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Development of English Article

A definite article appeared in the English language in the pre-written period of its development. The definite article originated from the demonstrative pronoun 'se'. Consequently, a new demonstrative pronoun 'thes' appeared in the language.

These two pronouns were opposed to each other by their meanings: 'se' (that, more distant) and 'thes' (this, a closer one). However, for a long time 'se' was used as a universal demonstrative pronoun and was more commonly used in the Old English period than the pronoun 'thes'. This served as a basis for the development of the definite article. A valuable evidence of the article formation can be found in the poem "Beowulf". In some episodes of the poem certain nouns are used with the determinant 'se' in accordance with language rules of the Old English language. The fact proved that the lexical meaning of the demonstrative pronoun is generalized and weakened, and the demonstrative pronoun gradually turns into a service indicator of the noun. Later, the use of the article becomes a grammatical norm. Until this time, the article had existed as a specific usage of the demonstrative pronoun. The same phenomenon can be observed in other Germanic languages.

The IX-century prose allows us to consider the definite article a tendency in the English language grammar structure development. By this time the function of 'se' was to mean nouns that call objects of a certain kind. However, in poetry use of the article was not obligatory. But the poetry of this time is canonical, conservative, it is not indicative of the article use. Sometime later, the optional use of the article in poetry was perceived as a stylistic sign of the style archaization.

Since the end of the IX century, the definite article existed as a special homonym of the demonstrative pronoun. It differs from the demonstrative 'one' by its grammatical nature and use [4]. They were also distinguished by the fact that the article was not stressed in the sentence structure.

The generic function of the definite article originated in the Old English period. So, in this case it is used to mean a particular, specific case. The formation of this function continued in the Middle English period. At that time, we could observe the obligatory use of the article in poetry.

By the end of the XV century, due to phonetic and morphological changes in the language system there were only two forms of the definite article in English: 'the' before a noun in its singular form and 'tha' ('tho') in the plural. As a result of vowel reduction in an unstressed position, the article changed its graphical form into 'the' and since then, it was the only form of the definite article [5].

The indefinite article appeared later than the definite one. Although we may find it in the prose of the X – XI centuries, its formation fully completed in the middle period of language development. The indefinite article originated from the Old English numeral 'an' (one) and the indefinite pronoun 'some'. The combination of these two meanings in one word is a phenomenon peculiar to many Indo-European languages. Naming the source of the indefinite article, we should speak not just about the numeral an, but about the numerically indefinite pronoun an. In the X –XI centuries, 'an' was used before nouns to introduce a new subject or a person not mentioned before. Later, its meaning it was used before nouns to mean the indefinite correlation with the subject or to classify the subject to a particular class or category. So, these are the two main semantic function of 'an'. During the XIII century, two phonetic variants of the indefinite article were distinguished in the English language: 'an' (before words beginning with a vowel and h) and 'a' (before words beginning with a consonant) [2].

In the first half of the XIII century the indefinite article became a separate element of the English-language grammar structure. However, its use was restricted up to the end of the XVII century when the rules for its use were fixed in grammars [1].

So, it would be interesting to point out some similarities in the development of definite and indefinite articles:

1. Both articles are developed by generalization, subsequent weakening and grammatization of the lexical meaning of their source word.

2. Initially, both articles exist as an articular use of their source word.

3. At first, articles appear with specific nouns.

4. Both articles develop as notional words devoid of lexical meaning – they just note the character of its use in speech.

5. In the formation of both articles, there are two key points: the formation of the main semantic function of the article and the formation of the grammatical norm of its use in which the principle of article obligatory use is implemented [3].

Thus, today the main purpose of the definite article is to mark the grammatical meaning of the particular in the noun used in speech while the main function of the indefinite one is to mark the grammatical meaning of the general in the noun.

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