

# A “the” or the “a”? Korean L2 learner problems and patterns

Kent Lee

Institute for Foreign Language Studies

Korea University

KOTESOL conference

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[www.kentlee7.com](http://www.kentlee7.com)

# Overview

- Learner difficulties
- Corpus study
- Pedagogical system
- Article (determiner) patterns

# Problems

Does the count/non-count noun distinction work very well?

Can you say:

- A water, a coffee ?
- The feminism ?

Can you start a new topic with *the*?

Can us use *a/an* for a previously mentioned noun?

# Problems

- Please give me a latte / a coffee / a water
- The feminism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionists
- Definitions: Now a first mover is a creative person who develops a new market.

# Problems

- Obligatory *the* for instruments?
  - Mary plays the piano
- Prep. phrases
  - The satellite is in orbit.
  - The children were speaking in dialect.

# Problems

- Inapplicability of textbook rules
- Count / non-count noun distinctions
  - too simplistic

# Research questions

- Lexical concreteness
- Semantic categories (e.g., Lyons 1977)
- Certain structures like prepositional phrases & post-modified noun phrases

# Corpus study

- **L1: COCA corpus** (Corpus of Contemporary American English), academic subcorpus (Gardner & Davies, 2013)
- **L2: UIUC corpus** (Cowan, Choi & Kim 2003)

Corpus		#files	#words	# the tokens	# a/an tokens
COCA (L1)	(academic)	24,169	103,421,981	13120	17817
EFL (L2)	Non-credit	56	11,822	10	10
	Undergraduate	110	60,236	92	44
	Graduate	324	169,798	297	130
	L2 total		241,856	399	184



# Corpus study

- Lexical concreteness / abstractness ratings (Brysbaert, Warriner, & Kuperman, 2014)
- Lexical frequency
- Prepositionally post-modified nouns
- 269 frequent nouns in academic vocabulary (Coxhead 2000)

# Corpus study

- WordSmith 7.0 Concord
- SAS 9.4 Studio statistical software (Univ. Ed. for Linux)
- Multinomial logistic hierarchical regression analysis

# Corpus results

- Significant effects for:
- L1 vs. L2, and L2 levels
- Lexical frequency
- Concreteness / abstractness

## L2 data: Less frequent nouns

- Liberman insists that supralaryngeal airway of modern humans is not defined by the existence of the hyoid bone
- In addition, positive stereotype influence our society as a good aspect.

# L2 data: Abstract nouns

## Omissions

- In addition, positive stereotype influence our society as a good aspect.
- and academic performance are also impaired in serious degree
- Because of this reason, it was very hard for me to understand English pronoun system.

# L2 data: Post-modified nouns

## Omissions

- I'm focus[ed] on ratio of user to a member of computer
- ... growing of obese population in the USA indicate severity of the public health problem
- We have suggested that three major limitations of Neanderthal show us the impossibility of speaking like humans.

## L2 data: Post-modified nouns

L2 writers more likely to use  
*a/an* + NP + PP

- but if these fears continuously reside in children's minds, and interfere their daily routines, it might be a beginning of social phobias (Gr)

# L1 examples: Post-modifiers

*the* NP + PP = restrictive, anaphoric

- ... and to further evaluate the arousal hypothesis of stereotype threat ...
- ... , the findings also confirm the central hypothesis of this study that ...
- ... , augmenting the inherent flexibility of the VTB abstraction ...
- The use of short videos for patients in the waiting room encourages them



# L1 examples: Post-modifiers

NP+PP (post-mod.): new, definitional, descriptive

- ... Molina and Rowland proposed an alarming hypothesis in Nature that the use of chlorofluorocarbon ...
- Breakwell (1986b) has defined a strategy for coping with stigma as ...
- ... to select a broadcast protocol for use in a large-scale WSN deployment ...

# Prepositional phrases

- Prep. phrases (?)
  - The satellite is in orbit.
  - The children were speaking in dialect.

# L1 examples: Prep. collocations

- In response, in terms of, keep/bear in mind, in practice, in detail, to be in development, in relation to, in spring/summer/fall/winter, in decline
- difference in X, similar in form, believe in
- each involves significant drawbacks when used in isolation
- and emulated sensor nodes and radios in real time

# L2 concreteness effects

## Material vs. object nouns

- First, when you buy a film, you should check selection of film, brand ISO.

