

Markku Filppula and Juhani Klemola

The definite article in World Englishes¹

Abstract: Article usage is an area of syntax where a great deal of variation exists in different varieties of English. This study focuses on the uses of the definite article in two specific types of context: with names of social institutions and with the quantifying expressions *both of*, *half of*, *most of*, when followed by a postmodifying *of*-phrase. Differences in usage are known to exist between British and American English but in this study the scope is extended to selected varieties spoken in different parts of the world. The social distinction between standard and non-standard language is also examined with respect to British Isles varieties. Language contacts leading to substratal influence on article usage, universal semantic or pragmatic constraints, and possible “angloversal” features emerge as the main factors that can provide plausible explanations for a large part of the variability in definite article usage.

Keywords: definite article, names of social institutions, quantifying expressions, variation, language contact, dialect contact, substratum influence, universal, angloversal, standard vs. non-standard, Animacy Hierarchy, Inner and Outer Circle Englishes

1 Introduction

Article usage is a particularly complex area of grammar as it lies in the crossroads of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. It is therefore not surprising to find a great deal of both diachronic and synchronic variation in article usage between different varieties of English. What makes the study of this variation even more interesting is that it can also occur within a variety, including Standard English itself. For example, in British English names of illnesses or ailments can occur either without an article or with the definite article (DA), thus *(the) measles*, *(the) whooping cough*, *(the) headache*, etc. (see, e.g. Quirk et al. 1985: 270–272).

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Markku Filppula, University of Eastern Finland
Juhani Klemola, University of Tampere

Similar examples can be cited from most other varieties, and variation is especially common in those that have emerged from contacts with some other language or languages, which may have a different system of article usage or no articles at all. Obvious examples of such varieties are not hard to come by amongst postcolonial Englishes (see, e.g. Sand 2004; Mesthrie and Bhatt 2008: 47–52; Siemund 2013: 90–91, 97–100, and Kortmann and Lunkenheimer 2013, feature items 60–65).

Because of the complex nature of article usage, we have in this paper narrowed down our focus to some non-standard aspects of the use of the definite article. In the context of the British Isles and Ireland, such uses have been noted to be one of the characteristic features of the most Celtic-influenced varieties of English, such as Irish English (see, e.g. Harris 1993; Filppula 1999; Hickey 2007), but they are also attested to varying degrees in other British Isles varieties and World Englishes. Thus, in their survey of varieties of English around the world, Kortmann and Szendrői (2004) found that irregular use of articles (including also other than the definite article) was among the World-wide Top 12 features of non-standard varieties of English, attested in 33 of the 46 varieties in the *World Atlas of Varieties of English* (WAVE) survey². It turned out to be a top feature in the British Isles, the Caribbean, Australia, Africa and Asia, but not in America and the Pacific. Variation in article usage is also treated in some detail in Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008: 47–52), who provide plenty of examples from different varieties across the globe and from several Asian varieties, in particular. Siemund (2013: 100–105), in turn, discusses the same phenomena and especially the marking of definiteness from a cross-linguistic, cross-dialectal and typological point of view.

2 Object and aims of this study

The features examined in this paper are, first, the use and non-use of the definite article with names of *social institutions* and, secondly, certain types of *quantifying expressions*. The social institutions selected for closer examination are: *church*, *college*, *hospital*, *school*, and *university*, when used in the institutional sense and not referring to the any specific church, college, school, etc., thus, *be in/at (the) school*, *go to (the) church/college/hospital* etc. The quantifying expressions to be

² In the enlarged survey published in electronic form, eWAVE – *The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English* (see <http://www.ewave-atlas.org/>; Kortmann and Lunkenheimer 2013), the number of investigated varieties was increased to 76, including 26 pidgin and creole Englishes.

studied are: *both of*, *half of*, *most of*, when followed by a postmodifying *of*-phrase, as in *(the) both/half/most of them*.

As our starting-point we will use the descriptions of article usage in British Standard English given in Quirk et al. (1985: 277–279) and Biber et al. (1999: 261–263). According to both sources, the definite article is typically left out in British StE with the following types of nouns in the following kinds of context:

- non-specific or generic plural NPs;
- names of social institutions such as *school*, *church*, or *hospital* when used with non-specific reference;
- quantifying expressions such as *most*, *both*, *half* when followed by a post-modifying *of*-phrase;
- names of languages, festive days or seasons;
- means of transport or communication.

