Definiteness in English, French and Arabic: A Contrastive Study

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1. *Introduction:*

It is well known that an article is a type of restrictive adjectives[1] --that is, it limits the noun being described. The articles are perhaps the "simplest" adjectives --so simple that we often don't recognize that they are really adjectives. In English and Arabic, this is not so vital, but in French, it is; adjectives in French must agree in number and gender with the nouns they modify. The article is used with a noun showing whether the noun refers to something definite or indefinite. "Definite" means that "the" in English refers to some specific thing as contrasted with "a" or "an" which does not refer to one specific thing.

Thus, if I say "the book", you know to which book I refer, this knowledge based either on a previous mention of this

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(¹) **The restrictive adjectives are: definite&indefinite articles, possessives adjectives, demonstrative adjectives, indefinite adjectives, interrogative adjectives, cardinal adjectives, ordinal adjectives, proper adjectives and nouns used as adjectives (see Quirk, 1985).**

individual entity or on the situational elements surrounding it ,

as opposed to "a book" which is general and does not refer to

any specific book (Beeston,1968:24; Hassan, 1975:421). In

French, the definite article is often used to indicate preferences

for whole classes of things. When used in this sense, the definite

article is usually left out in the English translation. For example,

in English, we say, "I like bread." No article is used. In French

and Arabic, we say, "J'aime le pain." and "أحب الخبز ". The

definite articles in both languages indicate that we like bread

generally and these articles are required for the sentences to be

grammatically correct. The usage of this definite article is

therefore determined by two types of references; specific and

generic reference (Quirk, 1985:262; Richard *etal*, 1985:17).

Furthermore, the definite article is generally "used to indicate a

single object in the world of discourse. It also signals to the

reader that the noun to follow is to be interpreted as referring to

a particular object or particular group of objects" (see Dubois,

1973:66;; Jesperson, 1976:162; Abdullah, 2007: 12).

Moreover, Trask (1993:21) states that "an article is a

determiner which lacks independent meaning but serves to

indicate the degree of definiteness or specificity of the noun

phrase in which it occurs". However, there are two main

theories about the meaning of definiteness; familiarity and

uniqueness. The point of familiarity is that for an object to be

definite, it must be familiar to both the speaker and the listener.

Thus in the sentence: "I went blind from staring at the sun too long" In this sentence, *the sun* is part of everyone's general knowledge, and it is therefore familiar to both the speaker and the listener.

Under the uniqueness theory, the definite article signals that there is only one entity that satisfies the description that the speaker used. In other words, the object to which the speaker refers to is unique. In the sentence "The winner of the competition will definitely lose a limb" the competition has not yet ended, as noted by future tense, so the listener cannot possibly identify the winner. However, it is common knowledge that unless there is a tie, a competition only has one winner. Therefore, in the listener's mind, even though the winner has yet to be determined, he or she will be unique based on the fact that a competition only has one winner. Moreover, both properties characterize most occurrences of definite descriptions although there are examples which defy one or the other or both theories (Lyons 1999: 3-12). Furthermore, the purpose of articles is to let the reader know that a noun is coming and to tell something about the noun (Larson, 1984:443).

The three languages- English, French and Arabic- have the following articles a, an, and the ; L`, Le, La, Les, un, une, and des ; أل respectively. In Arabic, أل is called the instrument of definition consisting of two letters the *elif* and *lam* and it is

employed to indicate either the genus of any individual bearing the name or a particular individual; the former is called لامُ الجِنْس and the latter لام ألعَهْد(Wright,1971:269; Hassan, 1975:423). However, Blachere (1952:205,306) sees that the article أل is a demonstrative because it looks like the demonstrative and it is used as a demonstrative when the context permits that. ألرجُل . ذلك ألرّجلُ and هذا ألرّجلُ like *this man* for instance, can mean

Owing to the importance of definite articles as part of the noun phrase in the formulation of the sentence and to the necessity to be used properly by language users, the present research tries to shed light on them in three languages: English, French, and Arabic focusing on their different functions in these languages and showing whether there is any similarity or difference among them.

2. *Discussions & Data Analyses*

As mentioned earlier, articles are used in the three languages with nouns. However French language has some exception in which the definite articles (Le, L`, La, and Les) are used before the verbs as pronouns (direct object) for instance:

1.

  a. *Je donne le livre a Jacques*

  b. *Je le lui donne*

  c. أعطيته اياه

It is known that French mostly uses definite articles (Le, La, and Les) before parts of the body including appearances and mental faculties like memory, whereas English uses possessive pronouns (her, his, and their) as in:

2.

  a. *IL a leve` la main*

  b. *He raised his hand*

  c. رفع يده

In French, the challenge resides in knowing when to use a definite article or a possessive adjective. If the part of the body is the subject of an English verb other than "to be, French like English uses a possessive adjective (mon, ton, son, etc.). Example:

3.

  a. *Tes cheveux tombent en cascade*

  b. *Your hair hangs down*

  c. ينسدل شعرك

In French, the definite articles (Le, L`, La, and Les) are used when the body part or mental faculty is the direct object of a pronominal verb expressing a common action that the subject performs with his or her body; however, this is not true in both English and Arabic as can be seen in the following examples:

4.

  a. *Jean a hause Les epaules*

  b. *John shook his shoulders*

c. هز جون كتفيه

The user of the French language also prefers to make body part the direct object of a sentence whereas English and Arabic languages users tend to make the body part the subject of the sentence as in:

5.

  a. Il a les bras muscles

  b. His arms are strong

c. ذراعاه قويتان

    In Arabic, the definite article may occur after a demonstrative but this is not true in both French and Arabic as in the following examples:

5.1

  a. Cette classe est large

  b. This class is big

c. هذا الصف كبير

5.2

  a. J` ai achete` cette maison

  b. I bought this house

c. إشتريت هذا البيت

Furthermore, proper nouns take zero articles in the three languages as in:

6.

  a.Jacques est alle` au marche`

  b.Jack went to the market

c. *ذهب جاك إلى السوق*

     But if the proper nouns in Arabic are used as common nouns, they may take the article and the inflection of the masculin plural (ون) and feminine (ات) for example: *Les Zayeds* الزيديون **and** *Les Fatimas* الفاطمـات .   **This is true also in English as in:** *The Jacks.* **In French, the definite article (Les) can also be used before proper nouns to indicate the name of the family or to emphasize the name and this name is singular as in:**

7.

   a. Les Martin عائلة مارتن

     Name of rivers in French and English take definite articles whereas the name of 'Tigris' 'دجلـة'in Arabic takes always a zero article. This can clearly be shown in the following examples:

8.

  a.*Le Tigre , L` Euphhrate*

  b.*the Tigris and the Euphrates*

  c. *دجلـة و الفرات*

     As for the names of the people in the three languages, they take definite articles as can be seen in below:

9.

a. *Les* Francais	*The* French	الفرنسيون
b. *Les* Anglais	*The* English	ألإنكليز
c. *Les* Irakiens	*The* Iraqis	العراقيون

The names of cities and countries take zero article in French and English when they are preceded by prepositions *to* (English) and *au* and *aux* (French) whereas they take definite article in Arabic as in the following:

10.

a.Il travail a` Mossoul.

b.He works in Mosul.

*c.*يشتغل في الموصل

Moreover, the names of games that take definite article in Arabic show zero articles in both English and French. This can be illustrated in the following:

11.1

   a.Je joue aux cartes.

   b.I play cards.

   *c.*العب الورق

11.2

   a. Elle joue du piano.

   b. She plays piano.

   c. تعزف البيانو

English uses the zero article plus uncountable nouns whereas Arabic and French do not function like that as in:

12.

   a. Love can cause a lot of suffering.

   b.L`amour peut causer beaucoup de souffrance.

c. قد يسبب الحب الآماً كثيرة.

On the contrary, English, French and Arabic use definite article plus plural nationality noun as can be seen in the following example:

13.

 a. The Chinese have an ancient culture.

 b. Les Chinois out une culture ancienne.

c. يمتلك الصينيون حضارة قديمة

  Definite articles are not used with certain nouns in French and English which indicate places, objects or activities whereas such nouns in Arabic take articles.

14.1

 a. Je vais au lit (Activity)

 b. I go to bed

c. اذهب إلى الفراش

14.2

 a. Ne soutez pas sur le lit. (Object)

 b. Do not jump on the bed.

c. لا تقفز فوق السرير

  As for general terms in both English and French, they are preceded by zero articles but this is not true in Arabic:

15.1

 a. Poverty is not a shame.

 b. Pauverte` n`est pas vice.

c. ليس الفقر عيبا

15.2

　　a. Necessity has no law.

　　b.. Necessite` passé loi

　　c. الضرورات تبيح المحظورات

　　　　We have to notice that when the generic reference is limited by the use of the post-modifying of the phrase form, the head noun requires the definite article in English and French; whereas the head noun in Arabic takes zero article as in the following:

16.

　　a. The director of the company.

　　b. Le directeur de la soci`ete`.

　　c. مدير الشركة

　　　　The names of studies that take the definite article in French and Arabic take zero articles in English for example:

17.1

　　a. I study mathmatics.

　　b. Je fait les me`thmatiques

　　c. ادرس الرياضيات

17.2

　　 a. He studied medicine

　　b. Il a fait L medicine

　　c. درس الطب

It is also noticed that the names of diseases that take definite articles in Arabic and French take zero articles in English. The following examples illustrate this:

18.1

   a. He has influenza.

   b. Il a la grippe

   c. انه مصاب بالأنفلونزا

18.2

   a. She has typhoid.

   b. Elle a` le typhus.

   c. إنها مصابة بالتيفوئيد

   Certain nouns in Arabic and French that may denote institutions or places take definite article, whereas such nouns in English are not preceded by definite articles as it is clear in the following:

19.1

   a. I go to school.

 This sentence means " I go to school to learn"

   b. I go to the school.

This sentence means " I go to the building"

   c. اذهب إلى المدرسة (للدراسة)

   d. اذهب إلى بناية المدرسة

   However, different dialects of English do not always use articles in the same way. For instance Americans speak of "going to the hospital" whereas British say "going to hospital".

3. Conclusion:

This research paper shows that there are certain fundamental differences between the three languages. It also reveals the difficulties of teaching such notions because there are no direct correspondences among French, English, and Arabic. The presence of a definite article in one language is not necessary in another one. It also points out that it is difficult to find out common rules concerning the functions and uses of definite articles in French, English and Arabic. This difficulty comes from the variability of these rules that govern the use of articles in English, French and Arabic. The research, however, is also meant to highlight certain points of definiteness in the three languages that can be useful to the users of these three languages especially those who deal with translation.

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التعريف في اللغات الانكليزية و الفرنسية و العربية

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المستخلص

تناول البحث دراسة أدوات التعريف فـي ثــلاث لغـات: (الإنكليزيــة والفرنسية والعربية)؛ وذلك من الإشارة إلى استعمالاتها في هذه اللغات الثلاث و إظهار أوجه التشابه والاختلاف بينهم. وبهذا تحاول الدراسة إثبات أن اسـتعمال أدوات التعريف في هذه اللغات غير متشابه وذلك تبعاً لميزات ووظائف محـددة للأسماء التي تليها. إذ أظهرت الدراسة وجود اختلافات عديدة بين هـذه اللغـات الثلاث تبعاً لاستعمالها لأدوات التعريف .