## Other less “thingy” nouns

- Of course, stereotypes have impact on society

## L2 concreteness effects

General activity cf. event nouns

- However, in anthropological behaviors of Neanderthals, they had enough ability to change the conversation each other
- That is, if this situation continues, it can be possible to increase a crime in our society

# L2 concreteness effects

General  
activity  
cf.  
event  
nouns



Oops! Where is my baggage?  
あれ？荷物は？

**The theft is increasing**  
**盗難被害増加中**

**Don't forget your baggage!**  
**荷物忘れていませんか**

東京空港警察署  
Tokyo Airport Police station  
東京国際空港ターミナル株式会社

# L2 Concreteness effects

- Object nouns cf. material nouns
- Other “thingy” nouns
- Event cf. activity nouns
- Post-modified nouns (e.g., with restrictive meanings)
- Abstract nouns

# Pedagogy & traditional grammar rules

Traditional rules are:

- Arbitrary
- Untested; not based on empirical evidence; ∴ unscientific
- Probably unintelligible to learners



# Science vs. arbitrariness

- “For me, it is far better to grasp the universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring.”

— Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*

# Grammar

- NBMA: Non-bovine material approach

# Grammar

- NBMA: Non-bovine material approach



# Grammar

- Empirical basis
- Presented inductively when possible
- When possible, appeal to intuitive / natural categories / concepts
- Interactive activities (discovery, communicative ... )
- Patterns (or principles) rather than "rules" and "exceptions"

# Patterns

## Pattern 1: Indefinite

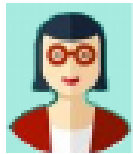


**A/an:** Indefinite =

- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing

# Patterns

## Pattern 2: Definite

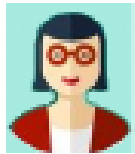


The: Definite =

- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)

# Patterns

## Pattern 2: Definite



The: Definite =

- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)



# Patterns

## Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)



A/an/the =

- Object or thing



# Patterns

## Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)



**A/an/the =**

- Object or thing

## Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)



**A/an/the =**

- Object or thing
- Object / thing
- Specific type or batch (of material)
- Specific event / instance (of abstract noun)

# Patterns

## Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)



- Ø bare noun (singular) =
- Material, mass, substance

# Patterns

## Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns ( $\emptyset$ s)



Plural bare nouns ( $\emptyset$ s) =

- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things

# Patterns

## Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)



Plural bare nouns (Øs) =

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# Pedagogical system: Advanced

- Abstract nouns
- “the” + Post-modified nouns (restrictive)
- Definitional “a/an” (incl. post-modifiers)
- “Generalized / Abstractified” nouns
  - in orbit / in dialect

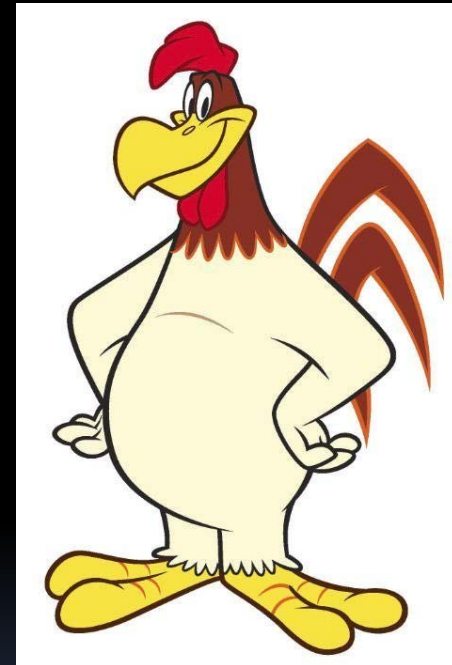
# Patterns: Singular bare nouns

- Materials, substance
  - Water, coffee



# Patterns: Singular bare nouns

- Materials, substance
  - chicken



# Patterns: Singular bare nouns

- General activities
  - jogging / jog
  - theft / (a/the) theft
- Abstract nouns
  - Love, peace, war
- Generalized nouns
  - The satellite is in orbit.
  - The children were speaking in dialect.



