

Use of the article in spoken Esperanto

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This paper discusses the article's use in spoken Esperanto.

Definiteness is a universal notion, but it is not always grammaticalized. Some languages have articles (English, Italian, French, German), others do not (Russian, Polish, Latin). Cross-linguistically, indefinite articles tend to emerge later than definite articles (Carlier, 2013). Some languages have only definite articles, and the absence of the definite article is equivalent of the indefinite article (Hebrew, Arabic, Bulgarian). When definiteness is grammaticalized, its expression varies from one language to another.

Kirtchuk (2004) states that "primarily a pragmatic, essentially deictic ('pointing at') function, definiteness is expressed cross-linguistically by different devices: phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical. The most characteristic such device is the definite article" and "definiteness is a multidimensional notion that can combine referentiality, specificity, identification, actualization, genericity, individuation, familiarity, and shared knowledge" (Kirtchuk 2004:1).

La Fundamento de Esperanto, the grammar of Esperanto, states that the definite article is 'la', regardless of gender and number. The omission of the article corresponds to an indefinite article. Zamenhof, the founder of Esperanto, mentions that the article may be omitted, if its use is problematic for speakers whose L1 does not have articles. He also states that articles in Esperanto are used in the same way as those in the speaker's first language. However, the use of articles varies considerably in languages that contain them. Esperanto is used by speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This study is based on oral stories produced by Esperanto speakers who respectively have Italian, French, Russian or Polish as their first language (L1). Two series of images were used to facilitate comparison. I examine the use and non-use of the article in Esperanto in Italian and French speakers' stories, on the one hand, and in Russian and Polish speakers' stories, on the other.

The results show that all informants use the article. In some cases, the article is missing even though a noun has already been introduced previously. These omissions are not attributable only to the informants' L1. Speakers of Slavic languages use demonstratives (equivalent of 'this' or 'that' in English) instead of articles more often than speakers of Italian and French. On the other hand, Italian and French informants more often use indefinites (equivalent of 'certain' in English) to compensate for the absence of the indefinite article in Esperanto. I also note an orientation towards a common norm, perceived intuitively, which emerges from the international use of Esperanto.

References

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