

DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF THE DEFINITE ARTICLE IN GREEK AND ENGLISH¹

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The use of the article is quite complicated both in English and in Greek. Aside from the difficulties that present themselves to those who are learning their mother tongue, articles present even greater obstacles to the speaker of English who is trying to learn Greek—especially in cases where the difference in usage of the article in the two languages is somewhat subtle. The following difference, for example, does not cause the student any trouble:

1. *John*

ο Γιάννης

When, however, we are dealing with the general meaning of a noun, we encounter greater difficulty. In English we omit the definite article in the case of certain nouns in order to convey the general meaning of those nouns:

2a. *The priests* of my church have beards. (specific)

Priests in Greece have beards. (general)

But this does not always happen in Greek. Consequently, the student often makes mistakes:

2b. Οι παπάδες στην εκκλησία μου έχουν γένια.

*Παπάδες στην Ελλάδα έχουν γένια. (*indicates an erroneous construction)

It is not sufficient to tell the student that all nouns in Greek, even when they are used in their general sense, require an article, because Greek, as well as English, omits the article in certain places.

To help students understand where they must use the definite article in Greek even though it is omitted in the corresponding expressions in English, I offer three categories of nouns expressing a general sense, listed as (a), (b), and (c), below.

In Greek, as opposed to English, we use the definite article:

(a) before plural nouns that have a general meaning

3. Η αγωνία του Γκρέκο είναι να βρει πίσω από τα φαινόμενα την ουσία.

El Greco's anguish is to find the essence behind *phenomena*.

(b) before singular, abstract nouns

4. Ποιος μπορεί να ξεχωρίσει την αστραπή από την αιωνιότητα;

Who can distinguish the light flash from *eternity*?

(c) before singular non-countable nouns that express an entire class

5. Η ζάχαρη είναι γλυκειά.

Sugar is sweet.

One might say, perhaps, that in all of the above categories both languages use the article in a way that is so different as to be self-explanatory, and that the student ought therefore to learn only one rule—namely, that in every case in which the general sense of the word is involved, Greek requires the definite article even though the article is omitted in the corresponding expression in English.

Unfortunately, however, this simple hypothetical rule cannot stand, for there are cases in which the definite article is omitted in Greek as well as in English.

We are continuing to speak of the three categories mentioned above—that is, of nouns expressing a general sense. If such a noun is in the accusative and is also employed in a partitive sense, it is not preceded by an article in Greek. Let us look once more at example number 2:

2. Οι παπάδες στην Ελλάδα έχουν γένια.

Priests in Greece have *beards*.

The word *παπάδες* needs the definite article because it is in the nominative case; on the other hand, the word *γένια* is not preceded by an article since it is in the accusative case

and is also used in a partitive sense. What do we mean by the term “partitive”? We mean a sense that, although general, is somewhat restricted—a sense that indicates a part as distinct from a whole. In the above sentence, the word γένια is general in meaning, not specific. However, because priests in Greece do not possess all the beards in the world but only a general portion of a still more general class that includes all beards, the meaning of the word γένια in this sentence is somewhat restricted. In short, it is partitive.

Here is another example:

6. Όλοι έχουμε ανάγκη από αγάπη.

We all need *love*.

What we need is the abstract sense of “love.” Yet we do not need all the love in the world but only a part of the entire class. The meaning is partitive.

Conversely, if we say

7. Όλοι αγαπάμε την αγάπη.

We all love *love*.

then we include the article because the abstract word αγάπη, although it is in the accusative case, is no longer a partitive. What we love is not a limited amount of all the love in the world; it is the unlimited entirety of love. The Greek sentence therefore requires the definite article even though the corresponding sentence in English omits the article.

How, then, can we teach the differences of use of the definite article in Greek and English?

Perhaps in this case we may be permitted to take refuge in translation, despite the fact that translation is not accepted very readily by the modern method of teaching. Personally, I prefer drills in which we give the Greek sentence and ask for the English equivalent. For example:

8. Teacher: Θρηνούμε την αποσύνθεση των μύθων.

Student: We deplore the dissolution of myths.

If, however, we do not wish to employ translation, we can invent transformation drills. Here are some that require the student to distinguish between partitive and non-partitive words:

9. Teacher: Η δουλειά είναι σκληρή.

Teacher: Κανείς δε διαλέγει.

Student: Κανείς δε διαλέγει σκληρή δουλειά. (partitive)

10. Η φτώχεια είναι καταστρεπτική.

Κανείς δε διαλέγει

Κανείς δε διαλέγει την καταστρεπτική φτώχεια. (non-partitive)

11. Οι τραγωδίες είναι ποιητικές.

Ο Σοφοκλής έγραψε

Ο Σοφοκλής έγραψε ποιητικές τραγωδίες. (partitive)

12. Οι τραγωδίες είναι ποιητικές.

Προτιμούμε

Προτιμούμε τις ποιητικές τραγωδίες. (non-partitive)

It should be clear that I have covered only an extremely “partitive” portion of the complete subject of the differences in the use of the article in the two languages. I have not even mentioned the indefinite article. I simply wished to emphasize a specific problem that causes misunderstanding not just among students but also among their teachers. To use or not to use the definite article in the cases that I considered is not a question simply of correctness but also of precision, since the meaning of the sentence is thereby changed.

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