

USING **THE** WITH NAMES: WHAT ARE THE RULES?

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ABSTRACT

Rules given by both grammar books and classroom textbooks for the use of the with proper names are inadequate. The traditional analysis of this area of grammar, by semantic field, misses the point. In this article, I suggest that an alternative analysis into 'real' and 'descriptive' names is more illuminating. I then attempt to explain some of the apparent exceptions to rules, and offer - for practical classroom purposes - an expanded version of the traditional analysis.

Introduction

This is an area of grammar which causes more confusion than almost any other. Why do we say *the National Monument*, with the, but *National Day*, without? Why do we need to put the before *University of Cambridge* but not before *Cambridge University*? Why is it *Time* magazine, but *The Straits Times*? *ASEAN* and *NATO*, but the *IMF*? Should we say *Cameron Highlands* or the *Cameron Highlands*? Do I live on *Cheras Road* or *the Cheras Road*?

Small wonder that the use of *the* with names causes bafflement to students, teachers and textbooks alike. Indeed, some respected grammar books such as Leech & Svartvik (1975), omit it entirely - possibly because it appears to be more a question of idiom than of systematic grammar.

For my part, I avoided any serious teaching of the use of articles for many years, trusting that I was 'covering the subject' in class by doing a few exercises based on the lists commonly found in grammar books for students (e.g. Swan & Walter, 1997; Holden & Singh, 1993). The approach here is to list groups of names used either with *the* (rivers, mountain ranges etc.) or without *the* (continents and so on), followed by exceptions. The rules, given in this manner, are clear enough but appear incoherent and arbitrary.

The areas dealt with by the textbooks are also strangely limited. Geographical names, for some reason, get particularly good coverage. Some writers boldly go a little further and give rules for (say) newspapers, restaurants or public buildings, while a very few touch on more esoteric areas such as the names of ships and express trains (Joseph, 1991). But the names of most of the other things which our students need to refer to in everyday life - businesses, government departments, events such as the *Commonwealth Games* and so on - are hardly ever mentioned.

Although my students learnt, for instance, that the names of seas take *the* while those of lakes do not, I could never explain why. Yet, when faced with a newly coined name - a new government department, say, or a new seafood restaurant - I realised that I had no hesitation in deciding whether or not to use *the* with the name, and that other fluent users of English were making the same decision as myself. Clearly, there was some kind of system in this madness -but what?

The most complete account I have come across is Roger Berry's *Articles* (1993), which devotes an entire chapter to the subject. However, Berry doesn't draw out what seem to me to be the fundamental principles, nor does he deal with the mutability and uncertainty of some names. The time seems ripe to look at the whole question afresh.

Is It Just A Question Of Idiom, Or Are There Any Rules?

Unfortunately for teachers, this is a very active area of language. For one thing, new names are being created all the time. Worse, there are also several cases where established forms appear to be changing: for instance, the country formerly known as *the Ukraine* is now called just *Ukraine*. Where there is such a change under way, native speakers often disagree about usage, especially in speech (e.g. *I've got an account with Hongkong Bank/the Hongkong Bank; He comes from UK/the UK*).

Despite the apparent anarchy, it seems to me that we are dealing with a question of grammar, in the sense that there are rules. We are not talking here about rules of the traditional classroom sort, but rather a complex network of something conflicting principles which practised users of English apply subconsciously. One of these principles is analogy - the creation of new names on the model of existing ones. Newspaper names are a good illustration of this process. There is no compelling reason why these names should begin with the - indeed, one short-lived newspaper in the UK was called simply *Today*. But traditionally they do, so anyone starting a new newspaper would automatically call it *The Jinjang Clarion* or *The Sunday Thrill* simple because a name with *The...* 'sounds right for a newspaper'. And the reason that it 'sounds right' is that we subconsciously recognise a mental category 'newspaper name' following the established model of *The Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Two Basic Kinds Of Name

Apart from analogy, what other principles are there? It seems to me that the traditional analysis of names by semantic field (mountains, buildings, express train etc.) is something of a red herring. Instead, I suggest, it is more useful to think in terms of just two basic types of name.

The first kind, which we can call 'real' names, consists of those traditional names which have been used to confer identity from time immemorial: the names of people themselves (*Aslan, James*) and of some of the most important entities which define their lives: towns, nations, festivals. Real names do not take *the*.

Names of the second type are different. They derive from common nouns with a descriptor (*the White House, the National Monument, the World Health Organisation*). Such names, which could be termed 'descriptive' names, do include *the* - which is logical, because the essence of *the* is to make common nouns refer to specific things, distinguishing one particular house (or monument, or organisation) from just any old house, monument or organisation.

Principles In Conflict

It is the interplay between these opposing principles - is it a real name, or is it just a descriptive phrase made particular by *the*? - which lies behind most of the apparent exceptions to rules.

