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CORRELATION BETWEEN SERBIAN ASPECT IN ADJECTIVES AND ARTICLES IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH

CORRELACIÓN ENTRE EL ASPECTO SERBIO EN ADJETIVOS Y ARTÍCULOS EN INGLÉS Y ESPAÑOL

Marijana Prodanovic[1], Sasa Corbolokovic[2], Aleksandra Gagic[3]

1, 2, 3 - Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

1. Email: mprodanovic@singidunum.ac.rs **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4413-5535
2. Email: scorbolokovic@singidunum.ac.rs **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3767-2313
3. Email: agagic@singidunum.ac.rs **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6804-4662

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Abstract:

This essay aims to illustrate the phenomenon of (in-)definiteness in three languages – them being English, Spanish, and Serbian. Not many similarities could be found among the three languages. While English and Spanish recognise the notion of definite-indefinite article, there is no article in the Serbian language. However, what Serbian does have is the concept of definite and indefinite aspect in adjectives – which, it is assumed, could serve as a compensation for the definite-indefinite article on many occasions. With this in mind, a brief survey among Serbian native speakers who study both English and Spanish was conducted. The results it yielded showed that Serbian speakers do recognise, though to a certain extent only, the difference between definite and indefinite aspect in adjectives in their mother tongue. The lack of full awareness of the mentioned aspects leads to them not using this potential of Serbian when dealing with Spanish and English articles.

Keywords: English, Spanish, Serbian, (in-)definiteness.

Resumen:

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo ilustrar el fenómeno de la (in)definición en tres idiomas: inglés, español y serbio. No se pudieron encontrar muchas semejanzas entre los tres idiomas. Si bien el inglés y el español reconocen el concepto de artículo definido-indefinido, no existe ningún artículo en el idioma serbio. Sin embargo, lo que sí tiene el serbio es el concepto de aspecto definido e indefinido en los adjetivos, lo que, se supone, podría servir como compensación del artículo definido-indefinido en muchas ocasiones. Teniendo esto en cuenta, se realizó una breve encuesta entre hablantes nativos de serbio que estudian inglés y español. Los resultados que arrojó la encuesta mostraron que los hablantes de serbio reconocen, aunque solo hasta cierto punto, la diferencia entre el aspecto definido e indefinido de los adjetivos en su lengua materna. La falta de pleno conocimiento de los aspectos mencionados hace que no utilicen este potencial del serbio cuando se trata de artículos en español e inglés.

Palabras clave: Inglés, Español, Serbio, (in-)definición.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

It is common knowledge that we cannot find articles in all the modern languages. What is also known is that articles, despite not being complex from a morphological perspective, can play an important role in language transmission, translation, and interpretation. The relevance of articles specifically comes to the forefront of foreign language teaching-learning practices. Rarely can we be, as non-natives, sure about what article could perfectly fits one context, irrespective of our language proficiency. Even as native speakers, we can often have some doubts as regards the extent to which something is or is not well-defined. In foreign language teaching-learning practices, adequate acquisition, interpretation, and activation of articles is a specific ordeal for those learners whose L1s do not recognise this category. They might face numerous obstacles in both writing and speaking, and translation activities are no exception. This paper will aim to obtain an insight into the correlation between articles in Spanish and English and aspect in adjectives in the Serbian language.

The English language is characterized by a tripartite framework of articles – we usually differentiate among definite, indefinite and zero article. Relying on literature, we can find numerous suggestions, official guidelines about the usage of articles – there are, namely, some occasions, some nouns/noun phrases which specifically ask for the usage of either definite or indefinite article (or exclude visible articles at all and stick to their zero representative).

