

## APPLYING COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS TO TEACHING THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

*Abstract:* Innovative methods in the field of foreign language instruction today originate mostly from Cognitive Linguistics. Applied cognitive linguistics has, over the last fifteen years, provided us with empirical evidence on which we can develop new teaching approaches in the EFL classroom. By understanding human cognition and applying this knowledge to foreign language instruction, teachers can facilitate the learning process by helping students make use of resources already available to them. There is much room for improvement in the teaching methods of the English articles to L1 Serbian speakers, who frequently struggle with article production. The aim of this paper is to give an overview of some of the most relevant studies which have focused on the introduction of Cognitive Linguistics into the EFL classroom, with a particular look at English language article instruction, the theoretical work done by Langacker (1991; 2000) and Epstein (2001a; 2001b) as well as more applied work done by Huong (2005), Verspoor & Huong (2008) and Verspoor (forthcoming).

*Key words:* cognitive linguistics, foreign language instruction, the English article system

### 1. Introduction

Although some authors have tried to make the case that incorrect article use, or even the lack thereof, does not completely impede communication, proper reference resolution is an important precondition for successful communication. Just like with any other grammatical category, all the necessary effort should be made for English articles to be used properly, especially among non-native speakers of English who strive to achieve the coveted level of proficiency. In terms of how reference is realized, it relies heavily on collaboration inference, that is, the listener must be willing to correctly infer what it was that the speaker intended to identify. Assumptions are made on both sides, in terms of the availability and access to the referent in question. The English language can boast of a variety of referring expressions, such as demonstratives, pronouns, and most important for this overview, definite NPs or the definite article in particular. The situation would not hold much significance for us were there a one-to-one correspondence between referring expressions in English and in Serbian. However, problems

ensue from the fact that not only does the English language contain an article system, while there is no article system in Serbian, and thus no definite article, but the definite article in English also codes definiteness, while Serbian has been identified as coding specificity (Trenkić, 2002; 2004; 2007; 2009).

Thus, instruction on article use is a necessary part of the EFL process. This does not vary, irrespective of the L1 of the students in question. So far, what will be referred to as the 'traditional' approach to teaching the definite article has been based on explicit instruction which exploited the main components of definiteness: familiarity (subsumed under identifiability, Christophersen, 1939) and uniqueness (a special case of inclusiveness, Lyons, 1999; Russell, 1905; Huong, 2005).

The textbooks used as aids during the instruction process focus on familiarity, as evident in the second/prior mention rule for the use of the definite article, and unique identifiability (Gundel et al., 1993 inter alia) as a necessary and sufficient condition for the use of *the*. However, it remains to be seen whether this has proven to be the best possible approach, considering that errors in article use persist even among proficient learners of English from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. Still, unique identifiability has widely been accepted as the standard in many cases of the use of *the*, sometimes explicitly and sometimes less so. Adopted here for the purpose of this overview is Huong's succinct explanation of what unique identifiability (to the speaker and hearer) is:

"A noun is used in a definite sense when both the Speaker and Hearer (or writer and reader) know exactly which one(s) is/are meant. In other words, when a Speaker thinks that the Hearer can identify it as unique or as the only ones, he/she will mark a common noun with the definite article" (Huong, 2005: 160).

Could the aforementioned persistence in the number of errors be eradicated with a change in the approach taken? It would appear that finding a new framework within which to conduct research and instruct various learners of English would be a worthwhile endeavor. Some, such as Verspoor & Huong (2008) have already made the initial steps, explaining that a cognitive approach might help students acquire the English article system by becoming aware of what is actually meant with each individual form.

The aim is to enable the EFL students to understand the conceptualization involved in article use. "The hypothesis is that once they understand the overarching principles, students may realize what is actually meant with the forms and recognize the meaningful relationships between the different uses of a particular form. The advantage of such a CL approach to teaching language is that it helps raise awareness of form-meaning connections, and that once an L2 learner recognizes these connections, he or she may be better able to recognize, remember and apply them" (Verspoor, forthcoming).

