Make-up class assignment: Definite & indefinite articles

Compare the examples in the left and right columns of the following pages, and try to infer the linguistic principles of article usage (‘a’ & ‘the’). Do this based on the examples, rather than consulting language reference or grammar books. As a group, write up your observations and turn them in. This can be written informally, e.g., in outline, bullet point, or any format. Be sure to include your group members’ names (3-6 people per group). Bring a hard copy write-up of your findings to class on Tuesday.
Definite & indefinite articles

English has a definite article (‘the’), an indefinite article (‘a/an’), and noun phrases with no articles (null or “Ø”). Take a look at the noun phrases in boldface below. Are the nouns above count or non-count nouns? What patterns in meaning or nuance do you see when you compare those on the left and right?

1. Null cf. indefinite ‘a’
   a. Five years ago, the patient weighed over 100 kg. With positive support and encouragement from others, she first stopped eating cake and soda, which she used to consume every day. More recently, by eating salad every day and cutting down on coffee, she has lost weight and increased her energy levels. She drinks less coffee and juice (since fruit juice often has extra sugar added), and more water. Since making these changes, she has lost a significant amount of weight.
   b. She used to consume a cake each week, on average, and two or three sodas and six coffees per day. She even drank a soda in the mid-morning, a juice between every meal, and a coffee in the evening while studying. She has made a habit of ordering a water with each restaurant meal instead of sugary drinks. She runs or walks a kilometer every day, does dumbbell exercises with a 2 kg weight.

   c. Stone or rock have been used for human-made structures from the beginnings of human history. ‘Rock’ is more often a geological term, or a term for everyday pieces of rock, while ‘stone’ is more often a term for the material, especially for building materials that have been processed. Rock, as in large pieces of rock, were first used for fashioning human dwellings. Later, humans found how to quarry and cut stone, such as granite and marble, for buildings.
   d. At first it would have been hard to drag a large rock to build a primitive house, and the pieces might not fit together well to make a good house. Humans later learned to cut and transport stone from quarries to build buildings. In building the Egyptian pyramids, for example, a large stone could be carried on rollers or loose sand by a group of people. A normal piece of rock is simply a rock, or a stone in more formal or literary style. A large rock formation might also be referred to as a stone.
Our kitchen inventory includes **fish**, **chicken**, **lamb**, rice, **onion**, **cucumber**, **pepper**, and **tomato**. Besides the main dish, we may want to provide **salad**.

We have **a chicken** and **a lamb** in the barn, and **a fish** in the freezer. For each portion, the recipe requires a cup of rice, **an onion** and **a tomato**. To provide each person a **salad**, we also need **a cucumber** and **a tomato** for each portion.

**A chicken** tried to cross the road to get to the other side. But my car hit **the chicken**, and now there is **chicken** all over the road.

2. Indefinite ‘a’ cf. null plurals

a. She used to consume **a cake** each week, on average, and two sodas and six coffees per day. She even drank **a soda** in the mid-morning, **a juice** between every meal, and even **a coffee** in the evening while studying. Now, however, she orders **a water** with each restaurant meal instead of sugary drinks. She sometimes jogs, or does light dumbbell exercises with **a 2 kg weight**.

b. The nutritionist advised her that she should stop eating **cakes** and drinking **sodas** and **juices**. She reduced her intake of instant and sweetened **coffees**, and instead has learned to appreciate drip or pressed **coffees** without sugar. Based on advice from her friend, she bought **some weights** for exercising.

c. We have **a chicken** and **a lamb** in the barn, and **a fish** in the freezer. For each portion, the recipe requires a cup of rice, **an onion** and **a tomato**. To provide each person a **salad**, we also need **a cucumber** and **a tomato** for each portion.

d. Our barn has a number of **chickens** and **lambs**, The vegetable garden has many **onions**, **cucumbers**, **peppers**, and **tomatoes**.

e. **Some chickens** tried to cross the road to get to the other side. But my car hit **the chickens**, and now there is **chicken** all over the road.
3. Null singular cf. null plural

a. Stone or rock have been used for human-made structures from the beginnings of human history. Rock is more often a geological term, or a term for everyday pieces of rock, while stone is more often a term for the material, especially for building materials that have been processed. Rock, as in large pieces of rock, were first used for fashioning human dwellings. Later, humans found how to quarry and cut stone, such as granite and marble, for buildings.

b. It might be hard to drag large rocks to build a primitive house, and they might not fit together to make a good house. Humans later learned to cut stones from quarries, and found ways of transporting such stones to build buildings. In building the Egyptian pyramids, for example, large stones could be carried on rollers or loose sand by groups of people.

4. Indefinite ‘a’ cf. plurals (2)

a. A felid is a member of the cat family, or Felidae. This group includes various cats: lions, tigers, jaguars, leopards, snow leopards, cheetahs, lynxes, and others. A lynx is a medium-sized wildcat known for its reflective eyes. An ocelot is a small wildcat found in Central and South America, which was once prized for its fur.

b. Male lions typically have large manes of hair, blond to black in color, from head to tail. Female lions, or lionesses, lack this large mane, but both have a long tail. Such gender differences are known as sexual dimorphism. Unlike other felids or wildcats (e.g., tigers, leopards, cheetahs, lynxes, and ocelots), only lions show obvious differences between males and females.