Our aim is to investigate to what extent the definite article is either left out or used with the names of social institutions and with the mentioned kinds of quantifying expressions in different varieties of English, both traditional and standard, spoken in different kinds of sociohistorical settings world-wide. We also want to examine the factors determining the use of the definite article, and more specifically, the possible role of the following factors:

- (i) distinction between standard and non-standard varieties;
- (ii) influence of language and/or dialect contacts;
- (iii) influence of universal or “angloversal” features of language or (in the case of the latter) of English.

3 Databases

Our first set of set of data represents non-standard traditional varieties of spoken in the British Isles and Ireland. These include:

- **Traditional English English** (Trad EE): *Survey of English Dialects* (SED) *tape-recordings*; interviews with NORM-type³ informants dating mainly back to the 1950s and early 1960s;
- **Traditional Irish English** (Trad IrE): corpus collected and compiled by Markku Filppula and others in the late 1970s and the early 1980s; informal interviews with elderly speakers with minimum education from four different

³ The acronym NORM stands for ‘nonmobile, older, rural male’ (see Chambers and Trudgill 1980).

regions in the south of Ireland: Counties Clare, Kerry, and Wicklow, and the city of Dublin; most of the informants from the (south)-west of Ireland had some Irish and some lived close to Irish-speaking areas.

- **Traditional Welsh English** (Trad WE): corpora collected and compiled by Heli Paulasto in Llandybie, Carmarthenshire, south-west Wales, between 1995 and 2000; nearly all the informants were first-language Welsh speakers and had minimum education.

The evidence obtainable from these corpora will be used in this study to examine the effect of the non-standard – standard distinction on definite article usage, the latter being represented by the second set described below. Furthermore, the conservative nature of especially the Traditional British English data opens up a window into nineteenth-century regional English(es) and thus allows some diachronic comparisons to be made.

The second set of data is drawn from a selection of Englishes from the *spoken and unscripted parts* of the *International Corpus of English* corpora, which have been designed to represent the national standard English variety in each of the countries included (for discussion of the data-collection principles and composition of the corpora, visit <http://ice-corpora.net/ice/>). For American English we have used the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE), a widely used surrogate for the as of yet unpublished ICE-USA.

The following varieties were selected for this study:

- **American English** (SBCSAE);
- **British English** (ICE-GB);
- **Canadian English** (ICE-CAN);
- **East African English** (ICE-East Africa);
- **Hong Kong English** (ICE-Hong Kong);
- **Indian English** (ICE-India);
- **Irish English** (ICE-Ireland);
- **Jamaican English** (ICE-Jamaica);
- **Philippines English** (ICE-Philippines);
- **Singapore English** (ICE-Singapore).

The ICE databases consist of transcripts of speech obtained from various types of spoken situations involving educated speakers: dialogue and monologue, face-to-face conversations and radio interviews, lectures, and sportscasts. Stylistically, they range from the informal and colloquial to more formal situations. The size of the individual corpora varies from 500,000 to 600,000 words.⁴

⁴ The SBCSAE sample we have used is somewhat smaller (ca. 250,000 words) than the spoken parts of ICE-corpora included in the study.

The Asian and African corpora and varieties depicted in these corpora share the following general characteristics:

- they represent (mostly) non-native, yet to a certain extent institutionalised varieties of English, having developed through the educational system(s) of each country;
- they are generally spoken as an L2 in their respective countries;
- they display a wide range of functional and sociolinguistic uses; and
- they may reflect substratal or other influences from the other language(s) involved in the contact setting.

In our comparative set-up, the postcolonial varieties serve an important role in making it possible to assess the extent to which a given feature of article usage is due to influence from a substratal language or, if that can be excluded, whether it could be considered a universal feature of one type or another.

4 Results

We will start off with some examples from the databases to illustrate the types of use of the DA examined. This will be followed by a survey of the distribution of DA and zero article, first, in the nonstandard traditional varieties of British, Welsh, and Irish Englishes and second, in the data from the standard ICE varieties. In the discussion part, then, an attempt is made to assess the role of the possible explanatory factors (non-standard – standard distinction, language/dialect contacts, universal/angloversal features).