### 1.1. Why Cognitive Grammar?

Cognitive linguistics has introduced several very important concepts into the field of language study, ranging from construal, conceptual metaphor, category formation (including prototypes), embodiment, the usage-based nature of language to the idea of the symbolic nature of language, which, as Tyler puts it “allow us to reconceptualize L2 learning” (2012: 62). A similar account of the key concepts in cognitive linguistics and their application to second language learning and teaching was given in Littlemore (2009: 4-12) with additional evidence on how some of these concepts can, and some already have been, used in practice. One of the features of cognitive linguistics that makes it so suitable for use in L1 and L2 studies is the fact that it proposes that the same cognitive processes that account for L1 learning will also account for L2 learning as well. Thus, “a learner comes to the L2 learning situation with a fully formed set of conceptual categories linked to linguistic forms” (Tyler, 2012: 62) which can easily be picked up in the process of L2 acquisition and investigation. The theory is in its entirety based on universal human cognitive skills and thus could provide us with universally available teaching tools. Even though L1 cognition transfers to that of L2, and as Robinson & Ellis (2008: 7) claim, can facilitate or interfere in L2 development, the ‘cognitive’ model would in no way allow any negative cross-linguistic interference. The cognitive mechanism involved is shared by all, it introduces nothing new that could potentially confuse learners, but merely explains what happens during the process of discourse development and thus comprehension.

These facts, coupled with the insufficient information available to EFL teachers in the Serbian linguistic environment regarding the explanation of the (mis)use of articles of L1 Serbian/L2 English speakers (with the exception of Trenkić (2002, 2004, 2007, 2009) and Dimitrijević (2009, 2010, 2011a; 2011b)), indicate the need for further study. The studies might help us to identify alternative means of teaching L1 Serbian speakers of English how to use *the*, by attempting to introduce some of the key concepts of cognitive linguistics into the L2 classroom. With the emphasis it places on the symbolic form-meaning pairings, Cognitive Grammar allows us to treat articles as meaningful. It offers support for the claim that the English article system is completely coherent, it is not arbitrary and does not consist of a variety of rules meant to be memorized which can be presented quite simply and in a meaningful way.

Before proceeding onto the work done by the authors selected for this review, all of whom have delved into the field of the English article system and cognitive linguistics/grammar it would be beneficial to mention, albeit briefly, some key issues. Mainly these refer to R. Langacker’s insights on issues such as definiteness, construal, boundedness and grounding.

To begin with, Langacker has described definiteness as a factor of topicality (one of three in fact), which is “mostly subjective, for it does not pertain to the inherent nature of a participant, but rather to the highly extrinsic property of whether the speaker and hearer have succeeded in establishing mental contact

with it" (1991: 307). Thus, a referent is rendered definite by virtue of the speaker's construal of a particular situation. Huong (2005) restated this by stating that we rely on construal to emphasize the use of articles as clues to help signal the speaker's construal of the status of information in the ongoing discourse and to indicate whether the speaker conceptualizes an entity as being bounded or unbounded. Definiteness also indicates that "the Speaker and Addressee have established 'mental contact' for the 'referent of an instance'" (Langacker, 1991: 91), and could be said to reside in part on the establishment of joint attention involving the speaker and hearer involved in a particular situation, proving that they are both thinking of the same referent.

Construal is the cognitive linguistic concept referring to the fact that as humans, we are able to view the same situation in a variety of different ways, and ascribe different interpretations to them.

"Learning language involves determining structure from usage and this, like learning about all other aspects of the world, involves the full scope of cognition: the remembering of utterances and episodes, the categorization of experience, the determination of patterns among and between stimuli, the generalization of conceptual schema and prototypes from exemplars, and the use of cognitive models, of metaphors, analogies, and images in thinking. Language is used to focus the listener's attention to the world; it can foreground different elements in the theatre of consciousness to potentially relate many different stories and perspectives about the same scene." (Robinson & Ellis, 2008: 3)

Our varying construals are reflected in the choice of words we use to signal them, including varying referring expressions. This notion is closely related to the concept of boundedness. The latter refers to the setting up of any clearly delineated boundaries of a particular referent, mainly referring to whether or not we perceive something to be uncountable or not. Although it may, on the surface seem like a clear-cut concept, problems do tend to arise in situations when what is typically considered a count noun is used as a non-count one and vice versa (paper for example).

When it comes to the concept of grounding: "... a nominal or a finite clause has the discourse-related role of singling out an instance of the thing or process type and specifying its relation to the *ground* (the speech event and its participants) [...] For a nominal, grounding elements include the demonstratives, the articles, and certain quantifiers." (Langacker, 2000: 271). This emphasizes the importance that context plays in the determination of article use.

Finally, we come to boundedness. "A fundamental distinction between count and mass nouns depends on whether the profiled region is construed as being **bounded** within the scope of predication in its domain of instantiation. For physical substances, the domain of instantiation is generally space. *Lake* is thus a count noun because it designates a limited body of water whose boundaries are specifically included in the scope of predication (i.e. they are inherent to the conception of a lake). By contrast, *water* is a mass noun." (1991: 18, original bold).

