Context-Free Usages of the Definite Article in English : on Proper Nouns in View of Natural vs. Human Environments

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1. Introduction

The definite article "the" is the most common word in the English language (Sinclaire 1991).   Naturally, errors with "the" call into question a person's general competence in English and automatically mark him or her out as a non-native speaker.   It is therefore important for non-native speakers to use the article as accurately as possible, and any theoretical research which helps them to do this should be regarded as valuable.   The majority of the studies over the English definite article have been centered about "definiteness" covered under such concepts as "specificity (Enc 1991, Heunsinger 2002)," "determined reference (Farkas 2002)," "uniqueness(Russell 1905) ," "familiarity (Heim 1982)," or "previously mentioned (old and new / givenness) (Chafe 1976) " in grasping its semantic behaviors sensitive to context.   However, overall view of the usage of *the*, the English definite article, shows two aspects with respect to context: context-free and context-sensitive.

The context sensitivity on the usage of the definite article means that the presence or insertion of "the" is mandatory and meaningful only when its anaphoric linking has been hooked on a nominal expression introduced in the previous linguistic context. That is, the definite article is employed only when both the speaker and the listener or the writer and the reader know what is being referred to. The use of the definite article presupposes shared or registered knowledge as a familiar one.   It is therefore used to refer to established information, which comes to constitute a context, whereas the indefinite article is used to refer to new information.   So, changing "weapons of mass destruction" into "the weapons of mass destruction" by simply addition of "the" on the former expression brings up presuppositions of both that we all know what weapons we are talking about and that they exist.   This has been well recognized and has been characterized through a few decade-long researches with the different concepts as above so far.

On the other hand, the aspect of context-freeness of "the" is that the presence or absence of "the" before a certain category of nouns is already fixed and regarded as part of grammar to memorize.   Under the view of context-free "the", regardless of the

introduction of previous contexts, nouns can be partitioned into two sides: the one is a group of nouns requiring the presence of "the" such as "the sky, the ground, the wind, the Pacific ocean, the Amazon, the Republic of Korea, the Han river, and the Johns, etc.," and the other is a group of nouns rejecting the presence of "the" such as "Mt. Everest, Mt. Halla, Jeju Island, Manhattan, Lake Michigan, Korea, Seoul, and John, etc."   Of the two aspects on the context for the definite article, the context-free usages have received little attention, and have been treated as a list of exceptions out of reach of any comprehensive principles or governing notions.

  In this article, however, I would like to focus on these neglected context-free usages which seldom have been paid attention to in the theoretical linguistic circle, and to argue for a certain concept or principle running through these context-free usages. The central concept on the usages of context-free "the" that I would like to propose here is the notion of "compatibility" that factitiously partitions the entity on question from the elements classified or categorized on a par with it, bringing up the sense of contrast, except the cases of self-salient distinction of the questioned entity in nature.

2. Interesting observation on Waters vs. Mountains

Have you ever had thought on why the article *the* is used before the names of rivers, while *the* is not used before the names of mountains?   This is the case, where the following examples show:

 (1) Rivers
  The Nile
  The Han River
  The Amazon
  The Mississippes
  The Monongahela river

(2) Mountains
  Mt. Everest
  Mt. Halla
  Mt. Fuji
  Mt. Killimanjaro

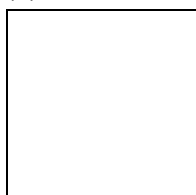Both rivers and mountains are parts of the environments which are seen around us.

Then what factor plays a role in our conceptualization that distinguishes rivers from mountains?

(3) Mountains

Out of many intrinsic properties of their distinctive nature, you can name a few things. A mountain is a high area of land with steep sides, its soils are staying, and it does not move and it usually makes a good contrast with the ground and other neighboring areas (including mountains) and can be seen distinctively in the distance, as Mt. Killimanjaro manifests itself as in (3).
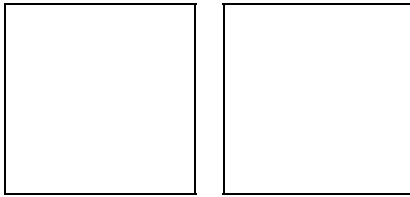
(4) Rivers

On the other hand, rivers are large amount of fresh water flowing continuously in a long line across the land, the water of rivers are flowing, not staying there, and the range of rivers are hard to tell one from connecting others except for arbitrary partitioning by name as seen in (4).   For example, the Monongahela river is connected with the Ohio river and the Allegheny river but there is no apparent reason why only the part of the water stream line is cut out to be named as the Monongahela.[1]

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[1] The Monongahela river is formed by the confluence of the West Fork River and the Tygart Valley River at Fairmont, West Virginia.   In Pennsylvania, the Monongahela is met by two major tributaries: the Cheat River, which joins at Point Marion; and the Youghiogheny River, which joins at McKeesport.

