

CHAPTER III

THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE 'A' AND ITS THAI EQUIVALENTS

3.1 Definition

It is generally known that the indefinite article a and its variant an is placed before a noun to give it the sense of indefiniteness.

3.1.1 Structural Grammar

Fries, in his book The Structure of English places a in the same category as the, that is, in function word Group A because it precedes Class 1 words.

Barbara Strang¹ formulates a rule for the indefinite article as follows:

a + noun singular (e.g. a cake)

She also states that

The Indefinite Article can **only** be used with a singular or a countable (central) noun as head. It indicates that that noun is being used of one, or some (one), or any (one), or a particular instance of a referent of that noun.

¹Barbara H.M. Strang, op.cit., p. 127.

Examples:

- A pound isn't enough.
- A child turned the corner and came into view.
- A child could do it.
- They were talking to a man I know well.

3.1.2 Transformational Grammar

Jacobs and Rosenbaum treat a and an as two different articles, saying..." The articles "a" and "an" are generally called indefinite articles..."²

Paul Roberts says that the plural form of the indefinite article a is \emptyset which is called ' a nondefinite article.'³ This means that a noun phrase that appears to consist of one plural noun is made up of \emptyset and a noun in the plural form.

3.1.3 Traditional Grammar

Traditional grammar deals with the indefinite article in details. George O. Curme indicates that "...the indefinite article a or an derives from the

²Jacobs and Rosenbaum, op.cit., p. 85.

³Paul Roberts, op.cit., p. 14.

numeral one."⁴

P.C. Wren says that

A or an is called the Indefinite Article, because it leaves indefinite the person or thing spoken of; as, a doctor; that is, any doctor.⁵

Otto Jespersen states that

A denotes one member of the class or species concerned, but it does not indicate which member.⁶

and

A, as said above, denotes an indefinite member of a class. Therefore, if we find the indefinite article before a word ordinarily used as a proper name, this must have lost its function as a mere non-denotative label of some individual (person or thing) and must have acquired some class-noun quality.

Often such a word is used with the indefinite article to denote a member of a class of which the bearer of the name is a typical representative.⁷

We frequently find a before a family name to denote a member of a family.

In Essentials of English Grammar, Jespersen explains that

⁴George O. Curme, op.cit., p. 228.

⁵P.C. Wren, op.cit., p. 49.

⁶Otto Jespersen, A Modern English Grammar Part VII Syntax (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1965), p. 419.

⁷Ibid., pp. 426-427.

An (before vowels), a (before consonants) is what is traditionally termed 'the indefinite article'; a better name would be 'the article of indetermination'. It is historically a weakened form of one.⁸

3.2 The Use of the Indefinite Article 'a'

Otto Jespersen explains the use of the indefinite article as follows:

The indefinite article naturally precedes an adjective (an old man, etc.). There are, however, some exceptions to this rule:

How great a crime had been committed,
was not discovered till next day.
However dark a night
We could not do it in so short a time.
He is as diligent a man as ever lived.
Too hard a task
A cousin of the artist, and in his way
no less remarkable a man.⁹

He observes that

The singular with the indefinite article is used generically with a substantive in the singular, it may be considered a weaker any:

An owl cannot see in the daytime.
An oak is harder than a beech.¹⁰

Paul Roberts points out that

A and an do not ordinarily occur with nouns like courage, resentment, gladness

⁸Otto Jespersen, Essentials of English Grammar (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966), p. 174.

⁹Ibid., p. 178.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 213.

or with nouns like gravel, mush, oxygen.¹¹

The principal function of the indefinite article is to denote a particular specimen of the class of persons, animals, or things indicated by the noun.

The indefinite article, as a general rule, is used before a common noun, singular number.

Examples:

- This is a mango.
- Fight like a hero.
- Here is an elephant.
- a young dog
- a very high temperature
- a never-to-be-forgotten experience
- He is a rich man.
- a thinking man
- a broken toy
- an upset stomach
- a quickly-growing movement

From these examples, it can be seen that the indefinite article a can precede a noun (as in a mango), a noun preceded by an adjective (as in a rich man), a noun preceded by a participle (as in a thinking man; a broken toy), and a noun preceded by an adverb + an adjective or a

¹¹Paul Roberts, English Sentences (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 22.

participle (as in a quickly-growing movement).

