Capturing Variation in the Use of (in)Definite Articles in Native and Nativised Varieties of English

Pascual Cantos, Carlos Balsalobre, Vicenta Rodríguez and Ana María Fernández

Abstract

Articles exhibit a relatively stable set of semantic/pragmatic meanings in English (e.g. Hawkins 1978) despite the fact that the definition of ‘definiteness’ itself remains a contentious issue (cf. Abbott 2003). In this paper, I examine the existing categories of usage types that have been proposed for ‘the’, ‘a/an’ and ‘0’ and argue that they are inadequate for the creation of classification schemes for use with corpora of nativised (cf. Lowenberg 1986, Kachru 1986) varieties of English. To illustrate, consider the following:

1) Why is it that the people in general don’t seem to know these I mean from appearance anyway and from what one hear as in these these not the issues that are often front-ended to any discussion <ICE-SIN:S1B-039#75:1:A>.

2) And it is time that we forget this sort of, a generalizing, and comes out to grasp that another plan of action…. <ICE-IND:S1B-028#106:1:D>.

3) Then 0 mid-term effect is from that scarring tissue which </>which heals now there’s a big fibrous or a big colloid <ICE-EA:S1BINT4T>.

While these marked uses of articles are often regarded as erroneous (or at least, improper) by native standards, I will show that their underlying grammar is largely principled and requires a different semantic/pragmatic treatment to allow for more accommodating classification schemes. Towards this end, I will complement the usage types that have been proposed for ‘the’ by Hawkins (1978) and Prince (1981), as well as by Huddleston and Pullum (2002), Biber et al. (1999) and Quirk et al. (1985) for ‘a/an’ and ‘0’, with insights from studies on English articles with language contact perspectives (Ionin et al. 2004, Gil 2003 and Trenkic 2002). Finally, I will propose new classification schemes to capture the variation in the use of articles in native and nativised varieties of English and present some results of their application in ICE.