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Some Apects Of The Categories Of Definiteness And Indefiniteness In Croatian And English

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The article discusses some linguistic means used by Croatian and English respectively in expressing the categories of definiteness and indefiniteness. It also provides an English text and its Croatian translation for a comparative analysis of the ways in which English and Croatian express definiteness/indefiniteness.

In his article «Kategorija neodređenosti/određenosti i načini njezina izražavanja» («The categories of indefiniteness and definiteness and the ways they can be expressed») (2000), Josip Silić writes: «The categories of indefiniteness and definiteness are a result of abstract thinking, which is identical in all nations... They are expressed in all languages, but not in the same way. Therefore, these categories are logical and language universals.» Mentioning *language universals*, the author reminds me of Bloomfield, who, in his book *Language* set a task for linguists of the future: to compare the categories of different languages and see what features are universal or at least widespread (cf. Bloomfield 1933:270). He dedicates a part of the book to the phenomenon of definiteness/indefiniteness, comparing English to German, French, Finnish, etc.

The categories of indefiniteness and definiteness are semantic-syntactic categories, connected with pragmatics and text linguistics. These categories have been researched since ancient times – i.e. Apollonius Dyscolus (second century AD), the author of the oldest preserved book on syntax, wrote about the presence/absence of the definite article in Greek. Work by modern descriptive grammarians is still based on Dyscolus's ideas.



Also, most contemporary pragmatics have embraced his views, putting *familiarity* and *identifiability* in the centre of their theories. In his book *Definiteness* (1999), Christopher Lyons reviews different approaches to the categories of definiteness and indefiniteness, from Dyscolus, through Bertrand Russell and his logical or formal semantic analysis, to a number of contemporary linguists and philosophers who write about different languages and different aspects of the problem. In the end, Lyons comes to the conclusion that most theories revolve around the concepts of *identifiability/familiarity* and *inclusiveness* (i.e. whether the referent includes all the members of a set).

Literature on definiteness/indefiniteness is rather rich. Some studies mention Croatian, but mostly as «Serbo-Croatian». For instance, Jiří Krámský, in his book *The Article and the Concept of Definiteness in Language* (1972), mentions Croatian (or, rather, Serbo-Croatian) as a language which expresses definiteness with special forms of adjectives, as well as with the declension of nouns (the latter is not very well explained). Christopher Lyons, in the mentioned book, talks about the Croatian (he uses the name «Serbo-Croat») definite and indefinite adjectives, as well as the three demonstrative pronouns (taj, ovaj, onaj). Discussing grammaticalization, the author speaks about Serbo-Croat again, and he says that «in Serbo-Croat, the definite adjective may not be expressing definiteness anymore, but it is necessary in some grammatical contexts» (1999: 339). This statement is compatible with the views of Ivo Pranjković, who, in his article «Izražavanje neodređenosti/određenosti imenica u hrvatskom jeziku» («Expressing the indefiniteness/definiteness of nouns in Croatian») (2000), says: «I think that a discussion about the categories of indefiniteness and definiteness is even more important now that the formal differences between the grammaticalized forms of expressing these two categories are getting blurred, or, rather, they are preserved in the nominative of nouns having masculine gender. «. In Croatian, apart from definite and indefinite adjectives, there are some other means of expressing definiteness/indefiniteness. Some of them are brought to our attention by Pranjković in the same article, and are as follows:

1. choosing between the accusative case and the so called partitive genitive – example: *uzeti kruh* (to take the bread) – DEF, as opposed to *uzeti kruha* (to take some bread) – INDEF;
2. the so called Slavic genitive – example: *Ne vidi stol.* (He cannot see the table.) – DEF, as opposed to *Ne vidi stola.* (He cannot see a table.) – INDEF;
3. Indefiniteness can be suggested by the plural of those nouns that normally don't have plural – example: *razni Bushovi i Clintoni* (various Bushes and Clintons);
4. Sometimes speakers of Croatian make use of the difference between the so called distributive singular and plural, where singular suggests some kind of definiteness, and plural some kind of indefiniteness – example: *ljudi u odijelu* (*men in a suit) - DEF, as opposed to *ljudi u odijelima* (men in suits) – INDEF.
5. Definiteness/indefiniteness can be expressed on the level of a complex sentence,



especially in the opposition restrictive/non-restrictive relative clause. In the recent years, most studies concerning the topic of relative clauses in Croatian have been written by Snježana Kordić. In one article she also writes about expressing indefiniteness by the word *čovjek* (*man*) – example: *Čovjek ovdje ne može disati* (*One cannot breathe here*).

