry about?

(9a) you are just the people to go with the Red-Cross unit

(9b) in which he displayed a notable diffidence and the liability to panic

We shall now proceed to discuss each of the above types of qualifiers and the degree of their co-occurrence with the definite article.

Prepositional group. The occurrence of this qualifier with the definite article is rather low — only in 62 percent of cases the definite article is found (1a), (2c). This is true of all prepositional groups, regardless of the introducing preposition. As of holds a special place among prepositions, and it is the most frequent of prepositions, the instances with *of*, when counted separately, yield the following result: the definite article occurs in 65 percent of cases; which is higher than the 54 percent of the definite article with other prepositions, but not impressively so.

The instances of non-occurrence of the definite article consist of the absence of the article with singular non-count nouns (2a), the occurrence of the zero article with plural count nouns (1), (2), and the indefinite article with singular count nouns (2b). From this it follows that among the articles we have included only the definite article, null, nil, and the indefinite article; all other determiners have been left out as not figuring in the „x/the“ choice. We hesitated about including *some* among the determiners that would, as the first choice, occur at *x*, but eventually decided against its inclusion.

It would seem that the fact that a noun is followed by a prepositional group — particularly a group introduced by *of* — gives very little indication about the occurrence — or non-occurrence — of the definite article with the noun so qualified. Here the degree of co-occurrence is considerably lower than it is, for instance, with nouns modified by ordinal numerals or relative superlatives (“the first boy”, “the best boy”).

What we have done so far has been an overall co-occurrence survey of the prepositional group qualifier and the definite article regardless of the possible differences in the relation between the qualifiers and its head-noun. We propose now to try and discover whether there are such differences.

We have tried to subdivide *of*-qualifiers into groups. These are of two types — one type consist of such subdivisions as

have been established on the basis of reading into the relation meanings which are not signaled by formal elements present in the head-nouns and the qualifiers, as when "the back of the bench" is interpreted as meaning "the back belonging to the bench". The second type of of-qualifiers consists of cases where there is no semantic interpretation; instead, existing formal items are transformed in some way, as when the of-group "the waste of resources" is classified as "Verb + + Objects → Noun (from Verb) + Object" (to waste resources → the waste of resources).

a. The largest group of of-qualifiers is made up of cases where there is a vague relation of "belonging to", "have", and similar meanings of possession between the head and the qualifier noun. The total number of such examples is 80, and the instances with the definite article account for over 90 percent of the examples, which is a satisfactorily high percentage. The reason why the percentage is so high seems to lie in the fact that in most instances the noun following the preposition of can have only one such referent (or one such group of similar referents) as represented by the head-noun. For instance in "the private warf of Alder estate" the estate has only one warf; in "the wrong side of the street" the street can have only one wrong side. Some more examples of this, most frequent, type:

the dark waters of the Sound /the foot of the table/ the far side of the threshold

Of the examples where some article other than the definite appears, one is an instance of the deletion of the definite article in certain types of apposition:

Mrs. Cunning, *wife of the well-known surgeon*

Other examples are:

it lay in a *small crook of the hills* / she began to demonstrate *less enchanting aspects of her character* / *an entire Roman city of the time of emperor Titus* has emerged after centuries of burial beneath volcanic ash / a certain colonel of the air wing / the notin of artists as *useful membres of a Hospital Unit* was foreing to to British feelings of adequacy

b. Of the type "Noun₁ made of / consisting of / containing N₂" ("a heart of gold") there are 23 instances, consisting of only 26 percent of the cases of the head-noun being preceded by the definite article. This is obviously a situation where the prepositional group and the definite article rarely share meaning. Examples with the prevailing non-definite articles:

he kept *bottles of beer in a bucket of water / big slabs of stone made the floor / tubes of water-colour paint / a road-house set on a sweep of gravel / he slipped on a patch of concealed ice / it was a small suitcase of imitation crocodile hide*

Examples with the definite article:

I ran in my mind *the long list of statistics* that they would expect in my report / we've bounced back with *a list of semantic cue words* / he surveyed *the procession of passengers* coming up the gangway

c. In the type containing expressions of quantity, number and similar, the definite article has been found in 6 percent of cases (in a total of 16 examples):

it'll probably add only about *a twentieth of a roentgen* to the average exposure badge / selenium 79, with *a half-life of six hundred thousand years* / he had taken in tow *a scampering retinue of more than a dozen*

Also instances with less obvious expressions of quantity or number:

with *a trace of warm air* / from the high narrow windows, the view over roofs and of *a scrap of ancient graveyard* / he sat down in *a wave of applause* / a long series of illness and resignation

There is only one example with the definite article:

he had taken twice *the maximum dose of a patent preparation of chloral*

This type is similar to the preceding "made of" type and sometimes it is hard to keep them apart. This is no serious problem as both types show a low percentage of the definite article.

d. Our next type is formal, rather than interpretative. It consists of a transformation by which a structure consisting of Noun + be + Adj is changed into Noun₂ (derived from Adj) + of + Noun₁, as in:

old age is serene → — serenity of old age

We do not mean to imply that "old age is serene" is primary and "the serenity of all age" is a secondary derivation. We are not implying that they stand in any provable derivation relation at all. What we mean by this, and other similar interpretations, is that they seem to be useful in establishing a type of of-qualifier element relevant to the purpose of co-occurrence.

We have collected only four examples of this type and the occurrence rate of the definite article is 50 percent. Although satisfactorily formal, this type does not seem to be of any practical use because of the balanced likelihood of occurrence of all types of articles.

Examples with the definite article:

after the struggles of youth in Europe *the serenity of a comfortable old age* was pleasant / it was largely due to *the ability of cooks* to respond to . . .

Examples with other articles:

bespeaking either a weakness on the America's part or a *fantastic singleness of purpose* / somehow it all struck him as being a *monotony of newness*

The number of examples is too small for any conclusion. The smallness of the number is due to the statistical manner of collecting examples. Examples were not selected. All relevant instances within a selected length of text were taken. Therefore total numbers of examples of individual types of qualifiers show relative frequencies of the types. Thus, this adjective transformation type is likely to occur four times for 16 occurrences of the "belonging to" type.

e. Next is the type of apposition illustrated by the example:

London is a city → the city of London

(The city of) London is very large

Of the six examples collected all have the definite article: and what wonders *the science of archaeology has given us* / the town of East Joloppi / the State of Maine / the colour of "Old Ivory"

f. Next type is illustrated by

time passes → — passing / passage of time

There are 15 examples of this type. The definite article has been found in 80 percent of them:

in the comparative stillness that followed *the subsidence of its mighty voice* / the automobile's original appeal shrank in inverse proportion to *the growth of her demands* / *the dry growths of shrubs* come close to the house there / the three Negroes were momentarily blotted out in *the whirl of dust*

Examples with the other articles:

a thing of clay thrust aside to await *recurrence of the sculport's mood* / the cities of yesterday stand revealed, free of all *encroachments of forest or desert or jungle* /

"That", said Mr. Berry with a faint return of interest, "might be useful"

g. There are 13 examples of the type:
to waste resources → — waste of resources

The examples with the definite article constitute 53 percent of the total:

that was more by the way of being a pun about his name than a criticism of *the conduct of his love affair* / if you persisted beyond *the parody of a face* you saw that this man had strange eyes / this is the damnedest country for *the unexpected raising of all kinds of unlooked-for hell*

Examples with other articles:

we met last night and made *a nervous tour of the bars* / a brief glimpse of the Venus rocket / none took *particular notice of him*

In

Henry Heath, *portly, bustling manager of the great Kendall-Sudwich mills*

the absence of the definite article is due to apposition; outside the apposition the definite article would be used.