We can see how such 'exceptions' may arise when a new name is created. Take the case of *National Day* - a name which came into existence at the time of independence. The English language name of the national festival could have followed the analogy of other names beginning 'National', which are usually coined as descriptive names with common noun, modifier and *the* (*the National Museum, the National Zoo, the National*) influence being presumably the analogy with other festivals such as *Christmas* or *Commonwealth Day*.

Additional Syntactic Clues

As well as these general considerations, there are also some syntactic factors which affect whether a name has the or not:

A Names with *of* in the middle normally take *the*: *the University of Leeds, the Bay of Bengal, the Straits of Malacca*.

B 'Back to front' names where the general word precedes the specific one (*Radio City, Mount Kinabalu, Highway 66, Lake Toba, Fort Cornwallis*) never seem to take *the*.

C Names which derive from a person's name + possessives never take *the*. Examples: *Macdonalds, Harrods, Sothebys*.

D If the descriptor before a common noun is itself a real name, as in *San Francisco Bay, London Bridge or Anderson School*, the name often does not take *the*. This is a weak principle, though, as there are many exceptions (*the Washington Monument, the Australia Cup, the Penang Bridge*).

The General Principles In Practice

It is well known that the names of individual people, nations and towns do not take *the*. But several other important categories also qualify for 'real name' status, such as the names of days and months, seasons and festivals, and religious and philosophical movements (*Islam, Confucianism*). Interestingly, businesses also like to identify themselves with the 'real name' group by invariably adopting names without *the* (*IBM Cathay Pacific, General Motors*). Certain very fundamental institutions such as *Parliament or Congress* are also sometimes honoured by being thought of as real names.

We can fairly safely assume that most other names do take *the*. Names of jobs - as opposed to the names of individuals - are an example (*the Managing Director, the King, the Prime Minister*). The names of government departments, associations and organisations are another case. It is instructive to contrast *the FAM, the DAP* (organisations) and *the FO, the CIA* (British and American government departments) with *IBM and JAL* (businesses).

As I have noted, there are several interesting cases where names appear to be moving from one category to the other. The movement always seems to be from 'with *the*' to 'without *the*', as the name becomes more generally accepted and its original descriptive function is forgotten. It is indeed possible that any descriptive name is inherently unstable, and that, given time, it could come to be considered as a real name and lose its *the*. An example is *Hongkong Bank* (more recently *HSBC*), where the latest versions of its name, without *the*, brand it as a business. Originally, however, it was *The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation*, thought of as an organisation; and the halfway form *The Hongkong Bank* is still common. Similarly, a recent report in the *The Independent* newspaper demonstrates the difficulty faced by the British media in deciding whether to refer to *the Bank of Scotland* (organisation) or *Bank of Scotland* (business).

Another 'crossover' case is that of acronyms - names made up from initial letters (*NATO*, *Asian Nations* has become *ASEAN*, without *the*. However, this only works so long as the acronym is pronounced as a word rather than a series of letters; so *the United Nations* remains *the UN* and *the Central Intelligence Agency* is *the CIA*.

A New Look At The Traditional Categories

Even with a greater understanding of the basic principles, we still need teachable 'rules' for everyday classroom use. With this in mind, we can now take a more informed look at the traditional textbook analysis, and attempt to extend it into more widely useful areas.

Note that although I am using the word 'rule' here, it is only as a convenient shorthand. When explaining to students the complex interactions between conflicting principles which govern actual language use, I find it is a good deal more useful to think of 'tendencies' or 'habits' rather than 'rules', and to remind them of the important role played by analogy.

1 Geographical areas

The basic rule seems to be that geographical areas of all kinds take *the*. Examples: *the Netherlands*, *the Middle East*, *the Cameron Highlands*. The 'geographical areas' concept includes deserts (*the Sahara*), groups of islands and mountains, always plural (*the Philippines*, *the Himalayas*) and all types of seas and oceans (*the Pacific*, *the English Channel*, *the Straits of Malacca*).

1a However, individual mountains follow the 'real name' rule: no *the* (*Everest*, *K2*).

1b A mini-series of exceptions to (1a) (*the Matterhorn*, *the Eiger* and other German-language mountains) suggests another tendency: to translate a definite article from the 'home' language. (Another example of this tendency is the city name *the Hague*, translating the Dutch *den Haag*).

1c Lakes seem to avoid *the*: *Lake Toba*, *Loch Ness*. This is probably because they have 'back to front' names with the general word before the specific one (see syntactic clue B above).

2 Towns and nations

Generally, the names of towns and nations don't take *the*. But certain states whose names derive from the names of geographical areas used to take *the*, and sometimes still do: (*the*) *Ukraine*, (*the*) *Sudan*, (*the*) *Lebanon*; *the Netherlands*.