Definiteness and indefiniteness can also be expressed by words such as demonstrative and indefinite pronouns. Among the words expressing indefiniteness is the determiner *jedan* (*one*), which is considered by Josip Silić to be the Croatian indefinite article.

In connection with the problem of definiteness/indefiniteness in Croatian, it is important to mention the article «Vrste, položaj i uloge determinatora» («The types, position and roles of determiners») (1995), where the author, Luka Vukojević, points to various means of expressing definiteness/indefiniteness.

When dealing with definiteness/indefiniteness in English, the first thing that comes to our mind is the definite and the indefinite articles. There is ample linguistic literature on the problem of the article in many languages, including English. As concerns English, we must not forget that some other means of expressing definiteness/indefiniteness (e.g. the other determiners) have been taken into account in numerous studies. Bloomfield (1933: 204) says that: «The definite and indefinite categories may be said, in fact, to embrace the entire class of English noun expressions, because even those types of noun expressions which do not always take a determiner, can be classed as definite or indefinite: *John*, for instance, as definite, *kindness* as indefinite.» In Croatian, definiteness and indefiniteness were for a long time linked only with adjectives, not with nouns, and this fallacy is explained and warned against by Pranjković in the above mentioned text.

The English articles pose a big problem to learners and non-native speakers of English, even to those who have articles in their mother tongue. Native speakers of Croatian have a lot of difficulty using the English articles. The first reason is that Croatian has no article (although, as we have seen, certain expressions may be considered as legitimate replacements for articles), and the second that Croatian expresses definiteness/indefiniteness explicitly in much fewer contexts than English.

English contexts containing the definite article *the* are usually translated into Croatian in such a way that the definiteness is not explicitly marked, and if it is, the most usual translation is a demonstrative pronoun (*taj*, *ovaj* or *onaj*).

Example:

Eng: Give me *the* watch. — Cro: Daj mi *taj* sat.

English contexts containing the indefinite article *a* lose explicit indefiniteness when translated into Croatian. If indefiniteness is expressed in the Croatian translation, it happens by virtue of the determiner *jedan*.



Example:

Eng: I have *a* book. — Cro: Imam (*jednu*) knjigu.

In the following example indefiniteness in Croatian is contextual:

Eng: I am *a* doctor. — Cro: Ja sam liječnik.

If we add an adjective, Croatian will then express indefiniteness using the indefinite form of a particular adjective:

Eng: I am *a good* doctor. — Cro: Ja sam *dobar* liječnik.

We shall now look at the paragraph taken from chapter 3 of Conrad Phillip Kottak's book *Anthropology* (1991: 38-39) and compare the original text with my Croatian translation, in order to see similarities and differences between the linguistic means that English and Croatian use respectively in expressing definiteness and indefiniteness:

Comparing **the United States** with Brazil – or virtually any Latin nation- we can see **a striking cultural contrast** between **a culture** that discourages physical contact and demonstrations of affection and one in which **the contrary** is true. We can also see rampant confusion in **American culture** about love, sex, and affection. This stands in **sharp contrast** to **the more realistic Brazilian separation of the three**.

«Don't touch me.» «Take **your hands** off me.». These are normal statements in **American culture** that are virtually never heard in Brazil, **the Western Hemisphere's second most populous country**. Americans don't like to be touched. **The world's cultures** have strikingly different opinions about matters of personal space. When Americans talk, walk, and dance, they maintain **a certain distance** from others – **their personal space**. Brazilians, who maintain less physical distance, interpret this as a sign of coldness. When conversing with **an American**, **the Brazilian** characteristically moves in as **the American** «instinctively» retreats.

Translation:

Ako usporedimo **Sjedinjene Američke Države** s Brazilom – zapravo s bilo kojim južnoameričkim narodom – vidjet ćemo **zamjetan kulturni kontrast između (jedne) kulture** koja suzbija fizički dodir i pokazivanje osjećaja i one u kojoj vrijedi **suprotno**.