There still remains a mixed bag of examples I could not profitably classify. Their total number is 14; the percentage of the definite article is 28 percent:

but *the notion of artists* as useful members of a Hospital Unit was foreign to British feelings of adequacy / and strikes, just at *the point of balance*, the loose plank in the bridge / he looked brightly at *the rest of us*

Examples with other articles:

with *a house of his own* and *money of his own* / Edwards was a friend of *his uncle* / the rifle is as much a part of *that training* as are the more complex maneuvers / all marines undergo *an advanced kind of infantry training* / because of his age and *terrible state of health* / this book is *a story of lost cities* / Woolcut made *a demonstrative gesture of wiping his blunt brow*

Cases of of-qualification are not included if the qualifier is part of a derived proper name of any type:

the U.S. Undersecretary of State (antonomastic proper name) / the House of Commons / the District of Columbia / the Isle of Man / the Lake of Lucern / the Cape of Good Hope

Nor have we included the cases where an of-qualifier is used to distinguish from among several manifestations of the same referent, as in

the Paris of today is vastly different from the Paris of the Middle Ages

The reason for the exclusion of these types of of-qualifier is that considerations regulating the appearance of the definite article in them are different from those valid for the of-phrases we are concerned with. For one thing, most of the excluded cases are fixed combinations, while our of-phrases consist of comparatively freely combined elements.

Fixed expressions like "for the purpose of" or "for the sake of" and similar have also been left out.

Prepositional qualifiers introduced by prepositions other than of can be classified according to their temporal, spatial or other references; but such a classification does not seem relevant for our purpose. We shall have to satisfy ourselves with the fact that this qualifier-type occurs together with the definite article in 54 percent of cases, lower than the 62 percent of the overall percentage of the of-qualifier:

the march to the sea was such a success / events which have happened during the time between the old and the new edition / during retreat from the Chosein reservoir

Examples with other articles:

women in the sunbonnets stoked wood / if you have peace in your heart your stomach will look after itself / one of the barracks radios is picking up cool dance music from Hollywood (adjunct?)

It has been suggested that the proportion of the definite article is higher if the qualifier, any qualifier, contains a noun presented as definite. We propose to test this assumption on prepositional groups introduced by prepositions other than of.

The term "definite" has not been specified and we interpret it to mean that the noun in the qualifier is preceded by

a. the definite article. In this case the occurrence of the definite article with the head-noun is 63 percent:

the water in the bay became orange
Shwartz was a believer in the goodness of human nature

b. a possessive or demonstrative word; the percentage of the definite article is 30 percent:

before he reached the door to my room / the sometimes odd happenings in these pages

she had *an effortless swing in her hips*

c. The noun of the qualifier is a proper name. The percentage of the definite article is 86 percent:

they all heard *the iron bridge over Pettico-cow shake / the traffic on 101 / the intersection above Sudwich Square*

One of the barracks radios is picking up *cool dance music from Hollywood*

d. The qualifier contains a personal pronoun. Only one example:

many of *the characters in it* have since died

With nouns with the zero or the indefinite article in the qualifier, the definite article has not been found:

with *a wife in good health / inside was a woman with a grizzled hair / after centuries of burial beneath volcanic ash*

Clause. Only one clause has been found introduced by *since* (3); the rest are relative clauses or abbreviated forms of relative clauses. With these the definite article appears in 67 percent of cases, which is a higher percentage than the one found with the *of*-qualifier (62).

a. In full relative clauses (clauses without any deletions), which account for 31 cases of the total number of 57 of all types of relatives, the percentage of the definite article at 74 percent is rather high:

the car pushes very fine *the barrier that divides it from horses / it lay in a small crook of the hills that rose to the south of the large Shumadia plain / he crossed the brown-green grass to the pole that has once been a ship's mast*

Clauses introduced by adverbial words have also been included:

he looked down at *the small bay where the village of Guanadera ribboned along the shore*

Examples with other articles:

from this sack she removed *a bath towel with which she dried her slender body / events which have happened during the time between the old and the new edition*

b. Deleted relative word. There are five examples of this type of relative clause and they all have the definite article:

(10) *the moment any craft approached within ten feet an alarm sounded automatically*

(11) he smiled tolerantly at *the children he passed* / *the girl's hair was the brown he called hair-colored*

Of the five instances in only two of them the deleted relatives are in object relation to the verb of the relative (11); the other three are cases of indications of time where an awkward relative (that?, at which?) is left out (10).