The following examples from the corpora we have analysed illustrate uses of the definite article which deviate from the usages described in standard textbooks on English grammar and can in this sense be considered non-standard:

- (1) So he say- he came back and he says I'm going to send you to *the hospital*. I think you've had a heart attack. (WE, Llandybie: MT)
- (2) B: Apparently there are less people traveling now because of the weather
A: Uh I heard in the news that uh this morning the elementary and high school uh students uh are are excused to go to *the school* right now <,> but in certain areas I think only (ICE-PHI: S1A-050)
- (3) so he told me </>he told me</> that you see in Canada people don't care about going to *the church* (ICE East Africa: S1A-016)

- (4) A man who thinks about this <?> filling </?> things etcetera <,> he has missed his way in *the college* (ICE-IND: S2A-035)
- (5) B: So Kareen Chow asked me to go. Would you go?
A: Depending on what is going on between *the both* of them (ICE-SIN: S1A-061)
- (6) AC: I'd three brothers and two sisters, and they're all gone bar [/] bar [\] me.
MB: Hmm.
AC: Yes. But *the most* of them, well only one that did worse than eighty.
(SED: Man2: AC)

Definite article usage – or indeed, article usage in general – is an area of grammar that is not governed by categorical rules. Furthermore, definite article usage is to some extent variable in any variety of English, including so-called Standard English, and depends on a variety of pragmatic and other factors (cf. Sand 2003: 416, 425). In the case of *university* and *hospital*, for example, it can be difficult to draw the line between non-specific references to these institutions (as in *go to university/be in hospital*), as opposed to references to actual buildings or places. It is well known that British and American English differ in this respect: in British English, there is a strong tendency not to use the definite article with *university* and *hospital* when the reference is to the institution rather than the actual building, whereas in American English, the definite article is required in these contexts (see Quirk et al 1985: 277; Tottie 2001: 148).

4.1 Non-standard uses of the definite article in vernacular British Isles varieties

The results of our analysis of the use of the definite article in the contexts examined are shown in Figure 1 and Table 1.

In Traditional English English, the percentage of non-standard uses of the definite article in the contexts examined is very low at 3.4%. There is little evidence for definite article use with any of the investigated items, with more than one instance of the definite article being found only with *school* (3), *hospital* (2) and *most of/on* (3). In the traditional Welsh English corpus, the percentage of the non-standard use of the definite article is somewhat higher level than in Trad EE, at 6.8%. In Welsh English, the highest numbers of instances occur with *hospital* (4), *both of* (3) and *school* (2).⁵ The highest percentage of use of

⁵ In addition, the definite article is frequently used in our corpus of Welsh English with names of languages. This is not unexpected, since the construction has a Welsh parallel. We counted 8 instances of *the Welsh* ('Welsh language') and 4 instances of *the English*.

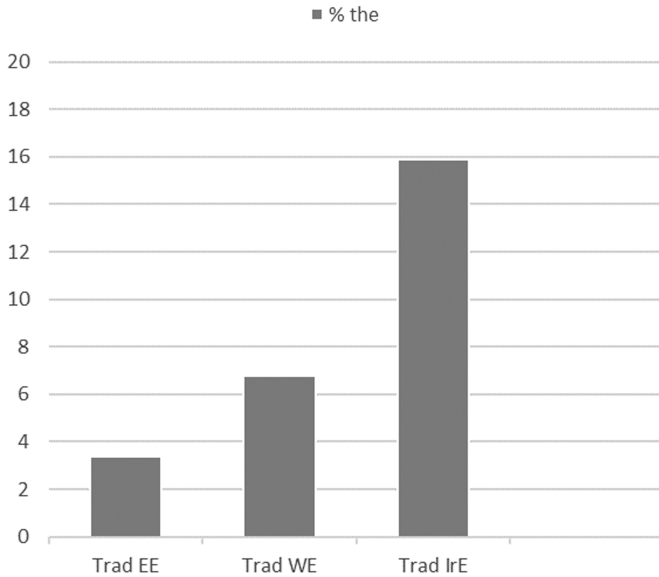


Figure 1: Percentage of non-standard uses of the definite article in Traditional dialects of English, Welsh and Irish English

Table 1: Definite article usage in Traditional dialects of English, Welsh and Irish English, frequencies normalised per 100,000 words (absolute figures in parentheses)

