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A Pedagogical Perspective on the Definite and the Indefinite Article in the Romanian Language. Challenges for Foreign Learners

Abstract

All Romance languages have developed the definite and the indefinite article via the Vulgar Latin (Classical Latin did not use articles), the language of the Roman colonists. According to Joseph H. Greenberg (1978), the definite article predated the indefinite one by approximately two centuries, being developed from demonstratives through a complex process of grammaticalization. Many areas of nowadays` Romania were incorporated into the Roman Empire for about 170 years. After two military campaign, the Roman emperor Trajan conquered Dacia, east of Danube. The Romans imposed their own administration and inforced Latin as lingua franca. The language of the colonists, mixed with the native language and, later on, with various languages spoken by the many migrant populations that followed the Roman retreat resulted in a new language (Romanian), of Latin origins. The Romanian language, attested in the 16th Century, in documents written by foreign travellers, uses four different types of articles. Being a highly inflected language, Romanian changes the form of the articles according to the gender, the number and the case of the noun As compared to the other Romance languages, Romanian uses the definite article enclitically. Thus, the definite article and the noun constitute a single word. The present paper aims at discussing, analysing and providing an overview of the use of definite and indefinite articles. The general norm and its various exceptions are examined from a broader perspective, synchronically and diachronically. The pedagogical perspective is meant to offer a comprehensible synthesis to foreign learners.

Keywords: *Romanian language, Latin, definite article, indefinite article, inflexion, linguistics.*

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I.   Introduction. Theoretical background

The Romanian language belongs to the Eastern Romance branch of the Romance languages, being the official language of two European countries, Romania and Republic of Moldova[1]. With an estimated number of 24.3 million speakers worldwide[2], the Romanian language evolved from Vulgar Latin and separated itself from the Western Romance Languages during the 5th – 8th Century BC (Malkiel, 1991).

The Romanian language preserves parts of the Latin declension, with five cases (the Latin ablative disappears in Romanian) and the neuter gender of the noun. Its vocabulary, though fundamentally of Latin origin, incorporates a significant number of words of Slavic origin (Schulte, 2008). Historically and culturally, Romania was exposed continuously to Slavonic through religion and vicinity. Orthodoxy, as the dominant denomination in Romania, used for centuries Slavonic as the liturgic language.

Starting with the 6th century, the Latin demonstrative/ adjective pronouns *ille* and *ipse* underwent a series of complex changes that ultimately resulted in the appearance of the definite article (Kuteva, Heine 2008). The entire grammaticalization process was justified by the need to avoid ambiguity since speakers had a particular propensity for not articulating the final phonemes of the words while speaking. "As in English and German, the definite article in Romance grammaticalized from a distal pronoun, namely Latin ILLE, which also constitutes the base of the distal demonstrative, reinforced by a preposed ECCE (= Behold!). The Classical Latin demonstratives were increasingly used as articles in Vulgar Latin from ca. 380 to 1150, indicating a change of function of this grammatical category." (Catasso 2011: 31-32).

The Romanian language uses four types of articles. Apart from definite and indefinite articles, there are possessive articles (also called genitival articles) and demonstrative articles.

In most European languages, articles are proclitic. In Romanian, most definite articles are enclitic. Enclitic articles are a characteristic of the Balkan languages. "[…] in the

[1] Although in the Constitution there is no mentioning of the Romanian language, the Constitutional Court rulled that Moldovan constitution should be changed according to the Declaration of Independence which states that the official language in Republic of Moldova is the Romanian language.
[2] Estimated by *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 22nd Edition, 2019.

Balkan languages, the definite article can attach to the noun only if the latter occupies the NP-initial position; assuming that definite NPs are governed by a D(eterminer), this generalization can be stated as saying that the definite article can attach to the noun only if the latter immediately follows the D position. If the article attaches to an adjective, at most degree words modifying the adjective may intervene between the D position and the adjectival host. If the D position is not followed by either N or AP, a strong form of the article is inserted in Romanian […]" (Dobrovie Sorin, Giurgea 2010: 77)

While the definite article in the Romanian language usually consists of morphemes added directly to the noun, the indefinite one is a distinct morphemic unit that precedes the nouns respectively the pronouns. Exceptions appear in the case of several dative-genitive nouns, as follows:

- When the noun is a proper masculine one ending in a consonant or a proper feminine one having foreign origins (not fully assimilated): *cartea lui John/ Mary* (John`s/Mary`s book);
- When a noun without an enclitic article is followed by a possessive adjective: *Lui frate-său i-am luat un cadou* (I gave a gift to his brother);
- When the noun is the name of a month: *luna lui martie* (the month of March);
- When the noun indicates years: *iarna lui 1918* (the winter of 1918).

For all these cases, the definite article should be placed in front of the noun (proclitic), as a separate morpheme. More often than not, it becomes difficult even for native speakers to decide whether a proper feminine noun has foreign origins or not. Many a time, the spelling and the pronunciation of several female names are identical in Romanian and other languages. Thus, the ordinary speaker tends to use an enclitic definite article as if the noun is of Romanian origins: instead of *Cartea lui Lina* (Lina`s book), *Cartea Linei*.