Characteristics of the definite, indefinite and zero article in English sometimes heavily depend on the context they belong to. As a results, EFL learners usually face less challenges when dealing with articles in isolation than when they appear in context-bound language scenarios. While some items are followed by fixed suggestions regarding the usage of articles, e.g., oceans, seas, mountain peaks, cities, theatres, meals, part of the day, body parts, material nouns, abstract nouns, etc., there can always be many exceptions to the available rules. Anyhow, one of the very first lessons related to articles says that we need to apply the definite article whenever dealing with an entity which is known, mentioned for the second time (at least), to what we can actually do see a reference (e.g., I met a boy in the street; The boy was wearing a navy-blue jacket). On the other hand, on occasions when an entity (be it animate or inanimate) is introduced for the very first time – namely – when it has not been defined, we can rely on the application of the indefinite article (further reading: Huddleston & Pullum, 2005, Ch. 5; Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990, pp. 363-394; Nelson & Greenbaum, 2013, Ch. 2.36; Prodanovic, 2022, Ch. 3; Payne, 2011, Ch. 5).

The status of articles is pretty similar to the one existing in English in the Spanish language as well (see more about the correlation in: Spinelli, 2007, Ch. 5). Namely, we find the definite article, in front of a noun, describing its specific nature (defining it); however, what represents a striking difference lies in the fact that the very form of the definite article in Spanish will depend on the gender of the noun in question; unlike the situation in English, which rarely differentiates between feminine and masculine nouns and offers just one form of the definite article, the Spanish language consistently applies agreement (the used article agrees with the noun following it, e.g., *el libro*, m; *la casa*, f). Furthermore, apart from gender, number also plays an important role here (e.g., *los libros*, m; *las casas*, f) – and that is why the used article might appear in either singular or plural (on the other hand, we still do have one and only *THE* in English, irrespective of number). Situation is pretty similar when it comes to the indefinite article. In both languages – this article is generally used in front of a noun to refer to its unspecified nature (being

mentioned for the very first time, unknown, not defined enough, etc.). Again, agreement between the article and noun used is always visible in Spanish (*un libro*, m; *una casa*, f) – both in relation to gender and number (*unos libros*, m; *unas casas,* f). In a nutshell, while there is only one form of the definite article, and the *a/an* variation for the indefinite article in English, Spanish has a spectrum of four variants for the definite and as many for the indefinite article – masculine and feminine in singular and plural (amounting to 8 possibilities in total). Although the very existence of the phenomenon of article in two languages could be very helpful in teaching-learning processes – differences related to its complexity might result in some common mistakes among language learners.

The Serbian language, both areally and typologically distant from the two languages previously mentioned, has no articles. Its system fully recognises and actively applies numerous elements functioning as determinators – but the notion of an article itself (neither in theory nor in practice) is unknown. Consequently, in foreign language teaching-learning processes, it could be pretty challenging to grasp a category which does have its counterpart in your native language. Both language teachers and learners might try to fill that void by illustrating the characteristics of definite and indefinite article in a foreign language via the usage of some similar determiners, e.g., indefinites or demonstratives (*jedan/neki dečak* for a boy and *taj dečak* for the boy). Even though such practices might come in useful, hardly could they always be seen as clear-cut guidelines. However, there is another category, not visible in either English or Spanish – which, at least in part, could be seen as a close one to the category of articles. The Serbian language, namely, recognises different aspects in adjectives – definite and indefinite, and has two forms of adjectives as disposal – the so-called more (definite) and less complex (indefinite) one.

In the eyes of literature in Serbian, aspect in adjectives is seen as a category distinguishing adjective from other content words (Stevanovic, 1999; Klajn, 2005; Mrazovic, Vukadinovic, 2009). The category is primarily related to qualificative adjectives, which could be regarded as definite and indefinite. Whether an adjective is a definite or an indefinite would be defined via a semantic distinction and differences in declension (Stanojcic, 2010). While the definite form of an adjective points to specific referential nature (something already mentioned, related to a specific situation or its parts), the indefinite one always refers to some characteristics of an indefinite entity. As a result, the former answers the question WHICH, whereas the latter answers the question WHAT. It is, anyhow, worth noting that the present-day Serbian language actively recognises and uses the definite-indefinite adjectival character solely in the nominative case of a masculine singular entry – the characteristic has almost disappeared in other cases (Piper, Klajn, 2012, p. 131).

Klajn (2005, p. 70) emphasises the fact that we can actually compare the aspect in adjectives in Serbian to the situation in English, as well as other languages where there are definite and indefinite article. Klajn adds (ibid) that these two categories should not be seen as identical, given the fact that definite aspect in an adjective can be used after one or some (it is not the same with definite article).