Corpus	The	∅	Total	% the
Trad EE (515,000)	2.1 (11)	60.0 (309)	62.1 (320)	3.4
Trad WE (61,400)	14.7 (9)	202.0 (124)	216.6 (133)	6.8
Trad IrE (158,000)	13.3 (21)	70.3 (111)	83.5 (132)	15.9

the definite article in the contexts examined, however, is clearly in the traditional Irish English corpus. More than one instance of the definite article is found with *school* (3), *most of* (13), and *half of* (2). Moreover, definite article is the preferred choice in our IrE corpus with *most of* (13 out of 20); the other quantifying expressions show considerably lower frequencies, (1 of 1 for *both of*, 2 of 4 for *half of*).⁶

⁶ Like WE, IrE often has the definite article with names of languages and especially with that of the indigenous language, Irish (12 instances of *the Irish*, 3 of *the English* in our corpus).

The wider use of the definite article in Welsh English and Irish English is to be expected on the basis of parallel usages in the respective Celtic languages. Thus, in Welsh, names of social institutions are used with the definite article, and the definite article is also used with quantifying expressions (as in e.g. *y ddau* ‘the both’) and names of languages (*y Saesneg* ‘the English (language)’) (Thorne 1993: 97–100). In the case of Irish, the parallels to the use of the definite article with names of social institutions are even closer than in the case of Welsh, and these parallels extend, in fact, to most other non-standard uses found in IrE such as names of certain illnesses, place-names, seasons, feasts, and abstract nouns (see Christian Brothers 1976: 6–8; Filppula 1999, section 5.2 for a detailed discussion).

4.2 Definite article usage in ICE varieties

Next, we turn to definite article usage in the ICE varieties investigated. Figure 2 and Table 2 show the percentage of non-standard uses of the definite article in the ten ICE varieties included in our analysis.

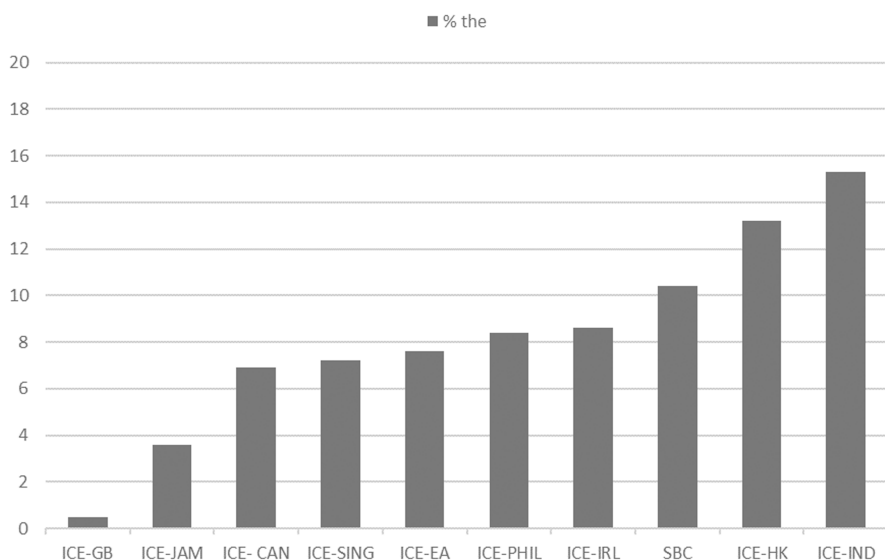


Figure 2: Percentage of non-standard uses of the definite article in ICE varieties of English

Table 2: Definite article usage in ICE varieties of English, frequencies normalised per 100,000 words (absolute figures in parentheses)

Corpus	The	Ø	Total	% the
ICE-GB (528,500)	0.2 (1)	40.1 (212)	40.3 (213)	0.5
SBCSAE (277,500)	4.3 (12)	37.1 (103)	41.4 (115)	10.4
ICE-CAN (535,400)	4.5 (24)	65.4 (350)	69.9 (374)	6.9
ICE-EAfr (261,600)	6.7 (18)	81.5 (220)	88.2 (238)	7.6
ICE-HK (598,400)	14.9 (89)	97.9 (586)	112.8 (675)	13.2
ICE-IND (553,400)	8.1 (46)	44.9 (255)	53.0 (301)	15.3
ICE-IRL (525,500)	4.0 (21)	42.6 (224)	46.6 (245)	8.6
ICE-JA (525,000)	3.4 (18)	93.2 (489)	96.6 (507)	3.6
ICE-PHIL (555,700)	3.9 (22)	42.3 (241)	46.2 (263)	8.4
ICE-SING (496,200)	3.7 (20)	47.0 (257)	50.7 (277)	7.2

