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A. J. Thomson and
A. V. Martinet

A Practical English Grammar 2nd Edition

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A Practical English Grammar

Second Edition



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A Practical English Grammar

Preface to the First Edition

This book deals with the construction of English from elementary to advanced level and is intended for intermediate and advanced students of English as a foreign language. Though written chiefly for adults it is suitable also for senior forms in schools. It is hoped also that teachers of English as a foreign language may find it useful as a reference book.

Special features of the book are:

- 1 A very comprehensive index, which should make this Grammar easy to use as a book of reference.
- 2 A very careful and detailed treatment of those points which students of English find particularly difficult, e.g. auxiliary verbs, the use of the present perfect and simple past tenses, the difference between certain similar words such as 'during' and 'for', &c.
- 3 A new treatment of the future.
- 4 Indication where necessary of the difference between ordinary conversational usage and strict grammatical form.
- 5 A list of over 300 of the more important of the verb + preposition/adverb combinations (e.g. give up, take off, &c.).
- 6 A chapter on spelling rules.
- 7 The use of the simplest possible English for all explanations so as to present the minimum difficulty to students who have not yet learned to read English easily.
- 8 Copious examples in good modern English.

Those using this Grammar as a textbook are warned that it is not a graded course, and that the chapters are not presented in order of difficulty. Difficult sections may therefore be met with in any part of the book, and intermediate students may prefer to omit these on the first reading. It is not, of course, necessary to study the chapters in the order given.

There are ten booklets of exercises based on this grammar. The exercises are graded and can be had with or without key.

Preface to the Second Edition

Certain sections, e.g. the conditional, the gerund, the passive, participles and indirect speech, have been expanded so as to present a clearer and more comprehensive picture of each structure. Various other additions have also been made which we hope will be of assistance to teachers and students using this book. The paragraph structure of the first edition has been retained as far as possible.

London, July 1968

A.J.T., A.V.M.

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1 Articles

The Indefinite Article

1 Form

The indefinite article is **a** or **an**. The form **a** is used before a word beginning with a consonant, or a vowel sounded like a consonant:

a man a table a university a useful thing

The form **an** is used before words beginning with a vowel (**a, e, i, o, u**) or words beginning with a mute **h**:

an hour an honourable man an egg an elephant an apple

It is the same for all genders:

a man a woman an actor an actress

2 The indefinite article, **a** or **an**, is used:

- a** Before a singular noun which is countable (i.e. of which there is more than one) when it is mentioned for the first time and represents no particular person or thing:

A dog is an animal. I see a man. A house has a roof.

A cat can catch a mouse.

- b** Before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of a class of things:

A cow has horns (i.e. All cows have horns). An elephant never forgets.

A palm tree is usually very tall.

- c** With a noun complement. This includes names of professions:

He is a doctor. She is a teacher. He became a great man.

She is a good girl.

- d** In certain numerical expressions: a couple, a dozen, half a dozen, a score (20), a gross (144), a hundred, a thousand, a million, and a lot of, a great many of, a great deal of.

- e** In expressions of price, speed, ratio &c.:

fivepence a kilo tenpence a dozen sixty kilometres an hour four times a day a pound a metre

(Note that **a** and **one** are not usually interchangeable. For the difference between them see 25.)

f With few and little

a few = a small number, or what the speaker considers a small number

a little = a small amount, or what the speaker considers a small amount

So that 'a little time' can mean days or years, depending on the speaker: and 'a few friends' can mean two or three, or twenty or thirty.

only placed first: 'only a few/only a little' emphasizes that the number/quantity really is small – in the speaker's opinion.

few and **little** can also be used without article but then have an almost negative meaning, and can usually be replaced by **hardly any**:

'We had little time for amusement' *implies that we were always busy.*

'Few people know this' = It is almost unknown.

g In exclamations before singular, countable nouns:

What a hot day! What a pretty girl! Such a pity!

but What pretty girls! What big dogs! (plural nouns, so no article. See 3.)

h a can be placed before Mr/Mrs/Miss + surname:

a Mr Smith a Mrs Smith a Miss Smith

'a Mr Smith' means 'a man called Smith' and implies that he is a stranger to the speaker.

'Mr Smith', without **a**, implies that the speaker knows Mr Smith or knows of his existence.

(For the difference between **a/an** and **one** see 25.)

3 The indefinite article is not used:

a Before plural nouns:

The indefinite article has no plural form. Therefore the plural of 'a dog' is 'dogs'.

b Before uncountable nouns:

i The following nouns are singular and uncountable in English: advice, information, news, baggage, luggage, furniture.

They are often preceded by: some, any, a little, a lot of, a piece of &c.

I'll give you a piece of advice. There isn't any news.

You need some more furniture.

Knowledge is also considered uncountable, but when used in a particular sense takes the article:

A knowledge of languages is always useful.

He has a good knowledge of mathematics.

Hair (all the hair on one's head) is considered uncountable, but if we consider each hair separately we say: a hair, two hairs &c.:

She has black hair. The fisherman used a hair to tie the feather to the hook

- ii Materials: glass, wood, iron, stone, paper, cloth, wine, coffee, tea &c. are considered uncountable. But many of these nouns can also denote one particular thing, and then take an article:

Windows are made of glass *but* Have a glass of wine.

We write on paper *but* I've got a (news)paper.

Iron is a metal *but* I use an electric iron.