We can expand these properties of rivers to other names of water such as oceans and seas. How can we distinguish between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean and the Artic Ocean? Is there any standard or natural sea-marking that makes a fine cut-line between the Adriatic Sea and the Ionian Sea and the Ligurian Sea and the Tyrrhenian Sea and even the Mediterranean Sea?

(5) Oceans and Seas

As you can recognize from the ocean & sea maps, the water on the earth is connected with each other, continuously flowing from one point to another point, from one river to another river, from a river to a sea, from one sea to another sea, from a sea to an ocean, and from one ocean to another ocean. The partition of seas and oceans seems to be arbitrary as much as that of rivers. Therefore, the compatibility among them requires artificial or factitious dividing beyond natural water-marking. Whenever such requirement of artificial division exists at naming the bodies of water, we can see the definite article "the" is employed.

(6) Seas
a. The Yellow Sea / The West Sea
b. The Sea of Japan / The East Sea
c. The Adriatic Sea
d. The Mediterranean Sea

(7) Oceans
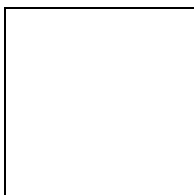a. The Pacific Ocean
b. The Atlantic Ocean
c. The Indian Ocean
d. The Arctic Ocean

Sometimes, all most the same area of water can be named differently due to political and national interests like The Sea of Japan or The East Sea on current debate.

In contrast, the case of mountains shows that they do not fall into such trouble of compatibility against the other mountains or neighboring areas and that whenever they are named, the article "the" is not used.
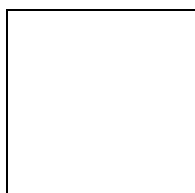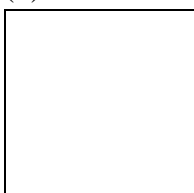
Most bodies of water need "the" before their names. So, usually the article "the" is used before the names of canals, straits, gulfs, seas, and oceans as well as rivers.

(8) Canals

    a. The Suez Canal
    b. The Panama Canal
    c. The North Sea Canal (at Amsterdam)
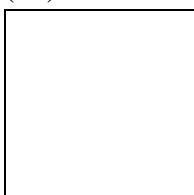   d. The Corinth Canal (in Greece)

(9) Straits   Sounds

    a. The Bering Strait
    b. The Korea Strait
    c. The Dover Strait
    d. The Gibraltar Strait

(10) Gulfs

    a. The Gulf of Mexico

b. The Persian Gulf / The Arabian Gulf

c. The Gulf of Oman

d. The Assyrian Gulf

So far, we have reached a conclusion that most of waters need to have "the" before their name, in contrast with mountains, which defy being preceded by the definite article. However, when it comes to lakes and bays, we can see the same blocking against "the," as below:

(11) Lakes

a.   Lake Superior

b.   Lake Michigan

c.   Lake Mendota (Madison, Wisconsin)

d.   Crate Lake (Oregon)

(12) Bays

a. Green Bay

b. Hudson Bay

c. The Bay of Bengal

What is responsible for the blocking of the definite article from being put on the names of lakes and bays seems to be connected to the reason why islands show the same behavior as mountains in not taking "the" in front of their names.

(13) Islands

a. Sicily (Island)
b. Manhattan Island
c. Jeju Island

Whenever such requirement of artificial division exists at naming natural environment like the bodies of water, we can see the definite article "the" is employed as in deserts, which have a characteristic of flowing or fluidity.

(14) Deserts

a. The Sahara
b. The Gobi
c. The Great Victoria Desert

The names of mountains and islands do not take the definite article when they are named in English.   When it comes to the plural forms like mountain ranges or a group of islands, however, it turns out to be a different story.   They should take "the" in front of their name.
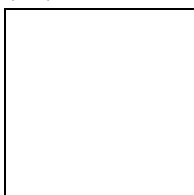
(15) Mountain Ranges

a. The Rockies/the Rocky Mountains
b. The Apls
c. The Andes

The reason why they need the definite article seems to be related to the artificial grouping, which can be detected in the names of waters. Which mountain or which island should belong to a certain group of mountains or islands is not self-salient or easily determined. Such partition among them is just arbitrary on different reason beyond naturalness or salience, which can be characterized by the concept of "factitious compatibility."

