

## Optionality in English Grammar

<sup>1</sup>A.A. Bilyalova, <sup>2</sup>T.V. Lyubova and <sup>3</sup>L.M. Zaynullina

<sup>1</sup>Department of Foreign Languages, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University,  
ulitsa Kremlevskaya, 18, 420000 Kazan, Russia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Foreign Languages,  
Kazan State Power Engineering University, Kazan, Tatarstan, Russia

<sup>3</sup>Bashkir State University, Ufa, Kirovsky District, Russia

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**Abstract:** The main objective of the study is the analysis of the use of articles with common nouns in the English language in terms of optionality. Optionality here is observed as a linguistic phenomenon which involves an optional or free use of one of the grammar variants or language means conveying meaning in the particular linguistic and extralinguistic terms. The co-existence of parallel structures in the use of articles with a common noun is a widely spread phenomenon in modern English. As a result the study attempts to determine the obligatory and optional variants of the use of articles, based on the semantic and structural reasons. The researcher comes to the conclusion that the study of grammatical variants in the usage of articles has an extremely high theoretical and practical importance because the existing rules for the use of articles in modern English are not always circumstantial as they regulate the use of articles, restricting them to a limited number of language situations

**Key words:** Optionality, an article, variability, obligatory, optional, variants

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### INTRODUCTION

Language is social by its nature. It is closely connected with its users and creators-people. It develops together with the development of society. Functioning of language is of great interest from the socio-linguistic point of view. There are a lot of scientific papers devoted to the linguistic description of social variation in language (Mikhalchenko, 2011). But language variation has been observed not only as an indicator of social groups but it is closely connected with literary norm of language with its grammar (Bilyalova and Lyubova, 2014). In the process of language development there are often changes in the grammatical form of the use of a language unit: initial variant becomes outdated and is often replaced by a new one. But this phenomenon is preceded by the parallel existence of two and sometimes more variants, one of which is obligatory and the other optional. The gradual change of the grammatical norms of the literary language is its most distinctive and characteristic trait. We must take into consideration that language is both rigid and non-rigid system and like any other system is a subject to change.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

There is a certain lack of consistency in the matter of understanding and interpretation of the

optionality in the linguistic literature. The term optionality is used differently by different scholars in a variety of ways in the literature. The problem of optionality in Russian linguistics is described thoroughly in the works of a prominent researcher of isolating languages V.M. Solntsev. Definition which V.M. Solntsev gives to the phenomenon of optionality is perhaps the most complete and expanded. He writes: «under the optional variant can be understood the freedom or opportunity of the omission or conversely, the use of an additional linguistic element, its modifications or changes in the order of linguistic elements under two conditions if there is an absence of any changes in grammatical relationships between linguistic elements in the speech pattern and an absence of significant change in the expressed value or meaning» (translated by the researcher). We fully agree with this definition but we'd like to add that optionality can occur only if we can observe the variance which is in fact the source of obligatory and optional language variants. To reveal the problem of optionality in the usage of articles with common nouns the set of research methods including both general methods of scientific knowledge (synthesis, analysis, comparison) and linguistic methods (contextual, stylistic, discursive and conceptual analysis) was used. The research is based on the artwork of such modern English and American writers of 22th and 21st centuries as S. Middleton "Holiday", Gr. Greene "the end of the affair", A. Christie "Miss Marple:

the complete short stories”, K. Amis “Lucky Jim”, J. Salinger “the Catcher in the Rye”, I. Murdoch “the Sandcastle”, J. Galsworthy “the Saint’s Progress” and others.

## RESULTS

**The use of articles with some common nouns from the view of optionality in current English:** In this study, we are talking about the grammar variants of article usage with common nouns. The co-existence of parallel structures in the use of articles with a common noun is a widely spread phenomenon in modern English. This kind of variance in the grammar can be observed in texts of the English literature. The study will attempt to determine the obligatory and optional variants of the use of articles, based on the linguistic and extralinguistic factors. It is impossible to provide an analysis of all grammar variants that have been elicited. The study discusses the most common variants in the use of articles in the literary language.