c. The relative and the verb *to be* are deleted and only the predicative construction remains:

they are packed in containers *which are* the same shade of green as the Universal products → they are packed in containers the same shade of green as the Universal products

There are 8 examples of this kind and the occurrence of the definite article is 50 percent:

a brief glimpse of *the Venus rocket squat and silvery on the Arizona sand* / Fowler pointed to *the lean man next to Winston* / the dusty car had gained the highway, entering it at *the point near a large roadhouse*

Other articles:

women often have *ideas so unorthodox* that men would hardly dare to entertain them / she gestured to *a door beyond the desk*

b. The relative and the *be* of an *-ing* construction are deleted:

Noun + *be* + *V-ing* (modified) — Noun + *V-ing* (modified)

There are only four instances of this type of elliptical relative, two of them co-occurring with the definite article preceding the head-word:

the black iron pots already steaming / the dark waters of the Sound eddying about the rocks beyond the village

There are two instance of other articles; in both cases their head-nouns are qualified by non-restrictive relative constructions:

he looked exactly what he was: *a retired tailor, thoroughly lacking in what ... / dust, gushing from the back wheels,* ran together behind in a dense whirl

c. This type of the relative clause contains passive construction whose auxiliary verb and the relative are deleted so that only the modified past participle remains:

the initials stamped on it were not his / nothing had changed ... Not the desks, ... nor the *one wall covered with prints* / we were suffering from *the dreary depression caused by the feeling that ...*

There are nine examples of this type with the definite article in four of them. It would seem that a past participle resulting from deletion and kept in the postnominal position by its complement has little to do with the occurrence of the definite article, in the same way as an epithet does not influence the "definiteness" of the modified noun: "a hard chair" is as likely to occur as "a chair".

Examples with other articles:

a hollowed-out gutter that lay hidden in the path of
shadow cast by one of the village's few surviving elms /
the hell of *an atom exploded in anger*

Instances of proper nouns modified by relatives have been left out, regardless of whether the noun occurs without an article

I am Mary Smith who loves you
or with an article

this is not *the Smith I was speaking of / the Philadelphia*
which Mr Johnson knew so well / she was *a Mary Smith*
he no longer recognized

Infinitive. For practical purposes we distinguish only two subtypes of the infinitive:

a. the infinitive whose subject is different from the subject of the matrix sentence. There is only one such example and it contains the indefinite article:

with two daughters safely married, *a grandson to soothe*
these last best years, what had he to worry about?

b. the subject of both the embedded sentence and the matrix sentence are the same. There are three such examples and they all have the definite article:

if I'd had *the sense to stay out this down-country / in*
which he displayed a notable diffidence and *the liability*
to panic / you are just the people to go with the Red
Cross unit

Conclusion. A qualified noun is more likely to be preceded by the definite article than by any of the other articles. Our pilot research, however, seems to indicate that co-occurrence of these two formal items, in general, is not so high as to justify the optimistic statements made by numerous practical grammars of English. The higher co-occurrence rate of the definite article with qualified nouns is due to the nature of the qualifier element and to the meaning of the definite article. If something can be said about a referent it is logical that in most cases the referent will be presented as known, as "definite". A qualifier, particularly a prepositional qualifier,

does not usually have the classifying meaning often present in an epithet. "A blue bell" can be the description of a flower, but it can also mean a class of flowers (bluebell /*Campanula rotundifolia*/) and the combination is in fact not modified at all. "The fox's foot" is the foot belonging to the fox, "a fox's foot" stands for a class of feet (the same as in "the dog had a fox's tail") or — usually spelt "fox's-foot" — for a class of plants (*Dactylis glomerata*). Most qualifiers — particularly prepositional groups, which are the most frequent qualifier type — lack this class-making ability; instead, they are purely descriptive (in a wider sense) of the referent which, because it can be described, is frequently signaled as known to the listener. The nominal group "— lamp on the table" is likely to have the definite article filling the slot because in most cases a referent whose spatial position is known is itself known. On the other hand "— table lamp" is a kind of lamp — in the same way as oak is a kind of tree — and the modifier supplies no clue to the possible identification of the lamp.

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