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The Definite Article In Idioms

English—Usage And Abusage

by Anonymous

We could not print this regular weekly feature in our Magazine section last Friday. So it is printed here. —Editor.

SOME writers appear to forget that there are idioms where the definite article is out of place even before countable nouns. Take the numerous idioms in which the word place features.

Take place, in place, in place of fall into place, give place to, pride of place. A pedant would try to 'correct' these expressions by throwing in the definite article before 'place'.

Anonymous remembers contributing a piece to an English daily in Karachi, where he had occasion to employ the idiom 'by reason of.' When the article was published, he found to his amazement that 'by reason of' had been altered to 'by the reason of.' The Editor must have thought that 'reason' needed to be trussed up by an article.

There are many phrases in common use where you have to step with caution, for some demand the definite article, and some do not. One such phrase where British practice differs from American usage is 'in the light of.' American English dispenses with the article. You cannot therefore rule 'in light of' out as incorrect.

The other day anonymous discovered in a biography of President Jackson of the USA by Arthur Schlesinger of the expression 'in last analysis'. You cannot write 'in last

analysis' in British English. It must always be 'in the last/Final/Ultimate analysis in British English. Anonymous confesses that 'in last analysis' in Schlesinger, a renowned historian with a remarkable command of prose, rather shook him. But there it was?

Such expressions as 'in fact,' 'in reality' 'in truth' must do without the definite article. So would 'in reason'.

Consider now the word force. It is both countable and uncountable, often used as an uncountable than as a countable. You have to write 'by force,' 'in force,' 'from force of habit', 'bring into force,' 'come into force.' But on the other hand you speak of 'the armed forces,' 'the force of gravity' and so on.

Countable nouns used in phrases meaning the mode of transportation of something also omit the article as in the following examples:

You travel by bus/car/taxi/train/boat/steamer. You send a letter or a parcel by messenger/bullock cart/rickshaw/by post.

But note that the early morning

may bring you a letter.

Certain other idioms demand the definite article invariably. 'Some help is in the pipeline.' Comment in the press was unfavourable.

It is now the fashion in both the USA and Britain to do without the definite article in phrases coined with the word 'level'. The window was at street level.' 'Discussions are taking place at ministerial level.' 'At university level, students must have greater freedom of choice.' But if you are using level a little differently before the object you wish to qualify, the article is indispensable. 'At the level of rural communities.' 'At the level of the fifth-floor window.' But 'at Cabinet level.'

The same caution applies to risk. Your life can be at risk. But you can go into the street at the risk of being run over. Anonymous notices that the phrase at risk has almost crowded out in danger which quite unreasonably some writers treat as old-fashioned. But there is a fine distinction in meaning between at risk and in danger, which now-a-days is over-

looked. You cannot, for instance, write 'at the danger of losing my life' I went into the burning building. Here the correct phrase is 'at the risk of'. But you may say 'the fire-fighters' live would be in danger if the flames spread.'

Readers in Bangladesh may draw some comfort from the fact that even those educated abroad sometimes show themselves prone to error. Anonymous started the other day at the sight of 'in spite of' in an essay written by an acquaintance of his with a degree in English from a British University. He wrote 'in spite' every time he used the phrase in spite of. He might as well have written 'in the spite of' to add to the enormity of his grammatical crime. Anonymous hopes that some friend of that man would open his eyes to the mistake.

What you need is caution and vigilance. As Anonymous never tires of emphasising, analogy is no guide to the correct handling of phrases and idioms in a foreign language. Nothing should be taken for granted. The stickler for accuracy must have the patience to watch his steps instead of rushing in like a fool where greater stalwarts sometimes stumble. It's the analogy of 'instead of which leads some people to think that 'in spite of' must be right. Well, it's not.