Besides being used with singular count nouns, the indefinite article a can be used with such words as alms, barracks, bellows, gallows, gas works, headquarters, etc., which, though plural in form, may be singular in meaning. Abstract nouns do not usually take a or an.

Examples:

- Knowledge can be dangerous without wisdom.
- Everybody wants peace.
- Beauty is skin deep.

From what is stated above, it is seen that the indefinite article a is generally used to precede singular or countable nouns and usually gives the idea of indefiniteness.

C.E. Eckersley states that "...a is used before a word beginning with a consonant sound; an before a word beginning with a vowel sound."¹²

Examples:

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| - <u>a</u> day | - <u>a</u> boy |
| - <u>a</u> train | - <u>a</u> European |
| - <u>a</u> university | - <u>a</u> useful book |
| - <u>an</u> apple | - <u>an</u> hour |
| - <u>an</u> open book | - <u>an</u> heir |

¹²C.E. Eckersley, op.cit., p. 51.

- an angry child - an honest man
- an honorable act

William Branford points out that

... a invariably precedes a sequence beginning with a consonantal sound (:a large cat), an a sequence beginning with a vowel sound (:an enormous cat); ...¹³

Thus, we can conclude that the choice between a and an is phonetically determined.

In the present study, the use of the indefinite article is classified as follows:

1. a used in the sense of 'one'
2. a used as a specifying article
3. a used as a non-specifying article
4. a used in generic sense
5. a used in special cases

3.2.1 A Used in the Sense of one

Some grammarians¹⁴ state that the indefinite article a is sometimes used in its original numerical sense of one.

Examples:

- a foot long (= one foot long)

¹³William Branford, op.cit., p. 71.

¹⁴Otto Jespersen, C.E. Eckersley, George O. Curme, P.C. Wren, for example.

- a hundred (= one hundred)
- a thousand (= one thousand)
- a shilling (= one shilling)
- not a word (= not (even) one word)
- Not a hair of your head shall be touched.
(=not one hair...)
- Rome was not built in a day. (= in one day)
- He emptied the glass at a draught. (= at one draught)

3.2.2 A Used as a Specifying Article

The indefinite article a can indicate a definite unit. When it is thus used a means some or a certain and can specify the genitive too.

Examples:

- We met an old man on our way here.
- There is a book lying on the table.
- A lamp is beside a chair.
- A guest is here.
- John bought a car before we did.
- There was a man enquiring for you while you were out.
- A friend wanted Ann to go.
- I wonder who would buy a house.

- To know a child is to love him.
- A squirrel found an acorn.
- A boy knocked at our door.
- He spoke to a soldier.
- He lives on a farm.
- a job by which he can support his family
- a girl whom I met several years ago and who occasionally visits me
- a letter which Jones dictated and John typed
- I stop at a friend's house for tea.
- I bought vegetables at a butcher's shop.
- We usually have lunch at someone's home, but last week we had lunch at a woman's club.

In the case of the genitive, a could point out definiteness with the help of the context:

a friend's house = the house of a certain friend
 a butcher's shop = the shop of a certain butcher
 a woman's club = the club of a certain woman

If there is no help from the context, a will give the sense of indefiniteness, as in

a butcher's shop = a shop where a butcher works
 a woman's club = a club for women.

3.2.3 A Used as a Non-specifying Article

The indefinite article usually indicates an indefinite unit. The presence of a and an in most cases signals

that a new character or subject is being introduced into the discussion. Thus, it can be called the non-specifying article.¹⁵ The non-specifying article is used to single out one object, action, or quality from among a number.

Examples:

- Can you give me a ruler?
- He wants to buy a car.
- Please pass me a pencil.
- Will you lend me a book?
- Would you like to have a drink?
- Jane wants a new skirt.
- Her father wanted to buy a cupboard.
- He asks to have a spoon.
- Please call me a boy.

3.2.4 A Used in Generic Sense

The indefinite article a can give more indefinite sense than it is in 3.2.3. A in this case is equal to any, designating no individual in particular.

Examples:

- A thief is a coward.
- (= Any thief is a coward.)

¹⁵This term is used by R.A. Close in English as a Foreign Language (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1964).