The Board for Standardization of the Serbian language (1999) points out that definite aspect in adjectives lives only in terminology in modern day and age. In their view, indefinite attributed SOME and ONE, used as a specific substitution for indefinite article coming from a number of languages, frequently exclude the usage of definite aspect in an adjective (*one serious gentleman, jedan ozbiljni mladić*).

Stankovic (2013, pp. 207-218) takes a more critical stance regarding the illustration of the category in literature. He

lists some examples taken from the language of Vuk Karadzic and Ivo Andric – who do combine definite aspect with indefinite determiners (one and some). Stankovic adds that the process of determining aspect in adjectives is a highly complex one and requires in-depth analysis – including not only Morphology/Word Formation but also Pragmatics.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ADDRESSING RELATED PHENOMENA

Studies in second language acquisition have also frequently focused on the usage of articles (either definite or indefinite), with specific emphasis on positive and negative transfer which might occur along the way. It has been concluded that learners whose L1 does not recognise the category of articles, will often struggle to acquire it – and might opt for either omit articles or find some substitutions (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004; Master, 1987; Ardura, 2014).

Montrul and Ionin (2010) investigated the influence of English on the status of article in Spanish among Spanish heritage speakers residing in the USA. They focused on the differences in the usage of definite article in the two languages and paid attention to the examples illustrating generic/specific reference in plural (in English, plural nouns are usually used with no article, to refer to generic; in Spanish, however, definite article is used for both generic and specific reference) and inalienable/alienable constructions (in English, definite article used with body parts refers to alienable possession, while in Spanish it points to inalienable possession). The investigation results confirmed a strong influence of the English language on Spanish heritage speakers in this regard; their choices as regards article activation are severely affected by characteristics of definite article in English, especially when it comes to generic usage context (confirmed in the investigation from 2012 as well).

Snape, Garcia-Mayo & Gurel (2012) contrasted as many as four languages – them being – Spanish, Turkish, Japanese, and English in order to see the status of article when generic reference is in question. The observed languages exhibit significant differences related to the characteristics of articles they possess – English and Spanish are characterised by article systems, the Turkish language recognises an indefinite article only, while Japanese has no articles. The study obtained an insight into the choices of EFL speakers of different L1s – Spanish, Turkish, and Japanese. What the group of authors concluded was that L1 influences the choices – and it seems that generic use of definite article presents a challenge for them all, irrespective of their proficiency levels.

Garcia-Mayo (2009) examined the usage of articles in English by Spanish native speakers with two different proficiency language level. As regards the characteristic of definiteness, the study confirmed that Spanish learners consistently apply definite article the to refer to this characteristic. Also, this insight shed some light on semantic transfer of the Spanish language characteristics onto English.

Trenkic (2009) addressed behaviour of second language learners whose L1s do not have articles. Such learners, the author reminds us, tend to see the concept of articles as nominal modifiers rather than grammatical constituents. For this reason, when using L2, they might either omit the usage of articles or look for some other alternatives, i.e., modifiers which might be used as substitution. In this work, Trenkic claims that common mistakes with regards to inconsistent patterns made by EFL learners should be seen through a deeper syntactic prism.

In one of her earlier studies, Trenkic (2004) was focused on the situation related to SBC languages (Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian) which do not possess the very

category of article. For these languages, the authors claims, it is believed that they might find some other language elements to compensate for this lack and emphasise definiteness or indefiniteness.

SAMPLE & METHODOLOGY ILLUSTRATION

Taking into account the above-mentioned postulates and insight, as well as the fact that Serbian, on the one hand, does not possess the concept of articles, while, on the other hand, Spanish and English both do, the idea underlying this investigation is to see whether Serbian native speakers – when exposed to definite and indefinite aspect in adjectives – which they should translate into English and Spanish respectively, relate definite aspect in adjectives to definite article and use the article whenever translating definite adjectives.