The traditional use of articles with most common nouns is regulated by certain grammatical rules. However, here we can observe so called deviations from the norm, in other words variation in the use of articles. For example, the use of the definite article before such words as university, school, hospital, church, prison, etc. assumes that the speaker is talking something like a building. The use of the same nouns without the article means that the nouns are regarded as an institution in a general sense. However, there are exceptions. In the second case when the process of being educated at the university is meant, university can be used both with the definite article and without an article. Here, we can observe a very clear example of optional use of the definite article. Variants here can be interchangeable. It’s important to note that in such cases university is preceded by a preposition, e.g.:

- In her 2nd year at the university she had been taken ill
- They had two children, one of them still at school, the other in her 1st year at university

Probably in the first example, the phrase 2nd year at the university implies the circumstances of time and it is the starting point of communication, so called theme of the sentence that’s why there is a need to define a noun. In the second instance, the phrase in her 1st year at university is the central informative part, so called the rheme of the sentence here the article is omitted. It is worth to note that the construction with the article is rapidly losing ground and is already less common than the one without an article in BE (British English) but not

in AE (American English). It manifests the strong tendency of the preferred omission of the article, existing in modern British English. Despite of this according to the rules of standard English the construction with the article is obligatory variant, the construction without the article is an optional one.

Another example where optionality in the use of articles can be observed are nouns theatre and cinema. According to the standard grammar with nouns cinema and theatre article the is most commonly used, even when the speaker does not mean a specific place. However, the analysis showed that in combination with verbs to go to invite and to take these nouns can be used both with a definite and indefinite article (if in mentioned place there are more than one theater or cinema), e.g.:

- “I say”, he ventured, “could I see you some time? We might go to a show or to the cinema
- I can read you a book or go to a cinema
- And we went to the national gallery and we had an early dinner and went to the theatre
- “Sometimes he took me out to dinner or a theatre...”
- The variant with the definite article is obligatory and one with the indefinite article is an optional variant

One may come across with variation in the use of articles with the noun part followed by of phrase. The noun part followed by of phrase can be used both with the indefinite article and without an article:

- You never thought of him again one doesn’t one just accepts one more uniform as part of the law
- I have never cheated on a boyfriend and as with my father it’s become a part of my idea of myself

It must be said here that there is a slight difference between the two constructions: the variant with the indefinite article sometimes implies “one part as opposed to other parts”: he or Lady Anne were accustomed to make that remark between 4.30 and 6 on winter and late autumn evenings; it was a part of their married life. However, this distinction generally is disregarded in speech and the constructions either are used in differently or speakers stick to one of them through out (usually to part without an article). Thus, the two constructions are interchangeable and it is the case when a free optionality is observed.

Future, following the preposition in can be used both with the definite article and without an article in the case when prepositional phrase functions as an adverbial modifier of time:

- It was more than that: there had been other children kidnapped before her and there might be others in the future
- In future in my presence you will no longer wear these garments
- I think you will probably go through life all right if you choose a more practical swimming costume in future

In general, there may be an absolute optionality of article usage here, i.e., free variation as in above instances but it can be seen that the construction “in future” is more often used in the meaning of “henceforth”, “further” while “in the future” has a meaning “during the period of time after present”. It’s worth noting that in all other cases where the prepositional phrase functions not as the circumstances of the time, optionality normally is not observed here there is the only obligatory variant “in the future”.

How many hopes, how much idealism, faith in the future (prepositional complement), readiness to struggle for it had perished with this young life.

Similar parallel constructions are found in the phrase on the stage. Noun stage that follows the preposition on can be used in modern English both with the definite article and without an article. The variant with the definite article is obligatory and with zero article is optional:

- How immense a figure she was on the stage before him what a shadow she threw on the wall with her slender body
- I was sitting on stage at the prompt table sharpening a pencil

When, however, stage is used metaphorically to denote theatrical work or the profession of an actor on the stage is the only alternative as in the set phrase go on the stage or in the sentence.

“He was a very good skater and all but I couldn’t enjoy it much because I kept picturing him practicing to be a guy that roller-skates on the stage”.

It must be said that the variant on stage tends to have acquired some properties of the adverb because it is sometimes spelt together (onstage) or with a hyphen (on-stage): “he’s up there onstage with his kids by his side the whole lot of them jamming up a storm”.