- A lieutenant is an officer.
(= Any lieutenant is an officer.)
- A cat is not as vigilant as a dog.
(= any cat; any dog)
- An albatross is a big sea-bird.
(= any bird of this particular species)

In this case, the indefinite article a plus a common noun, singular number is taken as representative of the whole class. Thus, it has a generalizing force like the definite article the.¹⁶ Both a and the in this case are equivalent to plural nouns with ^{the} non-definite determiner ϕ .
Examples:

- A horse is difficult to train.
- The horse is difficult to train.
- Horses are difficult to train.
- A dog is vigilant.
- The dog is vigilant.
- Dogs are vigilant.
- A cat is not as vigilant as a dog.
- The cat is not as vigilant as the dog.
- Cats are not as vigilant as dogs.

There are certain simple nouns that are usually used without an article:

Man is mortal.

Woman is frail.

Man cannot live by bread alone.

¹⁶ See pp. 15-16.

The garden seemed untouched by the hand of man.

"Man" here means 'human being,' 'mankind,' or 'humanity' and never occurs with the definite article.

But we can use this kind of noun with the definite article in:

The man hunts, while the woman takes care of the home.

The man is responsible for defending the home.

The woman gets the children in case of divorce.

3.2.5 A Used in Special Cases

A. A + Proper Noun

(1) When the indefinite article a is used with a proper noun referring to a well-known or famous person, it will convert the proper noun into a common noun indicating that the referent is a member of the class of that proper noun or that the common noun has the same characteristics as the proper noun.

Examples:

- He is a regular Hercules.
- You are a Lincoln in accomplishing such a deed.
- That woman is a Florence Nightingale.
- This young girl is a Venus.

(2) When the indefinite article a is used with a proper noun preceded by a title, a shows uncertainty.

Examples:

- a Mr. Jacobs
- A Mrs. Jones is waiting in your room.

B. A + Uncountable Noun

The indefinite article a can be used with a noun

referring to a substance or abstraction or before an abstract noun. It either indicates 'a kind of' that substance, or 'a certain amount or quantity of' it. When it occurs with a noun that can be countable or uncountable, its presence indicates that the noun is countable.

(1) A meaning 'a certain kind of'

Examples:

- a good wine = a certain kind of wine
- a bread = a certain kind of bread
- a beauty = a certain kind of beauty

(2) A meaning 'a certain amount or quantity of'

Examples:

- a rest
- a knowledge
- a desire

(3) A indicating that the noun is countable

When a noun can be used as a countable or uncountable noun, the presence of a indicates that the noun is countable. The difference between the noun occurring with or without the indefinite article a can be seen in the following pairs of sentences:

- He intends to start business soon.
(= begin commercial activity)
- He intends to start a business soon.
(= open a store)
- She wants to buy paper.
(= sheets used for writing)
- She wants to buy a paper.
(= a newspaper)
- He will start work tomorrow.
(= what a person does to earn his living)

- He will start a work tomorrow.
(= a piece of literary or musical composition)

C. A Used in Certain Expressions

(1) It can follow no less, as, too, quite, many, and certain adjectives.

Examples:

- We were received by no less a person than the Lord Mayor.
- She was as fine a schooner as you will ever come across.
- You allow too short an interval for lunch.
- He seems quite a decent fellow.
- Many a man has gone astray.
- Travelling on however humble a scale is expensive in Scotland.
- no worse a husband

(2) It is used with half

Examples:

- Half a loaf is better than no bread.
- half an hour
- half a mile

(3) It is used before singular predicative nouns¹⁷

¹⁷This term is used by Eckersley, *op.cit.*, p.53, predicative nouns = nouns forming the complement of verbs such as to be, make, etc.

and in adjuncts introduced by such, as, and for.

Examples: Predicative nouns

- She is a nurse.
- He is a teacher.
- He is an officer.

Adjuncts

- As a coach he was a great success.
- He was hanged for a pirate.
- He was such a hero.

(4) It is also used in the following expressions with the meaning 'each'.

- once a day - twice a year
- once a week.