As our results show, British English shows by far the lowest frequency of non-standard usages of the definite article at 0.5%. The opposite end of the continuum is represented by the Asian varieties, Hong Kong English (13.2%)⁷ and Indian English (15.3%), where the frequency of non-standard uses of the definite article is comparable to that of traditional Irish English. Between these extremes, a number of geographically dispersed varieties form a relatively homogenous group in terms of the frequency of non-standard usages of the definite article (ICE-CAN 6.9%, ICEN-SING 7.2%, ICE-EA 7.6%, ICE-PHIL 8.4%, ICE-IRL 8.6%, SBCSAE 10.4%⁸). Jamaican English, on the other hand, is clearly an outlier, falling between the extremely low frequency of non-standard uses of the definite article in British English and the large group of postcolonial varieties of English.

5 Discussion

The *standard – non-standard* distinction emerges from our results as one significant factor explaining the differences between the varieties examined. Thus,

⁷ In principle, all the ICE corpora should represent a comparable range of text types. However, as Rautonaho (2014: 159–161) has shown, the spontaneous conversations (S1A) in ICE-HK appear to be rather different compared to the other ICE corpora. This can be seen, for example, in the list of the most frequent verbs in ICE-HK, where ICE-HK clearly differs from all the other ICE corpora.

⁸ It must be pointed out, however, that the relatively high frequency of non-standard usages of the definite article in the SBCSAE, representing American English, is to a large extent due to the categorical use of the definite article with *hospital* in the SBCSAE.

TradIrE and ICE-IRL, on one hand, and TradBrE and ICE-GB (though slightly less so), on the other, diverge from each other in their rates of use of the definite article in the kinds of context investigated. This is hardly the full story, though. The clear difference between the educated varieties of IrE (represented by ICE-IRL) and BrE (ICE-GB) suggests influence from some other sources, too. *Language (and dialect) contacts* could be one such factor. This is supported by the language-contact background of the Irish varieties, which is also evident from the higher figures for TradIrE as compared with educated IrE, not to mention several empirical studies of article usage in IrE dialects from early on (e.g. Joyce 1910; Henry 1957; Filppula 1999; Hickey 2007). It is plausible to assume that the influence from the corresponding Irish usages has seeped through into even the present-day educated varieties of IrE. Its likelihood is increased by the fact that Irish substratal influence shows itself in many other grammatical features of educated IrE (see, e.g. Kirk and Kallen 2007; Hickey 2007). This line of reasoning is also backed up by Trudgill's (2011) distinction between "high" and "low" contact varieties. In our database Standard BrE represents the former, while TradEngE represents the latter. All others (including AmE but with the exception of JamE) also belong to the high-contact varieties. As for JamE, there may well be a difference between the standard variety (as in the ICE corpus) and Jamaican creole but that comparison cannot be made on the basis of the current database.

That said, substratal influence cannot be considered the common denominator for all "postcolonial" or "contact" varieties. These include AmE, which displays a relatively high rate of use of non-standard definite articles on the basis of the SBC data. The same also holds for some of the African and Asian varieties. As Sand (2003), among others, points out, many of the relevant regional substratum languages (e.g. Hindi and Chinese) do not possess a definite article. It is also noteworthy that at least in SingE and EAfrE the general tendency is towards omission of articles and other determiners rather than "overuse" of the definite article (Wee 2004; Schmied 2004). In fact, Platt, Weber and Ho (1984: 52–59) have noted a shift in what they call the "New Englishes" from the definite/indefinite distinction to a specific/non-specific distinction, affecting the way articles are used. Documenting this would, however, require a comprehensive study of not only all instances of the definite, indefinite and zero articles in the databases but also other means of indicating specificity/non-specificity of noun phrases such as the use of demonstrative pronouns, and this was not possible within the bounds of the present study.

In the absence of clear substratal parallels and of the kind of sociolinguistic circumstances that would favour substratal influences, a third possible explanation could be *universal* or *angloversal* linguistic features which would then help explain the observed similarities between most of the postcolonial varieties.