He also described bounding as the “existence of a limit (internal to the scope of predication) to the set of interconnected entities that constitute a region, or the set of component states that constitute a process” (ibid, 545). In other words, we are able to determine whether or not a noun is C or UC.

## 2. ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

### 2.1. Epstein and three additional functions of the definite article

The theoretical account of alternative types of English article use continues with an overview of some of the concepts outlined by Epstein (2001a; 2001b). He stated that *the* also serves to convey the prominence of a discourse entity (or topicality of a referent), an entity’s status as a role function (is it an instance or a type, as it is referred to in CG) or to indicate a shift in point of view (2001b: 335) where point of view in this case refers to the shift in the deictic center of the discourse. This does not necessarily mean that we are to suddenly disregard the previous accounts of the use of the definite article. This is merely an extension of its meaning and functions which should accommodate all the uses of the definite article in naturally occurring discourse.

What follows is a list of examples used to illustrate the three additional functions of the definite article. All of the examples come from naturally occurring language and have been adopted from Epstein (2001b). The first function is the use of the definite article as a trigger to indicate that the discourse entity in question is highly prominent, with pronounced topicality, and will play an important role in the ensuing discourse. The following three examples illustrate the case in point and can all be found in Epstein, 2001b: 349-350.

For example, the opening sentence of H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man*: “The stranger came early in February.”

The definite NP *the stranger* is used to grab the reader’s attention and indicate the importance of this stranger to the story that follows, highlighting its topicality.

Hall has been thinking about God, psychiatry, analysis, fairy tales, dreams and the monkey trap. As a boy he saw a picture of a monkey trap in a book, and he has used it as a basis for a theory on human behavior. A monkey trap is a hollowed gourd with bait inside. The monkey reaches in and wraps his fist around the bait but can’t remove his hand unless he drops the bait. The monkey never does. Hall believes the stroke got him out of the monkey traps in his life and freed him to do what he really wanted to do—read and write and think. (New York Times Magazine, 18 August 1996, pp. 22, 24).

The definite NP *the monkey trap* indicates and introduces an entity once again of importance for the ensuing discourse, a point which is also backed up by recurring mention of the same phrase.

“When first introduced, no representation of the entity can be retrieved from memory, so a new representation of the entity can be retrieved from memory, so a new representation must be set up (similarly to indefinites). But a definite description referring to a discourse prominent entity differs from an indefinite description insofar as the definite (but not the indefinite) helps the immediate expectation on the part of the addressee that the speaker is likely to continue talking about the entity. In accordance with this expectation, the addressee constructs the discourse referent under the guise of a highly prominent entity” (2001b: 356).

The following examples illustrate the relationship between the definite article and roles, that is, ‘value-free’ interpretations of a referent. The definite article can be used to access a role (a type) or to access its value (an instance), depending on the context.

Now Foreman’s feet were planted. Now Moorer made the big mistake. He crouched ever so slightly. His chin was on a straight line with Foreman’s feared right. It came straight and true and Moorer never had a chance. (New York Times, 7 November 1994, p. B13)

In this case, the definite description is used to refer to a role which can be inferred (2001b: 360). The mention of a big mistake refers to a preexisting stereotype sporting event, when the athlete in question either does something outstanding and achieves outstanding results, or he buckles under the pressure or physically does not rise to the challenge, which leaves us thinking that in his make-it-or-break-it moment this athlete made a crucial mistake. In the previous example, this role is assigned a particular value of a mistake made during a boxing match at a particular fight, which instantiates it.

George Allen, a rancher from San Luis Valley, wearing a black cowboy hat and drinking a beer while waiting for Mr. Buchanan, described himself as a “guy who gets up at 5 : 30 in the morning” and was tired of paying taxes for social programs. “The Washington special interest has gone too far”, Mr. Allen said. “Buchanan is going to reverse all that. I’m the guy who is footing the bill, and I’m sick of it.” (New York Times, 26 February 1996, p. A8)

In this case, the instantiation or the value Mr. George Allen, a rancher from San Luis Valley, precedes the introduction of the role, the guy who is footing the bill, in the discourse, but does not make the use of the definite description, as in the case of prominent discourse referents, any less valid.