# Patterns: Plural bare nouns

- Set, group of things
  - I need to buy eggs and tomatoes.
- Categories, generalizations, general descriptions
  - Penguins are aquatic birds; penguins have adapted using their wings for swimming.

# Pedagogical ideas

## Object vs. material nouns

- Map tasks
- Recipes
- Shopping lists (grocery items)
- Shopping lists (for clothing, office supplies, furniture, or equipment)
- Budget proposals (e.g., for a company)

# Pedagogical ideas

- Film budget (for a proposal for an independent film; pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution phases)

# Pedagogical ideas

Process paragraph / description:

- Constructing an object (e.g., a house)
- Assembling a product (e.g., assembly instructions for a machine, piece of furniture, toy, computer, or other product)
- Manufacturing a product
- Accomplishing a goal

# Pedagogical ideas

Process: Object / material

- How something is made from a material.
- Describing how special effects might have been done in a film, or how a video was made (e.g., OK Go videos).

# Pedagogical ideas (advanced)

- Process: a scientific experiment, a research methodology
- A manufacturing processes, or the industrial processing of a material.
- Describe a particular artistic genre or subgenre (of film, music, novels, etc.); then discuss a specific example, and explain how it fulfills and differs from the standards of the genre.

# Pedagogical ideas (advanced)

- Describe a particular theory, movement, framework, belief system, or ideology in your field of study, and particular phases or varieties of this system.
- Present a proposal for your own independent film project, as if you were pitching the idea to a group of investors in order to gain funding for the project.

# Pedagogical goals

Oops! Where is my baggage?  
あれ？荷物は？

The theft is increasing  
盗難被害増加中

Don't forget your baggage!  
荷物忘れていませんか

東京空港警察署  
Tokyo Airport Police station  
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# Thank you!

- Kent Lee
- [kentlee7@gmail.com](mailto:kentlee7@gmail.com),  
[kentlee@korea.ac.kr](mailto:kentlee@korea.ac.kr)
- [www.kentlee7.com](http://www.kentlee7.com)

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# Thank you!

- Kent Lee
- [kentlee7@gmail.com](mailto:kentlee7@gmail.com),  
[kentlee@korea.ac.kr](mailto:kentlee@korea.ac.kr)
- [www.kentlee7.com](http://www.kentlee7.com)

# Patterns

## Pattern 1: Indefinite



**A/an:** Indefinite =

- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing

## Pattern 1: Indefinite



**A/an:** Indefinite =

- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing
- First mention
- Hypothetical example
- Definition (via hypothetical example)

# Patterns

## Pattern 2: Definite



**The:** Definite =

- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)

## Pattern 2: Definite



**The:** Definite =

- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)
- Second / subsequent mention
- Special contexts:
  - Physical context
  - Specifier adj./phrase
  - Whole-part context
  - Background scene
  - Specialized background knowledge
  - Scene / topic shift
- Post-modifier / post-specifier (specific example / type / instance)
- Exemplar / typical example
  - Definition by exemplar
  - Habitual / typical activity

# Patterns

## Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)



A/an/the =

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# Patterns

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- Specific event / instance (of abstract noun)

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## Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)



- Ø bare noun (singular) =
- Material, mass, substance



# Patterns

## Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)



**Plural bare nouns (Øs) =**

- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things

# Patterns

## Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns ( $\emptyset$ s)



Plural bare nouns ( $\emptyset$ s) =

- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things

## Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns ( $\emptyset$ s)



Plural bare nouns ( $\emptyset$ s) =

- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things
- Group, set of things
- Category, type of things
- Generic description

# Patterns

## Pattern 6: Compound nouns



### Compound nouns

- Determiner pattern depends on final noun

- Compounds
- Abbreviations
- Place names

# Pedagogical ideas

- .
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# Pedagogical ideas

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# In-class unit

## Basic patterns

A/an

The

∅ sg. - bare singular nouns

∅ pl. – bare plural nouns

# In-class unit

## Basic patterns

A/an indefinite

The definite

∅ sg. - material

∅ pl. – group, set

# Instructional methods

- Short sample sentences & paragraphs illustrate determiner patterns
- Student group discussion
- Activities connected to thematic unit
- Full-class teacher-led discussion
- Basic patterns, then metaphorical extensions

# Patterns: *A/an* = indefinite

- First mention
- Hypothetical uses
  - I want a man who knows what love is – a man who can cook and have an intelligent conversation.
- Definition style
  - A first mover is a person who develops a new product for a new market.