In a Romanian literary chronicle of Ruta Sepetys`s book *Between the Shades of Gray* published online on a rather popular literary website[3], the name of the main character, Lina Vilkas, appears in the text five times in dative – genitive with a definite article. Not even once, the article is proclitic. Similarly, the official translation of the book adopts the version *Linei*[4]. The form *Linei* for *lui Lina* is promoted simply because the name is consistent with the Romanian phonetic system, although it has foreign origins.

The definite and indefinite article is highly problematic even for the non-native speakers. Its use seems to depend more on the empirical understanding of how the Romanian language functions than on rigorous rules of grammar. When required, the article changes its form, according to the gender, the number and the case of the noun. The agreement between the article and the noun requires a deeper understanding of the gender, the case and the number of the noun.

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[3] https://www.delicateseliterare.ro/printre-tonuri-cenusii-de-ruta-sepetys-editura-epica-recenzie (accessed on Decembr 7, 2019).
[4] The Romanian version of the book was published in 2018, by Epica Publishing House. Translator: Gabriela Stoica.

Nouns could be used without any articles (zero article) as well, in specific contexts. A zero article is accepted whenever we have in the Romanian language one of the following situations:

- Innumerable nouns, not followed by an attribute: "vin" (*wine*), "zahăr" (*sugar*), "miere" (*honey*): *Beau <u>vin</u>* (I drink wine);
- When the noun is a predicate nominative, not followed by an attribute: *El este <u>student</u> (he is a student)*;
- When a preposition precedes a noun in the accusative, not followed by an attribute: *Telefonul este pe masa* (The phone is on the table).

The aim of the present article is to analyse the use of definite and indefinite articles in the Romanian language. The main objectives are:

- To discuss the norms that regulate the use of articles in Romanian;
- To overview the numerous exceptions to the established norms.

II.   Methodology

The present article employs qualitative methods of research as they are defined and discussed in the volume "Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research", edited by Catherine Cassell and Gillian Symon (2004). Although qualitative methods might seem not entirely relevant for the present research, they prove to be essential for understanding the topic discussed. "[…] it is not that qualitative research is inherently weaker or less rigorous but rather that judgements of 'good practice' in research cannot be made without reference to the social and political context. Our analysis of debates in such publications as The Psychologist (the magazine of the British Psychological Society), suggested to us that the difficulty in gaining acceptance of qualitative methods could be partly because of the value placed on research based on the natural science model, and because of the identity processes bound up with the role of 'scientist'." (Cassell, Symon 2004: 4).

The primary sources used are the Romanian Grammar published by the Romanian Academy (2008), and various research articles that discuss the topic of the present research synchronically and diachronically.

Although a comparison between the use of the article in Romanian, and in other Romance languages does not constitute the central focus of the current study, a brief discussion from a historical perspective provides relevant information and a broader perspective. The grammaticalization of the article is extensively described by Ian Roberts and Anna Roussou (2003). The Romanian perspective is discussed by Alexandru Nicolae (2012).

The empirical data is retrieved from online corpora. Multiple online sources offer an authentic view of how the definite and the indefinite article are used in different contexts, more often than not reflecting a tendency that the present research can not overlook.

III.   The Definite and the Indefinite Article

The use of the definite article indicates that the object or the person the speaker speaks about is well-known.

In the Romanian language, most definite articles are enclitic, and they are attached to the noun or the adjective (rarely, the definite article can be used with other parts of speech).

Although the standard word order in Romanian is Subject + Predicate + Object + Attribute, very often the speaker can freely transpose any of the respective syntactic categories mentioned above. Whenever the descriptive adjective is placed in front of a noun that needs a definite article, the article attaches to the adjective. As a general rule, any transposition within the structure noun + descriptive adjective expresses the intention of the speaker to emphasise the adjective[5].

Băiatul înalt/ Înaltul băiat – *The tall boy.*

A noun/ adjective and its definite article must agree in case, number and gender. The peculiarity of the Romanian language consists of preserving the neuter gender in nouns. Initially, Latin had had neuter, but as the language evolved, most neuter nouns were assimilated to masculine. "In Italian and Roumanian, however, the "neuter" involves, not pronouns, but nouns, and is not simply a sub-division of the masculine. Morphologically speaking, on the basis of the situation in Italian and in almost (but not wholly) all Roumanian "neuters," we seem to be faced with nouns belonging to one gender in the singular and to the other in the plural; this is the basis of the term ambigene 'belonging to both genders'." (Hall 1965).

Although the neuter gender seems to further complicate the structure of the language, the declension of the neuter noun follows a rather simple routine: when the noun is singular, it follows masculine, when it is plural, it follows feminine.