A set of 10 sentence pairs was created in Serbian; in each pair – the very same adjective was used; in one of the sentences, the adjective aspect is definite, in the other one, it is indefinite (examples with indefinite aspect adjectives represent specific control group in the investigation; they were used as supportive means – to help the respondents see the difference in the adjective usage). The pairs of sentences, as well as accompanying comments, are illustrated below:

1. Stari covek je sa osmehom gledao u daljinu (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

On je star covek, ne cudi sto otezano hoda.

2. Ko je na vratima - lepi decak upita (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

David je lep, ali i dobar decak.

3. Danas je tesko postati popularan pisac.

Znam da ce vam se vise dopasti popularni pisac (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

4. Detaljan pristup nije uvek i najbolji.

Gresku je primetio samo detaljni posmatrac (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

5. Marko, precizan matematicar, dao nam je resenje.

Da li sa tobom u razred ide precizni matematicar? (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

6. Smesni komentar me je doveo do suza (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

To nije nista drugo do smesan vic.

7. Luckast katakter ga je činio nedoljivim.

Hej, luckasti momče, otkud ti na našim vratima? (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

8. Nije se bojala strašnoga učitelja (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

Strašan prasak me je probudio usred noći.

9. Siromašni će uskoro izaći na ulice (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

Ne čudi što siromašan svet napušta zemlju.

10. Topao zagrljaj greje srce.

Topli osmeh me je podržao u teškom trenutku (*definite aspect, definite article expected*)

The comments given in parentheses were not available to the respondents – they represent the starting assumption of the study, i.e., its main hypothesis; as definite aspect in Serbian adjectives could be used as a substitution for both English and Spanish definite article (we opted for specific reference in singular nouns, where English and Spanish show similarities rather than differences), it might be expected that Serbian native speakers, learning the two foreign languages, could see the correlation between the phenomena and translate the definite aspect adjectives with the active engagement of definite article.

The observed sample comprises answers/translation provided by 80 university-level students, who took part in the activity in a relaxed, in-class atmosphere, without being exposed to any previous instructions, comments related to the expectations, and it could be, thus assumed, that the answers given depict spontaneous decisions, rooted in (primarily) mother tongue perceptions.

Upon sample gathering and classification, qualitive approach was applied and prominent translation suggestions were highlighted, with the main goal being a deeper understanding of whether Serbian native speakers are aware of the link between the observed phenomena, and if so – how they apply that in practice.

ILLUSTRATION & DISCUSSION

When translating into English, Serbian native speakers, with estimated C1 English language command – respondents proved that they might interpret the given sentences differently, but did not, however, show enough consistency as regards the usage of the definite/indefinite article.

The illustration which follows provides just an insight into the selected, most prominent examples, i.e., commonest translation suggestions in the corpus. While the usage of the definite article was (dominantly, around 60% of the sample) found when translating the adjectives in definite aspect, and the indefinite article in front of the noun phrase/-s in depicting indefinite aspect in adjectives, e.g.

- *Stari čovek je sa osmehom gledao u daljinu*/The old man was looking in the distance with a smile on his face;

On je star čovek, ne čudi što otežano hoda/He is an old man; it's no wonder he has difficulties walking.

- *Marko, precizan matematičar, dao nam je rešenje/ Marko, a precise mathematician, gave us the solution;*

Da li sa tobom u razred ide precizni matematičar/Is the precise mathematician in your class?

However, in over 20% of the sample, deviations from the illustrated correlation – definite article for definite aspect in adjective, that is – indefinite article for indefinite aspect in adjectives, as in the examples, were noticed:

- *Stari čovek je sa osmehom gledao u daljinu /An old man was looking in the distance with a smile* (indefinite article for definite adjective aspect)

On je star čovek, ne čudi što otežano hoda/He's an old man no wonder he walks unsteadily (indefinite article for indefinite adjective aspect as well)

- *Ko je na vratima, lepi dečak upita /Who's at the door? A pretty boy asked* (indefinite article for definite adjective aspect)

David je lep, ali i dobar dečak /David is a pretty, but he also a good boy (indefinite article for indefinite adjective aspect)

- *Danas je teško postati popularan pisac/It is difficult to become a popular writer nowadays* (indefinite article for indefinite adjective aspect)

Znam da će vam se više dopasti popularni pisac/I know you would prefer a popular writer (indefinite article for definite adjective aspect)

- *Detaljan pristup nije uvek i najbolji/ A detailed approach is not always the best approach* (indefinite article for indefinite adjective aspect)

Gresku je primetio samo detaljni posmatrac/The mistake was only noticed by an elaborate observer (indefinite article for definite adjective aspect)

In a similar vein, another deviation (around 15% of the sample) was actually based on zero article usage – irrespective of the adjective aspect in Serbian, e.g.