# Patterns: *The* = definite

- Linguistic context
  - 2nd / subsequent mention
  - Specifiers
  - The first, the last, the nearest, the very thing ...
- Physical context
  - You can take the red pill, or the blue pill.

# Patterns: *The* = definite

- Extended contexts
- Part-whole
  - Open the computer and you'll see the SATA cable between the motherboard and the hard drive
- Background scene
  - On my way to work the weather was bad and the sun was hidden behind the clouds.
  - At the office, the secretary was gone and the photocopier was broken.

# Patterns: *The* = definite

- Context
- Post-modifiers: relative clause, reduced relative, participle, prep. phrase
  - The satellite that the ESA launched failed to deploy.



# Patterns: *The* = definite

## The = exemplar

- In the jungle the lion sleeps tonight.
- Vivid description
  - The cheetah is the fastest land animal on earth.
- Regular, habitual activity
  - After stopping at the office, I went to the store to buy some chocolate. I then took the bus home.
  -

# Patterns: Singular bare nouns

- Materials, substance
  - Water, coffee
- General activities
  - Bungee jumping, jogging, theft
- Abstract nouns
  - Love, peace, war
- Generalized nouns
  - The satellite is in orbit.
  - The children were speaking in dialect.

# Patterns: Plural bare nouns

- Set, group of things
  - I need to buy eggs and tomatoes.
- Categories, generalizations (incl. encyclopedic descriptions)
  - Penguins are aquatic birds; penguins have adapted using their wings for swimming.

# Students' suggestions

- providing some explanations in Korean (2)
- easier explanations (1)
- more examples (5)
- more common or relatable examples (1)
- summary of principles or patterns (3), chart, graphic or table to illustrate the patterns (3)
- more exercises, such as editing or practice with a written article (2).

# Error-prone items

- Abstract singular  $\emptyset$  noun
  - culture, communication, literature,
- Generic plural incl. PPs
  - $\emptyset$  contemporary works of art

# Error-prone items

- Definitions
  - A first mover is a creative person who first develops an idea and brings it to market.
- Post-modified NPs
  - the impact that it had on ...
  - the presence of a human voice
  
  - But: ∅ contemporary works of art

# Native speaker variability

- Definitions
- Hypothetical
- Prepositions / generalized NPs: e.g.,  
in (a) dialect
- Post-modified items (e.g., specifier  
vs. generic)

# Improvements

- 6 basic patterns
  - Bare nouns vs. marked nouns (*a/an/the*)
  - *A/an* indefinite = unknown
  - *The* definite = known, context
  - $\emptyset$  sg. – material
  - $\emptyset$  pl. – group, set
  - Compound patterns



# Compound nouns

- Head noun determines pattern
  - According to the computer manual, RAM chip installation should be easy.
- Also abbreviations
  - The CIA and the NSA read my emails, not the FBI.
- Place names
  - The Congo = The Congo region
  - The Amazon = The Amazon river

# Implications for theory & pedagogy

- Cognitive grammar can complement other theoretical approaches
  - Esp. constituent structure (syntactic & prosodic trees, relations, hierarchies)
- Articles / determiners do not submit to traditional grammar rules
- Dependent on natural categories, context, nuance

# Implications for theory & pedagogy

- Pattern + metaphorical extension
- Natural transfer to pedagogy
- Can be tied in to thematic units, activities, contents

# Future work

- L2 Corpus research
- Error correction research
- Pedagogical methods

# Conclusion

- Kent Lee
- [kentlee7@gmail.com](mailto:kentlee7@gmail.com),  
[kentlee@korea.ac.kr](mailto:kentlee@korea.ac.kr)
- [www.kentlee7.com](http://www.kentlee7.com)

# Conclusion

- Kent Lee
- [kentlee7@gmail.com](mailto:kentlee7@gmail.com),  
[kentlee@korea.ac.kr](mailto:kentlee@korea.ac.kr)
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