(16) Islands

    a. The Aleutians
    b. The Hawaiian Islands
    c. The Bahamas

3. Casting the conceptual net over the usages of context-free "the"

It is so ambitious to cover all the range of the context-free usage in this page-limited article. The observations that we will make and apply the notion of the "factitious compatibility" to will be limited to the range of natural environments vs. human-built environments.

(17) Natural environments vs. Human-built environments
    (A) Natural environments: waters, mountains, deserts
    (B) Human-built environments: building, areas, bridges, transportations,
        political systems.

Different from the context-sensitive usages of the definite article, those context-free usages are pre-determined beyond contexts and are believed to be constant as "the stars in the sky." Its acquisition has not been possible to be captured by an elegant linguistic theory so far. Comparing with other linguistic fields, it is also true that there exists few research on this side of the definite article, because of such general assumption that the usages of context-free "the" are principle-free but memory-large, each of which can not help but to be learned by heart. The common cases of the context free usages of the definite article can be listed as followings, which have been assumed to resist any single conceptualization:

If we review the following proper names with the perspective of the "compatibility," we will see how the conceptualization can explicate the context-free usages.

Whenever the entity itself is self-salient against the neighboring or conceptually equivalent entities at first glance, it does not take the definite article. Without such salience out of its existence, the entity always needs artificial division to be differentiated from others to reach factitious compatibility when named.

(18)
  a. Before the names of most bodies of water except lakes, bays: Canals /Seas /Rivers /Straits/ Oceans/Gulfs, etc.
     ←→ Hudson Bay/ the Bay of Bengal, Lake Michigan
  b. Before the names of Island groups: The Aleutians, The Kuriles, The Hawaiian Islands, The Bahamas
     ←→ Sicily, Manhattan, Jeju Island   cf. The isle of Skye,
  c. Before the names of mountain ranges: The Rockies/the Rocky Mountains, The Apls, The Andes, The Appalachinans, The Urals/the Ural Mountains
     ←→ Mt. Everest, Mt. Baekdu, Mt. Fuji
  d. Before the Names of deserts: The Sahara, The Gobi, The Great Victoria Desert
  e. Before the names of some countries: The United Stated, The United Kingdom, The Netherlands, The Philippines, / The Republic of Korea, The Dominican Republic, / The Argentine, The Lebanon, The Ukraine, cf. The Hague
  f. Before the names of ships: The Queen Elizabeth, The Titanic, The Santa Maria The Cunard Line, The French Line.
  g. Before the names of Trains/Airplanes: The Bullet Train (The Shinkansen), The Oriental Express, The Shanghai Express, / The Tokyu Line
     ←→ Korean Airlines, Japan Airlines, American Airlines cf. The China Clipper
  h. Before the names of Bridges/Tunnels: The Golden Gate Bridge, The Brooklyn Bridge, The Hudson Tunnel, The Lincoln Tunnel
  i. Before the names of Hotels/Large buildings: The Imperial, The Century, The Hilton, The Empire State Building, The Tokyo Tower, The World Trade Center,
     ←→   House, Hall, Stadium
  j. Before the names of gardens, zoos, museums: The Botanic Garden, The Vilas Zoo, The Arts museum, The national museum of Korea.
     ←→ Park, Plaza, Mall.
  k. Before family names pluralized when more than one member of the family is referred to: the Kims   ←→ Kim

On this observation, we can do epistemological grouping over these stipulations: natural environments vs. human-built environments along pluralization vs. singularization, compulsoriness vs. optionality. Throughout these groups in both natural and human-built environments, we can seethe meaningful concept of "factitious compatibility" or "artificial grouping" to comprehend the general behaviors of this side of "the." Investigation into the A-J idiosyncratic-looking stipulations like seashells randomly scattered on the beach will make us find a land-marking path out of the maze.

4. Concluding Remarks

A list of the names of epistemological or ontological groups employing "the" before the names of most bodies of water, before the names of bridges or tunnels, or before the names of hotels has been attributed to as only a bunch of separated stipulations, which should be learned one by one, case by case, through experience or memorizing. However, by the conceptualizing of these randomly looking rules of names with regard to the definite article "the" in light of the concept "the factitious compatibility," we can reach a conclusion that the context-free usages of the definite article should be treated as principle-governed area. It is either factitious compatibility or self-saliency in the nature of an entity that determines whether the proper name regardless of nature or human environments should take the definite article on its name. It needs more attention and study to bring a full-scale of explanations and observation on these context-free usages of "the."

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