2a When a country name describes the political set-up (*the United States of America*, *the Kingdom of Thailand*, *the Soviet Union*, *the People's Republic of China*) it always takes *the*. Almost every

country has an alternative 'official' name of this sort (Japan is an exception!). This explains why *the UK* (=the United Kingdom) is the standard form - although there is nowadays a tendency even among some British to think of it as a real name and say just *UK*.

3 *Roads and streets*

Streets, roads, squares etc. in towns don't take *the*: *Downing Street, Rampart Road, 37th Avenue, City Square*. There are exceptions, usually names which were originally descriptive. *The Strand* in London is an example (*strand* is an old word for 'beach'); *the High Street* is another.

3a Roads between towns - essentially descriptive names - do take *the*: *the East-West Highway, the Cheras Road* (short for 'the road which goes to Cheras').

4 *Businesses*

Names of businesses don't take *the*: *BMW, British Airways, Microsoft*. The few exceptions are like the exceptions for road names, i.e. descriptive (*The Old Curiosity Shop*).

5 *Organisations in general*

But organisations, government departments, clubs and so on do take *the*. Examples: *the Ministry of Defence, the United Nations, the FAM*. There is clearly plenty of room for uncertainty between this principle and the previous one: the names of banks, discussed above, are a case in point.

5a Political parties and movements usually count as organisations: *the Republicans, the DAP, the IRA, the Taliban, the PLO*. There are several exceptions such as *UMNO* and *PAS* (pronounced as words), *Greenpeace* and *Hamas* (probably formed by analogy with the names of philosophies and religions).

6 *Acronyms*

Another 'but': as we have seen, pronounceable acronyms (*UMNO, NATO, ASEAN*) are thought of as more like real names and therefore don't take *the*.

7 *The media*

The traditional distinction between newspaper names (with *the*) and magazine names (without) is a useful rule of thumb, but doesn't explain why there should be exceptions. I offer the following as first thoughts towards a more comprehensive explanation:

Most of the media have real names, without *the*. This can be seen in the names of radio and TV stations (*RTM, NHK, France Inter, CNN*) and magazines (*Asiaweek Practical Motoring, Homes and Gardens*).

7a The first kind of exception is exemplified by *the BBC*, which is actually the name of an organisation (see 5 above) rather than a broadcasting station.

7b Another series of exceptions describes occupations: *The Economist, The English Teacher*. I suggest that this use derives from the 'class' use of the seen when we use, say, the cat to mean 'cats in general'. In a similar way, magazines with names such as *The Economist* and *The English Teacher* are intended by their founders to represent the whole of their profession, as a kind of collective voice.

7c The biggest group of exceptions, and the hardest to explain, concerns newspapers, whose names nearly always begin with *the*: *the Times, the Malay Mail*. My own belief is that they are simply formed by analogy, following the pioneering example of *The Times*, whose name was presumably coined as the short form of an expression such as *the times in which we live*.

8 *Public buildings, monuments etc.*

Public buildings are an extremely difficult area, and it is arguable that this isn't really a useful category at all. However, the following principles have some limited validity:

8a Most public buildings take *the*. Examples: *the Town Hall, the National Mosque, the War Memorial; the Acropolis, the Coliseum, the Taj Mahal*.

8b Hotels, restaurants, pubs, clubs, cinemas and theatres also take *the* (*the Hilton, the Lucky Dragon, the Rex*). The fairly numerous exceptions are mainly due to syntactic clue C - *Macdonalds, Maxim's* - or, as in the case of *Pizza Hut*, because they are thought of as businesses.

8c Many names which begin with a real name do not have *the*. Examples: *Anderson School, Buckingham Palace* (named after people); *Changi Airport, London Bridge, Leeds University* (named after places). Unfortunately this is not a clear-cut rule; there are several exceptions such as *the Washington Monument*.

9 *Historical events and grand occasions*

Historical events normally take *the*: *the Second World War, the French Revolution, the Renaissance, the Intifada*. Sporting events and other grand public occasions follow the same rule: *the Olympic Games, the World Cup, the Oscars, the Coronation*.

10 *A final word of warning...*

Students have to be reminded that, like any noun, proper names may be used as adjectives. In that case, of course, none of the 'rules' sketched out above apply, as use of *the* and *a* with phrases such as *Mediterranean country US citizen NATO member* depends on the head noun of the phrase (*country, citizen, member* in the examples above) and not on the proper name.

Conclusion

Although there will inevitably remain cases which defy classification and can only be explained as 'idiomatic', I hope I have shown that there is a little more system in this area of language than we usually think. It would be interesting to test the principles I have outlined against a wider sample of names, especially newly coined ones, to see to what extent they hold true. I believe there is room for a good deal of research here.

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