Following up this lead, Sand (2003) proposes that definiteness is linked to the well-known Animacy Hierarchy. This hierarchy is universal in nature and has the categories “human” and “proper noun” on top of the list of identifiability of referring expressions. For instance, social and domestic institutions relate to human activities and are thus uniquely identifiable to the hearer; quantifiers, in turn, “logically” adopt the definite article and are universal in that sense. According to Sand, at least some uses of the definite article shared across varieties are therefore not the result of substratal influences but can be explained by universal or angloversal factors such as the Animacy Hierarchy or other general semantic considerations. In another context (see Sand 2004) she expands on this link between definiteness and humanness. She refers to Whaley (1997: 172–73) who has claimed that the Animacy Hierarchy is sociocentrically orientated in that “speakers and writers tend to place most importance on themselves and those listening to them”. According to Whaley, this centrality of human referents in discourse then explains why they tend to be definite (and thus occur with the definite article) more often than nonhuman noun phrases (Whaley 1997: 173; quoted here from Sand 2004: 295).

Sharma (2005), also writing on the possible influence of universal pragmatic and discursal factors, discusses the use of the definite article in Indian English. She finds evidence for both commonly cited L1 effects but also for new, possibly universal, pragmatic functions. Her general conclusion is that, rather than acting as opposing forces, language transfer and universals may work together to produce a mixture of standard and non-standard uses of the definite article (Sharma 2005: 563).

Siemund (2013: 522) is an even more recent study that looks at over-use and under-use of articles and discusses the various factors behind the observed variability in article usage across varieties of English. One of the generalisations emerging from his study is that in non-standard Englishes variability in article usage occurs mostly in those contexts where the standard usage also shows some amount of variation, e.g. in names of diseases, social institutions, seasons, and “cultural uses” (Siemund 2013: 98, 101). Siemund’s findings are supported by the results of our study, which revealed considerable variation in the frequencies of non-standard uses in virtually all varieties except Standard BrE.

Another observation in Siemund’s study deserves to be noted, too: over-use and under-use of articles often occur concurrently especially in second-language varieties, which of course greatly adds to the variability in article usage (Siemund 2013: 99). A great deal seems to depend on whether the first language of speakers acquiring English has definite or indefinite articles in its grammatical system. According to Siemund, a contact situation easily leads learners to impose or reinterpret the article system of their own language upon that of English. This

in turn may result in overuse or underuse of the definite article or the other means of marking definiteness (or indefiniteness) in English (Siemund 2013: 101). Relying on Dryer's (2011) comparative survey of the article systems in the world's languages, Siemund further notes that about one third of the world's languages do not possess either definite or indefinite articles but use some other means of marking them (*ibid.*). It is obvious that quite a number of these languages are in close contact with English and thus add their own flavour to the general picture of article usage across varieties of English worldwide.

Finally, our results may be compared with those of Wahid (2013), who assesses, amongst other factors, the effects of variety type (i.e., the classification of Englishes into Inner and Outer Circle Englishes) vs. usage type or register on definite article usage. Somewhat surprisingly, Wahid's results show that register is more influential in definite article usage than the division into Inner and Outer Circle Englishes. However, Wahid notes some "marked uses" of the definite article among the Outer Circle varieties but even these are according to Wahid structural (such as presence of a postmodifying phrase) or situational in nature (Wahid 2013: 39). The discussion of our findings above makes it clear that they are in some contrast to those of Wahid: variety type is a factor differentiating especially between the Inner Circle varieties spoken in Britain and most of the Inner or Outer Circle varieties spoken in colonial and postcolonial contexts. It should also be noted that Wahid's study does not consider differences based on lexical categories at all, which is where clear differences exist on the basis of our results.

6 Conclusion

As has become evident, no single factor can be said to explain the observed variability of definite article usage in the Englishes investigated in this study. Instead, one has to assume a complex interplay of factors including linguistic and sociohistorical factors. Among the latter, the relevance of the standard – non-standard distinction was shown by comparisons between the British and Irish varieties, for which both types of data were available. As for the other varieties examined here, the relevance of this distinction awaits further study and appropriate data.

Substratum influence and, more generally, the effects of language contacts are best in evidence in the Celtic varieties of English, but are there, too, possibly reinforced by universal factors. For the Asian and African Englishes, it is harder to identify plausible substratal sources in the absence of the definite article in many of the relevant substrate languages. In these cases, universal or "anglo-versal" tendencies appear to provide better explanations.

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