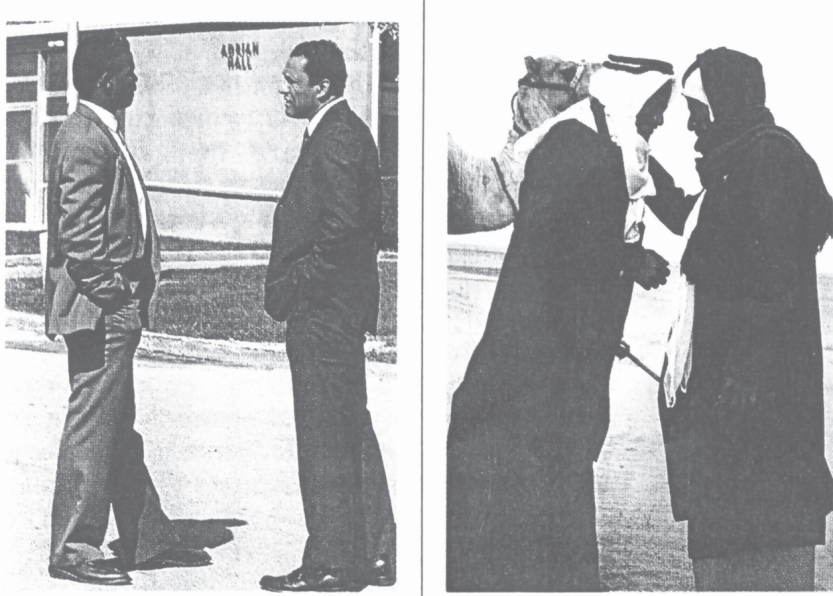
U **američkoj kulturi** također vidimo veliku zbrku oko ljubavi, seksa i naklonosti. To je u **oštrom kontrastu s brazilskim realističnijim razdvajanjem tih triju stvari**.

«Ne diraj me.» «Skidaj **ruke** s mene.» To su normalne izjave u **američkoj kulturi**, koje se zapravo nikada ne čuju u Brazilu, **po napućenosti drugoj zemlji zapadne hemisfere**. Amerikanci ne vole da ih se dotiče. Različite kulture u svijetu imaju bitno različite poglede na pitanje osobnog prostora. Kada Amerikanci govore, hodaju i plešu, zadržavaju **određenu udaljenost od drugih – svoj osobni prostor**. Brazilci, koji ostavljaju manje prostora, tumače





to kao znak hladnoće. Kada razgovara s Amerikancem, Brazilac se karakteristično primiče, dok Amerikanac «instinktivno» uzmiče.



Contrast **the** gap between **the** two American men with **the** closeness of **the** Egyptian Bedouins.

Translation:

Usporedite razmak između (**ove**) dvojice Amerikanaca s blizinom (**ovih**) egipatskih Beduina.

1. Let us first concentrate upon the name of The United States. Plural names of countries in English always have the definite article, which cannot be translated into Croatian.

2. In English, nouns denoting concepts, things or phenomena which are unique take the definite article, e.g: *the world*, *the Western Hemisphere*. In Croatian, as well as in English, uniqueness presupposes definiteness.

In the example *the Western Hemisphere's second most populous country*, the definite article may be linked with the noun *Western hemisphere*, but at the same time it can be connected with the ordinal number *second*, which also requires the definite article. For speakers of Croatian, the expression *po napučenosti drugoj zemlji zapadne hemisfere* carries enough information, so they feel no need to emphasize definiteness.

3. English abstract nouns may also be very difficult for speakers of Croatian in terms of the usage of articles. As a rule, they are uncountable, but in certain contexts they



become countable and then they may take the indefinite article. Most usually it is an adjective that makes them concrete, thus countable, but, as we shall see, this is not always the case. In our text we have several such words. The first one is *contrast* (in Croatian: *kontrast, opreka*):

a) This stands *in sharp contrast* — Cro: To je u *oštrom kontrastu*. - Croatian uses the definite form *oštrom*, not the indefinite form *oštru*. Also, we couldn't say such a thing: To je u *jednom oštrom kontrastu*. By using a definite adjective, Croatian explicitly treats the word *kontrast* as definite).¹

b)... we can see *a striking cultural contrast* between... (the third line from above) — Cro: Možemo vidjeti *zamjetan kulturni kontrast*.

In this example, English expresses indefiniteness by the indefinite article *a*, while Croatian expresses it by the indefinite adjective *zamjetan*.

4. The second abstract noun in our text is *culture* (*kultura*)². Sometimes it is used as an abstract noun without an article (*American culture*), and sometimes as a concrete noun with the indefinite article (*a culture that discourages...*).

