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English-Usage And Abusage-II

— by Anonymous

Some Hints on the Definite Article

ANONYMOUS has been asked by some of his readers to discuss this problem of the definite article, one of the traps where most foreigners are apt to stumble. They either do without it where it's necessary, or insert one where it is uncalled for.

The fact is that here again the mother tongue leads us unconsciously into error. No Indian language has anything corresponding to the definite article which is a feature of English, French, Italian and German, not to mention the others. Among Asian languages, as far as Anonymous is aware, Arabic is the only one with a definite article, but it is used differently from the way it is employed in English.

Nor has the definite article in French, for that matter, a function exactly parallel to the function of the definite article in English.

The English definite article is also the most mysterious of words in English whose behaviour cannot be easily reduced to rules. One must hope to learn from the practice of great writers.

Well, broadly speaking a countable noun used in the singular must have an article accompanying it, a or an or the. If you wish to 'define' the noun, that is, identify it precisely, you must use the definite article. Take the following instances.

INCORRECT : Muslims called for rebuilding of Babri mosque.

CORRECT : Muslims called for the rebuilding of the Babri mosque.

INCORRECT : There was big traffic jam in Motijheel after meeting broke up.

CORRECT : There was a big traffic jam in Motijheel after the meeting broke up.

INCORRECT : The dishonesty is common vice in certain countries.

CORRECT : Dishonesty is a common vice in certain countries.

INCORRECT : Mr. X collected number of stories for the publication in the book form.

CORRECT : Mr. X collected a number of stories for publication in book form.

INCORRECT : Book was sold for \$ 30 in U.S.A.

CORRECT : The book was sold for \$ 10 in Bangladesh and \$ 30 in the U.S.A.

INCORRECT : U.K. decided to import large quantity of ready-made garments from Bangladesh market.

CORRECT : The U.K. decided to import a large quantity of ready-made garments from the Bangladesh market.

INCORRECT : The NATO is important military organisation of which Germany is member.

CORRECT : NATO is an important military organisation of which Germany is a member (NATO is used here as a name).

Sometimes when two words come together to point to a meaning in which they cannot be separated you may leave out the definite article:

INCORRECT : I spoke to the father and the son about need for change in their policy.

CORRECT : I spoke to both father and son about the need for a change in their policy.

Abstract, uncountable nouns like efficiency, honesty, sanity do not need the definite article unless you imply the efficiency, honesty or sanity of a certain definite kind. Note the following.

CORRECT : Efficiency in industry is a great virtue.

ALSO CORRECT : The efficiency of Japanese industry arouses the admiration of the entire world.

In the second sentence, we write The efficiency to refer to a particular kind of efficiency.

Anonymous must confess that the examples he has given do not exhaust all possibilities. Sometimes the use of the definite article is governed by your meaning. Consider the following :

CORRECT : I bought milk today at 15 Taka a litre.

CORRECT : I bought the milk today at 15 taka a litre.

In the second sentence the speaker is obviously pointing to a pot or a pail in front of him which he leaves understood: hence the article. In the first, there is no reference to any specific quantity.

When you write a sentence, pause and reflect to see whether you are overlooking the need for the definite article in places where it is absolutely necessary.