And finally we come to the function related to the noncanonical point of view function, which requires us to position ourselves in a particular way in respect to the presumed speaker and to make important connections related to the deictic center of the discourse. It is easiest for an addressee to resolve reference when he or she is located in the immediate environment of the speaker. But sometimes the narrator/speaker may be referring to a context which is distant or remote, either in space or time, or the narrator/speaker is someone recounting a story in the third person. We are able to unconsciously make that shift from one point of view to another and understanding the text. It is this author’s opinion that the failure to

take this shift in point of view in account is one of the main factors that hinder the proper use of the definite article among L1 Serbian/L2 English speakers.

First of all, there is the opening sentence of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: "In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains." In this example we are asked to adopt the viewpoint of the narrator, who is at the same time the main protagonist. All of the definite descriptions are indicators of his point of view, inviting us into his environment, as he perceives it as the time.

I devised Sierra Madre resident Andy Dotson might not have needed to breach security barricades to return to his threatened home. He had forgotten his tattered, 19-year-old blanket with the distinctive penguin design. "The kids and the animals are my security blanket, they come first", he said. "But my family didn't get [the blanket], so I went back there. It means something to me. I was gonna bust through the barricades if I had to \_ (Los Angeles Times, 30 October 1993, p. A10)

This is another example of a shift to a noncanonical point of view, that of a third person. In the first example, we might even claim that the interpretation was made easier for us due to the fact that we as the reader were asked to adopt a new point of view from the very beginning of the text. In this case however, we determine that these shifts can occur mid-text, not to mention mid-sentence as well.

## 2.2. Verspoor and Huong: further studies

In his 2005 study, Huong opted for a cognitive-grammar based approach to article instruction designed to be used for L1 Vietnamese/L2 English speakers at the tertiary level. He addressed the topical issue of 'first/second mention' not as being insufficient, as has been suggested by Epstein, but being inaccurate, which "may cause more harm than good" (2005: 149). His approach, unlike the one developed by Epstein, was actually formatted to fit the EFL classroom, tailor-made to suit his particular students and which included much theoretically-laden instruction, starting from a discussion on definiteness in general, moving on to discussions of more specific issues which will also affect the choice of article. Since the participants involved in his study are first told to decide whether the noun in question is being used in the definite sense, they are "implicitly referring to Langacker's concept of "grounding" and [...] Langacker's concept of "quantity"<sup>1</sup> when we ask whether a noun is used as a count noun or not" (ibid, 152).

An important point that is made in this study is that definiteness is determined before countability, which could prove to be a key point in the process of article instruction. In addition, it may even prove to be a simpler step in the process of selecting the proper article, forcing us to rely on the context within which we come across the noun and the possible topicality of the referent in question. All we need in order to resolve this issue is to follow the discourse development, without the need to continuously refer back to any grammatical features of the

<sup>1</sup> This is also related to the concepts of "boundedness" and "construal".

noun (i.e. there is no need for EFL learners to continuously question themselves about whether what they are dealing with is a CSg, CPI or UC noun) in question or the syntactic structure of the sentence within which we find the noun in question (i.e. whether there is any modification that refers to that particular noun), all of which would additionally tax the comprehension process.

Another important point made in this study was the fact that it answered the question of the distinction between the specific and the generic, which is often times posed in regard to article use. The author made a very good point in saying that this type of distinction, when dealing with a cognitive grammar approach to article use and instruction, is actually not necessary. In other words:

“When a noun phrase is definite, it is implied that it is also specific as a result of the mental contact coordinated by the speaker and the hearer with a unique instance of a type (Langacker, 1991: vol. 2) and can thus be ignored. Besides, generic *the* is not that different from specific *the* and can be seen through the difference between two notions: the physical domain of instantiation and the abstract domain of instantiation [...]. If the speaker and hearer coordinate mental contact on one particular type as a whole, it can also be construed as uniquely identified and therefore definite, but in this case implicitly generic. Therefore, we feel it is warranted to use the notion of definiteness for both specific *the* and generic *the*, the more because it keeps the schema as simple as possible” (2005: 153, original italics). Furthermore, Langacker stated that

“In fact, I devised the notion “mental contact” for the specific purpose of characterizing the definite article, which – very roughly – indicates that the speaker and addressee have each established mental contact with the same instance of the relevant nominal class (which is specified by the remainder of the noun phrase).” (2000: 179).