American culture is translated into Croatian as *američka kultura*, and it is something very definite for speakers of Croatian. On the other hand, the sentence «...a striking contrast between *a culture* that discourages» is translated into Croatian in this way: «*zamjetan kulturni kontrast između (jedne) kulture koja*», where the noun *culture* is viewed as indefinite.

5. Eng: *a certain distance* – Cro: *određenu udaljenost* – both adjectives (*certain* and *određen*) attribute to the noun the quality of indefiniteness, which is obvious from the English usage of the indefinite article. It would also be obvious in Croatian, if the noun were masculine, and then the adjective would take the indefinite form (e.g. *određen iznos*).

6. This stands in sharp contrast to *the more realistic Brazilian separation of the three*. – The first definite article has cataphoric function, because it refers to something that will be said, and the second has anaphoric function, because it refers to something already mentioned. In Croatian, the first article is not translated, and the second one is translated by a paraphrase containing a demonstrative:

To je u oštroj suprotnosti s *brazilskim relističnijim razdvajanjem tih triju stvari*.

¹ Although Bloomfield classifies abstract nouns in singular without a determiner as indefinite, he points out that they include all the specimens (c.f. Bloomfield 1933: 204 & 205). Inclusiveness, uniqueness and identifiability are the qualities that are most usually ascribed to nouns in order for linguists to explain why they are seen as definite. All three qualities can be linked with those abstract nouns that are in singular and have no determiner (e. g. *kindness, mankind, life*), so we can conclude that they are definite nouns rather than indefinite (see Jonh Lyons 1977: 184; Christopher Lyons 1999: 218n; Krámský 1972 : 54). The Croatian translations of such words in our text might be considered a proof of that.

² The word *culture* is used here with the meaning «varied traditions of specific societies».



7....in which *the* contrary is true. — Cro: ... u kojoj vrijedi suprotno. – This definite article has the grammatical function of nominalizing an adjective (*contrary*), and, at the same time, it adds the quality of definiteness to the noun. In Croatian, definiteness is contained in the very meaning of the word *suprotno*.

8. Take *your* hands off me. — *Skidaj ruke s mene*. English uses possessives with nouns denoting parts of the body³. Croatian does not translate it if it is clear from the context whose parts of the body are referred to. Still, in the example *their personal space*, the English possessive is translated by the Croatian possessive *svoj*.

9. When conversing with *an* American, *the* Brazilian... — Cro: *Kada razgovara s Amerikancem, Brazilac...* – English can use either the definite or the indefinite article to denote a representative of a nation. We can again talk about the nominalization of adjectives.

10. Below the picture: Contrast *the* gap between *the* two American men with *the* closeness of *the* Egyptian Bedouins. — Cro: *Usporedite razmak između (ove) dvojice Amerikanaca s blizinom (ovih) egipatskih Beduina*. The definite article before the words *two American men*, as well as that in front of *Egyptian Bedouins* can be linked with the concept of spatial deixis⁴, because they, in a way, point out to the reader which men to look at, and could easily be replaced by the demonstrative *these*. Croatian will not necessarily use any means to express that, but if it does, the demonstrative *ovi* (in the appropriate case) is most likely to appear.

The definite articles before the words *gap* and *closeness* can be replaced by the demonstrative *this*, so here again we can talk about spatial deixis. Although Croatian could use a demonstrative here, it is not necessary, and, stylistically, it is not desirable. Croatian would express definiteness explicitly if we introduced an adjective before the singular masculine noun *razmak*. The adjective would then take the definite form (e. g. *Usporedite veliki razmak između (ove) dvojice Amerikanaca...*).

Conclusion:

The problem of definiteness and indefiniteness is very interesting, yet very difficult to solve. Comparing these two categories in two or more languages is a challenging task. I have demonstrated here a very modest comparison of Croatian and English in terms of these two categories, but I hope to pursue my research and come up with results that will be interesting and useful to linguists and learners of both languages.

³ For article-possessor complementarity see Haspelmath 1999.

⁴ On the subject of interchangeability of demonstratives and the definite article in English see John Lyons 1977: 646 and Levinson 1983: 83.

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NEKI ASPEKTI KATEGORIJA ODREĐENOSTI I NEODREĐENOSTI U HRVATSKOM I ENGLESKOM

U članku se raspravlja o nekim jezičnim sredstvima kojima se hrvatski i engleski služe da izraze određenost i neodređenost. Članak sadrži jedan engleski tekst i njegov hrvatski prijevod koji su poslužili za poredbenu analizu načina na koji ova dva jezika izražavaju određenost i neodređenost.