Term when denoting a period of the academic year is sometimes used indifferently with the definite article and without an article, particularly in prepositional phrases such as: at the end of (the) term in (the) summer term in the last week of (the) term. Here, it is difficult to specify obligatory and optional variants, the variants are interchangeable:

- It was Algy who came to their rescue, slipping back as acting-head until the end of the term
- He did not see the brigadier again before the end of term

When, however, term is modified by following or by new the definite article is obligatory, as in by the end of the following term or in during the first week of the new term: “...like Judy, Bouncer, Rapper and the sarcastic withdrawn Howarth, there were several their oddities, some of whom David didn’t get to know until the following term”.

Doubt can be used with or without the indefinite article in the prepositional phrases beyond doubt and without doubt. Prepositions beyond and without most often are used in set phrases beyond/without doubt with zero article which is an obligatory variant. However, in combination with prepositions doubt can also be used with the indefinite article as an optional variant:

- His anxiety, without doubt, far exceeded mine but his years and the habit of command helped him to control it
- Without a doubt that is the solution of the mystery

The use of the indefinite article in the second example can be explained by stylistic factors. The indefinite article in this case gives the statement more emotional connotation, indicates the confidence of the speaker. This variant is considered to be an optional one.

When the plural form tears is used as subject to such verbs as come, fill, flow, roll, spring, start, stream, etc., it can be used with the definite article or without an article with little difference in meaning. In this case, variants also differ in connotation. Obligatory variant in this case is the variant without the article and the optional is the variant with a definite article which is used by the speaker to clarify the subject or to enhance the expressiveness of thought:

- The tears were running down her cheeks again
- Tears sprang from his eyes. He slapped his knee and bent to let his laughter jerk out of his gaping mouth
- Tears had come into the woman’s eyes
- His voice had softened. The tears came into his eyes

The noun glance when a part of the phrase at first glance can be used either with the indefinite article or without an article if the phrase means “judging by the first impression”:

- Here, too many appeared at first glance to be quite healthy but among them were others who were monstrously disfigured in feature and in limb
- At a first glance in court I had thought him insensitive

The variant at first glance is the more common for this reason it is considered to be an obligatory variant.

**The use of articles with common nouns in some syntactic positions from the view of optionality in current English:**

Some syntactic positions admit of two articles to be used indiscriminately or one of them to interchange with its absence with little or no difference in meaning. So, in such cases we can say about complete optionality. But here we should take into consideration individual meaning of the noun which is as a rule of no consequence, although, there maybe certain semantic factors which limit the number of nouns so used.

Job titles (usually high), positions and posts are often used in the nominal part of the predicate and in applications as well as with such verbs as elect, appoint, make. As a rule, the use of these nouns without the article is obligatory. However, if a noun-predicative denotes a post or position which can be held by only one person at a time that noun can be used optionally both with the definite article and with zero article:

- The excuse for her lateness was that Annette was the form monitor
- Annette wasn't form monitor at all

The variant use of the articles can be observed with countable nouns in the singular after the following constructions what sort (kind) of some sort (kind) of any sort (kind) of "adjective+sort (kind) of" this (that) sort (kind) of:

- Why didn't she ask him about Danby's, try to find out what sort of a place it was?
- Invariably there follows a discussion as to what sort of place this would be to live in
- I just wanted to be friends in a friendly casual sort of a way
- I feel very limp and in a blank sort of way, frightened
- He might get some sort of job connected with censorship
- That was about the time Alec stepped in and gave him some sort of a job on the study

It is important to point out that in all above constructions the variant without an article is more common and is obligatory one. Moreover, it is only after whatsort (kind) of and some sort (kind) of that indefinite

article is used with the other constructions the indefinite article is rare and respectively it is an optional variant.