It is important for us to mention that the results of the research carried out by Huong did in fact show an improvement in the knowledge of article use in the group of participants who were exposed to the more cognitive-grammar oriented approach. The difference noted between the group that received a traditional instruction and the ‘cognitive’ group was statistically significant. However, the benefits reaped from this type of instruction were not long-lived and it soon came to pass that on the second post-test, although the ‘cognitive’ group once again outperformed the ‘traditional’ group, the difference was no longer statistically significant. These results are however far from discouraging. They indicate the need for a more consistent and persistent cognitive grammar based approach to article instruction in the EFL classroom.

Based on the research carried out by Huong (2005) and Verspoor and Huong (2008), Verspoor further developed the lessons designed as part of this research, by including the use of visuals to help further improve the instruments used in the instruction. The visuals were used with the intention of improving comprehension and retention. They were meant to keep the instruction simple and to keep the salient concepts clear. In addition to the inclusion of visuals, which could prove to be of great importance for further article instruction, the second important point

that was emphasized by Verspoor in her study was the fact that article instruction is discourse-dependent. Many textbooks and course books seem to neglect this point by offering individual sentences as illustrations of article use. However, without recourse to a particular setting, a particular context to limit or establish any clear boundaries, the use of the correct article could prove to be not more than a guessing game, since these examples of nominal can often lack a grounding predication.

The results of the research carried out by Verspoor (forthcoming) indicate that even though ultimately the participants displayed improvement in their knowledge of article use, the learning process did not follow a straight, linear path, but is full of ups and downs so to speak. For example, in her case study the two participants first underwent a dip in their performance, after which they both improved, one stabilizing at a higher level of proficiency and accuracy, the other taking several other dips. Thus, any recorded improvement is a step in the right direction but is by no means the end to our journey.

Visuals were also used by Dimitrijević (2010) who attempted to try and find an alternative method for article instruction within the aforementioned theoretical framework. The results offered a certain amount of proof that the figure/ground distinction could be used as a starting point in the attempt to explain the use of the definite article to learners of English as a foreign language. The results yielded a statistically significant connection between the visual representation of the figure/ground distinction and the use of the definite article ( $p=.000$ ). These results could serve as the basis for the further studies related to the relationship between cognitive linguistics and the definite article in the SL classroom.

### 3. Conclusion

My primary goal was to try and bring together the work of several authors regarding the use of the definite article as they relate to Cognitive Grammar, with the hopes of being able to design a method which could be applied in the L2 classroom. Considering the fact that in many languages, including Serbian, no article system exists, the need for such a method, which could inspire more native-like use of the definite article, might prove to be quite useful. If to this we add that errors persist even at advanced levels of L2 English, it all indicates a need for change in English article instruction.

Some of the work, although primarily theoretical in nature, has been very helpful in identifying key concepts which could provide the basis for further research: how we construe situations, the entities within them and how much the speaker and hearer have to collaborate as a part of reference resolution. On the other hand, the practical research projects have shown positive results and can steer us in the right direction, whether we are replicating previous research or starting our own. Further research will reveal whether a cognitive linguistic approach will prove to be a better choice for researchers and teachers alike.

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Marta Dimitrijević

## PRIMENA PRINCIPA KOGNITIVNE LINGVISTIKE KAO SREDSTVO ZA UČENJE SISTEMA ČLANOVA U ENGLESKOM JEZIKU

*Rezime:* Inovativne metode u oblasti učenja engleskog jezika kao stranog u današnje vreme uglavnom potiču iz kognitivne lingvistike. Primenjena kognitivna lingvistika je, tokom proteklih petnaest godina dala veliki broj empirijskih podataka koji mogu da se koriste u procesu razvoja novih nastavnih metoda. Kroz razumevanje ljudske kognicije i primenu ovog znanja na učenje stranog jezika, nastavnici mogu da olakšaju sam proces učenja time što bi učenicima omogućili da koriste sredstva koja su im već na raspolaganju. Postoji velika potreba da se način na koji se sistem članova u engleskom jeziku predstavlja učenicima promeni, s obzirom na to da oni često imaju velike probleme u savladavanju ove vrste gradiva. Cilj ovog preglednog rada je da ukaže na neka relevantna istraživanja koja su se fokusirala na uvođenje kognitivne lingvistike u učionicu, sa posebnim osvrtom na učenje sistema članova u engleskom jeziku. Tu spadaju teorijski pregledi autora kao što su Langacker (1991; 2000) i Epstein (2001a; 2001b) kao i primenjena istraživanja autora Huong (2005), Verspoor & Huong (2008) i Verspoor (u štampi).

*Ključne reči:* kognitivna lingvistika, engleski jezik kao strani, sistem članova u engleskom jeziku