- *Ko je na vratima, lepi dečak upita/Who's at the door – pretty boy asked;*

David je lep, ali i dobar dečak/David is pretty, but also a good boy.

- *Smešni komentar me je doveo do suza /Crazy character made him irresistible.*

To nije ništa drugo do smešan vic /Hey crazy boy, what are you doing at our door?

- *Siromašni će uskoro izaći na ulice /Poor will get on the streets soon.*

Ne čudi što siromašan svet napušta zemlju /It is not wonder that poor people are leaving aur country.

- *Topao zagrljaj greje srce /Warm hug warms a heart.*

Topli osmeh me je podržao u teškom trenutku /Warm smile supported me during the tough moment.

In the other part of the sample, when translating into Spanish, Serbian native speakers, with estimated B1 Spanish language command – confirmed practices similar to those visible in the Serbian-English sample part. Namely, around 40% of the respondents opted for definite articles when translating the noun phrases containing definite aspect adjectives, e.g.

¿Quién está en la puerta? – el niño bonito preguntó.

¿Quién está en la puerta ? – el chico guapo preguntó.

However, around 20% of the sample shows the usage of indefinite article, with both definite and indefinite aspect adjectives, e.g., "un chico guapo" or "un chico bonito". What is also interesting is the fact that many respondents opt for zero article consistently, as in "chico guapo" or "niño bonito". Moreover, in a number of examples – incorrect phrases were found, such as – "bonito chico" or "guapo chico".

More consistency was noticed for the translation of the phrases supporting the notion of indefinite aspect adjective. Around 70% of the respondents opted for examples like "un abrazo cálido", „una broma graciosa" or "un hombre viejo". Article omission is, though not significantly, was also a part of this part of the sample.

Taking all the above-illustrated examples into consideration, it could be concluded that only up to 20% of the examined respondents, Serbian native speakers, does recognise the grammatical hues, nuances hidden behind the definite, i.e., indefinite aspect in adjectives in Serbian. Not interpreting them well results in not translating them adequately, despite the fact that both English and Spanish do possess some viable counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Demonstrating, defining, as well as naming are common practices in all languages, irrespective of the group they inherently belong to, the very roots, and developmental processes. Undoubtedly, these (along with other practices) are conducted in sometimes totally different ways and could not even be compared among languages we use throughout the world.

In this essay, distant and languages belonging to different languages families were contrasted – English, representing the German side, Spanish, from the Romance group, and Serbian – as one of the Slavic languages. The primary goal was to determine whether Serbian native speakers, who learn both English and Spanish – are aware of the definite-indefinite aspect in adjectives in Serbian and the fact that something similar, in the form of definite-indefinite article also exists in both English and Spanish. To obtain an insight into the respondents' interpretation of the mentioned phenomena – a brief analysis, based on translation, was conducted.

On examining and discussion the provided illustrations, the main conclusion to be drawn is that not much

consistency as regards how we define something in language has been noticed. Irrespective of the language used (original sentences in Serbian – and English-Spanish translations), a constant lack of harmonisation is prominent. The situation could be interpreted in various ways – either the Serbian native speakers are totally unaware of the existence and nature of aspect in Serbian adjectives – and consequently, cannot find adequate counterparts when translating from Serbian into Spanish and/or English; or the respondents can see, and properly interpret different forms of adjectives in their mother tongue – but do not recognise the fact that articles in the selected foreign languages can serve as counterparts.

Be that as it may, this brief illustration might provoke some further, more detailed examination of the phenomenon, dig deeper, and possibly reveal some valuable information in the area of contrastive linguistics.

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