The Definite Article:

Case	Gender					
	Masculine		Feminine		Neuter	
	singular	plural	singular	plural	singular	plural
Nominative - Accusative	-l Băiatul	-i Băieții	-a Fata	-le Fetele	-l Tabloul	-le tablourile
Dative - Genitive	-lui Băiatului	-lor Băieților	-i Fetei	-lor Fetelor	-lui Tabloului	-lor Tablourilor

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For masculine and neuter singular nouns ending in a consonant, the definite article is preceded by the linking vowel "–u":

băiatul/ scaunul (the boy/the chair).

Rarely, "-u" might appear with feminine nouns as well as with masculine nouns ending in a vowel:

radioul (masculine) – the radio;

cafeaua (feminine) – the coffee.

One of the most common mistakes one makes when studying Romanian is to consider the linking vowel as part of the article. The specificity of the Romanian phonetic system makes it rather challenging to pronounce too many consecutive consonants. "U" plays the role of making the transition more accessible from the first consonant to the next one.

It is important to mention that more often than not in oral production, the definite article "-l" is silent, especially in informal contexts.

For feminine nouns in the dative or genitive singular, the definite article "-le" is added to the plural form of the noun:

fată (*girl*, feminine, singular, no article);

fete (*girls*, feminine, plural, no article);

fetei (*the girl*, feminine, singular, definite article).

Even for native speakers, the spelling of several nouns containing the phoneme "i" in their stem might pose some problems. "I" can indicate in Romanian that the noun is masculine plural or/and that it has a definite article. Consequently, there are cases when a specific noun incorporates the phoneme "i" three times:

copil (child), the first "i" in the stem;

copii (children), the second "i" indicates the plural;

copiii (the children), the third "i" indicates the definite article for masculine, plural, nominative-accusative.

In Romanian, the indefinite article is always proclitic, and it indicates that the object or person designated are not specified. Neuter nouns follow the same rule mentioned above: when the noun is singular, it requires the masculine form of the indefinite article, when the noun is plural, it requires the feminine form of the indefinite article.

The Indefinite Article:

Case	Gender					
	Masculine		Feminine		Neuter	
	singular	plural	singular	plural	singular	plural
Nominative - Accusative	un un băiat	niște niște băieți	o o fată	niște niște fete	un un tablou	niște niște tablouri
Dative - Genitive	unui	unor	unor	unor	unui	unor

	unui băiat	unor băieți	unor fete	unor fete	unui tablou	unor tablouri

As parts of speech, the morphemes "o" and "un" can be articles or numerals. When they have the value and the function of an adjective numeral ("one"), they resonate with another numeral mentioned in the same sentence/ phrase or in a broader context:

O fată a venit, a doua a plecat. (One girl came, the second one left)

"O" can also be a pronoun with the syntactic value of a direct object in the accusative.

Eu o cunosc. (I know her)

The article for plural nominative-accusative nouns ("niște") might have a stylistic role. When used pejoratively, it denotes the intention of the speaker to designate persons or objects that are not worthy of respect. In these cases, the tone of voice changes and often the noun is a diminutive.

IV. Phonetic mutations

The Romanian language distinguishes itself from other Romance languages by a complex system of phonetic mutations that occur on the level of vowels and consonants.

A mutation is defined as a change in a phoneme according to various morphological and syntactic contexts. Consequently, in addition to using the articles, the speaker should pay attention to the numerous linguistic mutations that might occur throughout the inflection of nouns in the Romanian language.

a. Vowel mutations.

a~ă: cană (singular)/ căni (plural) – mug/mugs

a~e: vară (singular)/ veri (plural) – summer/summers.

o~oa: om (singular)/ oameni (plural) – human/humans.

â~âi: mână (singular)/ mâini (plural) – hand/hands.

ia~ie : viață (dingular)/ vieți (plural) – life/lives.

b. Consonant mutations.

t~ț : tată (singular)/ tați (plural) – father/fathers.

s~ș: urs (singular)/ urși (plural) – bear/bears.

șc~șt: pușcă (singular)/ puști (plural) – rifle/rifles.

c. Mixed mutations.

- ad~ăz : pradă (singular)/ prăzi (plural) – prey/preys.

- al~ă : cale (singular)/ căi (plural) – path/paths.

V. Conclusions

Although Classical Latin did not have articles, in most provinces conquered by Romans the colonists were commonly speaking Vulgar Latin. Such was the case of the region where the Romanian language was formed.

Historically attested in the 16th Century, the Romanian language derives from Non-Classical Latin in terms of grammar, while its vocabulary, fundamentally Latin, is influenced by Slavic languages and later, by a multitude of languages such as Greek, Turkish, French or English.

The Romanian language, similarly to all the other Romance languages, preserves in its structure both the definite and the indefinite article, via the Vulgar Latin, the language of the colonists in Dacia, the Roman province conquered by Trajan in the year 106.

The definite and the indefinite article in Romanian are one of the most difficult challenges a learner faces mainly due to the inconsistency of the norm and its many exceptions.

Being an inflected language, in Romanian, there is a strict agreement between the article and the noun or the adjectives it determines. Identifying the gender, the number and the case of the noun correctly is essential when using the definite and the indefinite article.

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