3.3 The Indefinite Article 'a' and its Thai Equivalents

3.3.1 A Used in the Sense of one

When the indefinite article a is used in the sense of 'one,' it corresponds to the word nyn in Thai structure. This word differs from the cardinal numeral nyn in that it is generally pronounced with a mid tone and comes after the classifier. It seems that the word nyn is morphologically related to the word nyn. Its position in relation to the classifier determines the tone. nyn that precedes the classifier, like any other cardinal number, indicates quantity, while nyn that occurs after the classifier disambiguates the noun phrase regarding grammatical

number. nỳn in the construction N nỳn C¹⁸ seems to correspond to the cardinal number one in the English construction one + N. The equivalent of the English noun phrase a + N, therefore, seems to be N C nỳn.

Examples:

- a blouse
nỳn sỳa
- = sỳa tua nỳn
- a mosquito-net
nỳn mủn
- = mủn lản nỳn
- a key
nỳn kuncεε
- = kuncεε dỏc nỳn

The rule given above does not apply to a noun phrase that consists of a and a noun indicating a unit of measurement. According to Vichin Panupong, words that refer to units of measurement are classifiers.¹⁹ These words generally follow cardinal numerals.

¹⁸Vichin Panupong places nỳn in this position in the class of "cardinal" numeral and nỳn that occurs after a classifier in the class of "ordinal" numeral. In this study, however, nỳn is considered a variant of nỳn and will be written nỳn with the understanding that in the spoken language nỳn that occurs after the classifier is generally pronounced nỳn.

¹⁹Vichin Panupong, op.cit.

Examples:

- sǒon líd = two litres
- sǎam pii = three years

They also occur with nouns and function as classifiers.

Examples:

- náamman sǒon líd
- = two litres of gasoline
- weelaa sǎam pii
- = a period of three years

The Thai equivalent for a + N_{mea} is, therefore, C_{mea} nỳn.

Examples:

- a fǒot long
- nỳn fút jaaw
- = jaaw fút nỳn
- a shilling
- nỳn chilín
- = chilín nỳn
- a year
- nỳn pii
- = pii nỳn (Viehin Panupong considered 'pii' a time-word)
- a litre
- nỳn líd
- = líd nỳn

3.3.2 A Used as a Specifying Article

When the indefinite article a functions as a specifying article, the English noun phrase will correspond to N C nỳn in Thai.

Examples:

- We met an old man on
raw phób nỳn kèe phũuchaaj bon
our way here.
khỏonraw thaan thĩinĩi

= raw phób chaaj kèe khon nỳn ráwàan
thaan maa thĩinĩi

- A man came to see you
nỳn phũuchaaj maa hèn khun
when you were out.
khànathĩi khun pen ?ỏog

= phũuchaaj khon nỳn maa hĩa khun
khànathĩi khun māj jùu

or mii phũuchaaj khon nỳn naa hĩa khun
khànathĩi khun māj jùu

- A lady wants to see you.
nỳn sũphãabsãdtrii tỏonkaan hèn khun
= sũphãabsãdtrii khon nỳn tỏonkaan phób
khun

or mii sũphãabsãdtrii khon nỳn tỏonkaan
phób khun.

- A boy knocked at our
nỳn dẻgphũuchaaj khỏ? thĩi khỏonraw
door.
prátuu

= dẻg khon nỳn maa khỏ? prátuu bĩan
raw

or mii dẻg khon nỳn naa khỏ? prátuu
bĩan raw

= khǎo soodaa chǎn { khuàd nỳn }
khuàd

3.3.4 A Used in Generic Sense

When the indefinite article a is used in a generic sense, the noun phrase generic a + N corresponds to N in Thai.

Examples:

- A thief is a coward.
 nỳn khàmooj pen nỳn khonkhîikhlàad
 = khàmooj pen khonkhîikhlàad

- A cat is a mammal.
 nỳn mɛɛw pen nỳn sàd líaŋ lûug dŭaj nom
 = mɛɛw pen sàd líaŋ lûug dŭaj nom

- An albatross is a big sea-bird.
 nỳn ?albatrós pen nỳn jàj thálee nóg
 = nóg ?albatrós pen nóg thálee khànàad jàj

3.3.5 A Used in Special Cases

A. A + Proper Noun

(1) When the indefinite article a is used to precede a proper noun that refers to a well-known or famous person, it has no corresponding form in Thai. An English sentence that contains a noun phrase of this type is metaphorical. Its Thai equivalent, however, is not a metaphor but a simile; the construction is Adj + jàankaàb or mŷankàb + N_{prop.}