After negative have or have got some abstract nouns can be used optionally with or without the definite article in cases when they are modified by an infinitive:

- Passing the mirror in the hall which was always rough with her she had not courage to glance at it
- She did not have the courage to say that it was inconvenient
- She tied her hair back off her face but she found she did not have energy to do more
- He hadn't the energy to converse

In this case, the variant with the definite article bears the stylistic coloring, giving emotional expressiveness to speech. If the infinitive is already used in the preceding sentence, the article is sometimes omitted:

- "I don't think I can do that anthology in spite of the cash. I haven't time"
- "I am afraid I cannot. I have not the time"

When a countable noun with or without a preceding attribute is used with reference to people to express different kinds of emotions, it also takes optionally either the definite article or no article at all:

- "Poor woman! ... loved him beyond her children"
- The poor woman! she'll never know that I mean it
- The poor old dad! so this was the end, the purpose to which he had lived with magnificent moderation!
- Poor daddy! kiss me again; a long one"

As a matter of fact, the two constructions are in free variation only when they follow the pattern of exclamatory one-member sentences as in the above examples. If however they are used appositionally, the usual practice is to keep the before the noun, e.g., several times she had to speak to him quite sharply, the loud".

When the noun is premodified by an attribute, the use of the article seems in a way dependent on the meaning of modifying attribute. Thus, it has been noticed that with silly and poor there is a strong predilection for dropping the article whereas damned favors the. The meaning of the noun may also influence the use of the article. For instance, the nouns chap, girl, man, woman take the article less often than the others.

## DISCUSSION

The study of the optionality is of great importance due to the fact that it is the driving force and a vivid indicator of changes in the language. In linguistic

literature there is a large disparity in the understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon of optionality because optionality is interpreted by different linguists differently (Aissen, 2003; Fujii and Ono, 2000; Kittila, 2005; Rumsey, 2010). Some scientists mean by optionality an opportunity to substitute one synonymic word by the other without significant changes in the plane of content; others recognize ellipsis in it while the third consider an optional combinability. In this study, the term optionality is understood as freedom or the possibility of omission or on the contrary, the use within words, phrases and sentences of definite linguistic elements under the following conditions if there is) no change in grammatical relations between linguistic elements in the speech chain) lack of noticeable changes in the expressing the value or meaning. Thus, the optionality is a linguistic phenomenon that involves an optional or free use of one of the variants of the language means or these orthose language components for the transmission of a certain value or meaning, depending on the specific linguistic and extra-linguistic conditions.

As it has been mentioned above optionality is closely connected with the processes of current changes in language systems and what is extremely important it is a significant factor in the dynamics of language development. In a continuous process of language development, new ways of expression appear which can replace existing or co-exist with them simultaneously. Thus, the standard norm may include variants that actually exist in the language, objective and inevitable consequence of which is optionality. It means that language can possesses structures which are represented by two or more modifications having the same meaning and one of these variants is obligatory and the other (or others) is optional.

The study of variants in the usage of articles in the framework of grammatical variation from the point of view of optionality has an extremely high theoretical and practical importance because the existing rules for the use of articles in modern English are not always circumstantial as they regulate the use of articles, restricting them to a limited number of language situations. The results obtained can be widely used in teaching of practical grammar of current English language. Grammar variants of using articles described here are generally interchangeable, sometimes in any circumstances, sometimes which is more frequently in certain syntactic positions or lexical context or in certain of their senses. According to linguistic and extralinguistic situations variants are defined as obligatory or optional. Indeed, the presence of the optional variant in language

may indicate the functioning of the newly emergent phenomenon or on the contrary, the disappearing phenomenon thus the optionality is an important indicator of language changes and its development.

## CONCLUSION

Modern English possesses numerous structures which are represented by two or more modifications having the same meaning and which can be interchangeable sometimes in any circumstances which is rare but mostly in certain syntactic positions or lexical contexts. One of these variants is obligatory, the other is optional. The possibility to use one of the modifications in certain linguistic and extra linguistic situations is called linguistic optionality. A knowledge of such parallel modes is extremely essential both for theoretical grammar and speech practice. Optionality is a way to provide additional channels of language functioning, a certain reserve, performing stylistic function in certain linguistic and extralinguistic conditions. Also it is a strong indicator of language development. Understanding the nature of this phenomenon helps to deepen the knowledge about the nature of the language system and peculiarities of its functioning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was performed with financial support of Russian Humanitarian Science Foundation (RHSF) and the Republic of Tatarstan in the framework of scientific project No. 16-14-16002.

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