Some, any, a piece of, a lot of &c., are often used as shown in b(i) above:

Would you like some coffee? I want a piece of wood.

- c Before abstract nouns: beauty, happiness, fear, hope, death &c., except when they are used in a particular sense:

He was pale with fear. Some children suffer from a fear of the dark.

- d Before names of meals, except when preceded by an adjective:

We have breakfast at eight. He gave us a good breakfast.

The article is also used when it is a special meal given to celebrate something or in someone's honour:

I was invited to dinner (at their house, in the ordinary way)

but I was invited to a dinner given to welcome the new ambassador.

The Definite Article

The definite article is **the**. It is the same for singular and plural and for all genders:

the boy the boys the girl the girls

4 Use and omission of the definite article

- a The definite article is used:

- i Before nouns of which there is only one, or which are considered as one:
the earth the sea the sky the weather the North Pole

- ii Before a noun which has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time:

His car struck a tree; you can still see the mark on the tree.

- iii Before a noun made definite by the addition of a phrase or clause:

the boy that I met the place where I met him the girl in blue
the man on the donkey

- iv Before a noun which, by reason of locality, can represent only one particular thing:

Ann is in the garden (= the garden of this house).

He sent for the doctor (= his own doctor).

Please pass the wine (= the wine on the table).

- v Before superlatives and *first/second &c.*, and *only*, used as adjectives or pronouns:
 Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in Europe.
 Most people think that Monday is the worst day in the week.
- vi Before singular nouns used to represent a class of objects:
 The cuckoo is lazy (= all cuckoos are lazy).
- vii Before an adjective used to represent a class of persons:
 There is no peace for any but the dead.
 The old and the young should be able to live together.
- viii Before names of seas, rivers, chains of mountains, groups of islands and plural names of countries:
 The Atlantic Ocean the Thames the Alps the USA the USSR
 the Netherlands the Orkneys. *Note also* the Sudan.
- ix Before musical instruments:
 She learnt to play the flute.
- x With the type of meal mentioned in 3d:
 The dinner given to celebrate their victory cost £200.
- b The definite article is **not** used:
 - i Before countries, towns, proper names:
 Mr Jones returned to Wales and bought a house in Swansea.
 Exceptions:
 the USA the Sudan the Netherlands the USSR the Mall
 the Strand (in London) the High Street.
 the Smiths (= Mr and Mrs Smith and family) the Joneses (Mr and Mrs Jones) &c.
The Mr Smith would be possible in such sentences as:
 I don't want the Mr Smith who works in the accounts office; I want the other one/the other Mr Smith.
 - ii Before abstract nouns except when they are used in a particular sense:
 Men fear death *but* The death of the Prime Minister left his party without a leader.
 - iii After a noun in the possessive case, or a possessive adjective:
 the uncle of the boy = the boy's uncle.
 The (blue) book is mine = it is my (blue) book.
 - iv Before names of meals (but see 3d):
 The Scots have porridge for breakfast
but The wedding breakfast was held in her father's house.
 - v Before parts of the body and articles of clothing, as these normally prefer a possessive adjective:
 Raise your right hand. He took off his coat.
 But notice that sentences of the type:
 She seized the child's collar. I patted his shoulder.
 The brick hit John's face.

could be expressed:

She seized the child *by the* collar. I patted him *on the* shoulder.
The brick hit John *in the* face.

Similarly in the passive:

He was hit on the head. He was cut in the hand.

- vi Note that in some languages the definite article is used before indefinite plural nouns but that in English **the** is never used in this way:

Women are expected to like housework (i.e. women in general).
Big hotels all over the world are very much the same.

If we put **the** before **women** in the first example, it would mean that we were referring to a particular group of women.

5 Omission of **the** before **home** and before **church, market, school, hospital &c.**

a **home**

When **home** is used alone, i.e. is not preceded or followed by a descriptive word or phrase, **the** is omitted:

He went home. She left home. They got home late.
They hurried home. They arrived home after dark.

Note that the preposition **to** is omitted and **at** is not used after **arrive**.

But when **home** is preceded or followed by a descriptive word or phrase it is treated like any other noun as regards articles and prepositions:

We went to *the bride's* home
For some years this was *the home of your queen*.
A mud hut was *the only home he had ever known*.

b **chapel, church, market, college, school, hospital, court, prison, work, sea, bed**

These nouns are used without **the** when they are visited or used for their primary purpose:

we go to church to pray	to market to buy or sell
to school to study	to hospital as patients
to college to study	to prison as prisoners
to bed to sleep	to court as litigants
to sea as sailors	to work as workers

Similarly we can be in prison/hospital/court/bed as prisoners/patients &c. and at church/work/sea/market as worshippers/workers &c.

We return from work/school/market/church. We get out of bed/leave hospital/escape from prison.

When these places are not visited for their primary purpose the article **the** is used:

I went to the church to see the carvings.
He comes to the school sometimes to speak to the headmaster.
He returned from the prison where he had been visiting his brother.
They are at the sea = at the seaside. Compare this with

They are at sea = in a ship (but not necessarily as sailors).

He went to the bed = walked over to it. *Compare with*

He went to bed = got into it and presumably went to sleep.

In contrast to the above list, the following very common nouns always take **the**: **cathedral, office, cinema, theatre**:

He is at *the* office (*but* at work).

She is going to *the* theatre.