Examples:

- This young girl is a Venus.
 níi saaw degjǐn pen nǐn wiinás
 = dègsǎaw khon níi sǔaj_ jàankàb wiinás²⁰
- That woman is a Florence Nightingale.
 nán phǔujǐn pen nǐn floréns najtǐnkeel.
 = phǔujǐn khon nán dii jàankàb floréns
najtǐnkeel
- He is a Hercules.
 khǎw pen nǐn hækhiwlís
 = khǎw khěnrreɛn mǎankàb hækhiwlís

(2) The indefinite article a is sometimes used with a proper name preceded by a title. This kind of noun phrase is interpreted differently from that discussed under (1) of this section. To indicate uncertainty, the name is generally preceded by khon chýy which means 'a person whose name is'.

Examples:

- A Mrs. Jones is waiting in your
 nǐn naan coons y khoj naj khǔɔnkhun
 room.
 hǐn
- = mii khon chýy mísís coons khoj jùu
 naj hǐn khǔɔnkhun

²⁰The broken line indicates that the unit above it is added to make the meaning of the sentence clearer.

- A Mr. Jacobs called you up
 nỳn naaj caakhòbs riag khun khỳn
 this morning.
 níi cháaw

= mii khon chỳy místə caakhòbs thoorásàb
 maa hǎa khun mỳa cháaw níi

B. A + Uncountable Noun

(1) When a means 'a certain kind of', a corresponds to nỳn in Thai.

a + N = N C nỳn

Examples:

- a good wine
 nỳn dii lâw'ànùn
 = lâw'ànùn jàan dii cháníd nỳn

- a bread
 nỳn khànòmpan
 = khànòmpan cháníd nỳn

- a beauty
 nỳn khwaamsuaj
 = khwaamsuaj bèεb nỳn

(2) When a means 'a certain amount or quantity of', it has no corresponding form in Thai. The Thai equivalent of the noun phrase a + N is N.

Examples:

- a rest
 nỳn kaanphágp hòon

(1) A used with as, too, no less, etc.

Examples:

- She was as fine a schooner as
 thəə pen thāw dii n̄ŋ rya thāw
 you will ever come across.
 khun cá? khəəj maa khāam

= man pen rya thīi dii thīi sùd thīi khun
 cá? hāa thīi nāj ?līg māj dāj

- You allow too short an interval
 khun hāj māag s̄an n̄ŋ weelaaphág
 for lunch.
 s̄amr̀ab ?aahāanklaanwan

= khun hāj weelaa n̄ŋ paj s̄amr̀ab ?aahāan-
 klaanwan

- We were received by no less a
 raw pen dājráb dooj māj n̄ŋ n̄ŋ
 person than the Lord Mayor.
 khon kwaa x naajóg thēedsamontrii

= raw dājráb kaant̄onr̀ab càag thāan naajóg
 thēedsamontrii læj thiidiaw

(2) a used with half

Examples:

- half a loaf
 khrȳŋ n̄ŋ p̄on

= khànõmpaŋ khrȳŋ p̄on

- half an hour
 khrȳŋ n̄ŋ chūamoon

= khrÿŋ chûamooŋ

- half a mile
khrÿŋ nÿŋ maaj

= khrÿŋ maaj

(3) A used with predicative nouns and with as,
such, for.

Examples:

- He is a teacher.
khaw pen nÿŋ khruu

= khaw pen khruu

- He is an officer.
khaw pen nÿŋ naajtháhãan

= khaw pen naajtháhãan

- He was hanged for a pirate.
khaw y khwëen sãmràb nÿŋ coonsàlàad

= khaw thùug khwëen khoo naj thãaná? thii
pen coonsàlàad

(4) When a means 'each,' it corresponds to lá?
in Thai.

Examples:

- once a day
nÿŋkhrán nÿŋ wan

= wan lá? khrán

- twice a year
sõŋkhrán nÿŋ pii

= pii lá? sõŋkhrán

- once a week
 nỳnkhraṅ nỳn sàbdaa
 = sàbdaa lá? khraṅ

It can be seen that even though the indefinite article a generally corresponds to nỳn in Thai, there are many cases in which a occurs in English but nỳn does not occur in Thai. In such case e.g. a + predicative noun, there is no corresponding form for the article a in Thai.



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