5. Indefinite cf. definite

a. Farmer Brown went into his chicken coop to find his best chicken – a large, white rooster named Buster – to slaughter and prepare for tonight’s dinner. Buster sometimes tried to escape, so he was kept in a special cage. He entered the coop, but didn’t see Buster in his usual cage. He looked around the cages, and then to the corner of the room.

b. Buster was not in any of the cages. However, the rooster was waiting in the corner with a knife in his hand, ready to take on the farmer in hand-to-hand combat.
6. Definite singular ‘the’ cf. indefinites & plurals (special uses)

a. The cat family Felidae includes various cats: lions, tigers, jaguars, leopards, snow leopards, cheetahs, lynxes, and others. A lynx is a medium-sized wildcat known for its reflective eyes. An ocelot is a small wildcat found in Central and South America, which was once prized for its fur.

c. Lions are primarily nocturnal – sleeping during the day and active at night and even at twilight. They primarily live in savannas or grasslands, and some forests, but not necessarily in jungles.

d. In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight. Awimoweh, awimoweh... Near the village, the peaceful village, the lion sleeps tonight. Awimoweh, awimoweh... Hush my darling, don’t fear my darling; the lion sleeps tonight. Awimoweh, awimoweh...

e. On our planet, rooms have doors, walls, floors, and corners. However, on the planet Epsilon Eridani 4, rooms are always round and lack corners. In the tropical environments of the planet Rigel 5, public buildings are built like wire cages, and thus lack walls, floors and doors in the normal sense.

f. He approached the chicken coop and opened the door. He looked around the room, and at the cages to check on the hens first, and then saw Buster’s cage. Buster was not there. As the moon cast its light on the bare floor, he notice that some of his tools were missing on the wall. Then he saw Buster, waiting in the corner with a knife.

g. Computers consist of hardware such as motherboards, processors, hard drives, and various cables such as SATA cables, all in a metal chasis. A typical computer has a RAM chip, a chipset or sound card, a BIOS, and a power supply.

h. When opening the computer to repair or upgrade the hardware, first disconnect the power supply and open the chasis. Take care to not touch the motherboard, the processor, or the RAM chip with your bare hands. Note where the red cable connects to the motherboard before you remove it – that is the SATA cable, which connects the hard drive to the motherboard.
7. Articles ‘a/the’ cf. null: Activities & events

a. Aerobic exercise like swimming, bicycling, brisk walking, jogging, and rock climbing can be helpful for managing one's weight and for maintaining energy levels. Occasional extreme sports like bungee jumping may not contribute to weight management, but can offer other health benefits.

b. Every two days I go for a jog, or if I am tired, then at least a walk. Occasionally I go for a swim or a good climb on a mountain near the city. An exercise that I also particularly enjoy is bicycling.

8. Definite ‘the’ cf. null: Complex noun phrases

a. Modern physics has attempted to explain how gravity, electricity, magnetism, and the nuclear forces are related. The weak nuclear force has to do with radiation and radioactive decay, and the strong force holds nuclei together. Quantum physics has been able to bring electromagnetism and the nuclear forces into one theory, but not gravity. This gap is the purview of string theory.

b. The gravity of Earth is described by the value of 9.81 m/s^2, which assumes no air resistance; this is often called 'little g,' in contrast to 'big G,' the gravitational constant. The electromagnetism of the Van Allen belts around the Earth protect us from the radiation of solar storms.

c. Modern feminism began as part of the abolitionist movement against slavery in the early to mid-1800s. More modern forms developed in Marxist countries, and contemporary feminist movements were a product of the social unrest and protests of the 1960s in the US and Europe.

d. The feminism of the 19th century abolitionists was more grounded in religious arguments by progressive Christians. The feminism of the 1960s was clearly more secular, motivated by humanistic ideals, but the feminism of contemporary North America and Europe since then has always been shaped by religious elements as well.

e. We really need more support here.

f. I need the support of all my employees if our company is to survive into the next year. All the support that you can offer will be appreciated.

g. Water is a polar molecule, and the electromagnetic attraction of the molecules to each other explains its surface tension.

h. The water from this stream is cool and refreshing.
9. Definite ‘the ’ cf. indefinite ‘a’ (special uses)

a. After stopping by a colleague’s lab and a friend’s office, I went to a hospital to see a doctor about my symptoms, but fortunately it wasn’t serious. I took a bus home, and on my way I stopped by a small store to buy some snacks.

b. After stopping by the lab and the office, I went to the hospital to see the doctor about my symptoms, but fortunately it wasn’t serious. I took the bus home, and on my way I stopped by the store to buy some snacks.

c. I usually take a bus home, and occasionally, a taxi. In warm weather I may ride my bike to and from work.

d. I often go by bus, sometimes by bike, or occasionally by taxi.

e. The male lion has a head covered with a large mane. The tail of both males and females ends in a tuft of hair.

f. Male lions are characterized by a main running from head to tail.

g. An orbit is an object’s curved path around a point in space. A heliocentric orbit is an orbit around the sun. A geocentric orbit is one around the earth, such as for satellites, and a geosynchronous orbit is a stationary orbit over the earth.

h. The earth is in heliocentric orbit around the sun. Various objects are in orbit around the Earth, that is, in geocentric orbit. Some satellites are in geosynchronous orbit around the earth. Other objects may be in other types of geocentric orbits, such as satellites in medium-earth geocentric orbit.

i. The hospital is located between the old church and the school.

j. She goes to church several times a week, sometimes before going to school.

10. Special oddity: What’s the difference?

a. I’m going to the hospital.
I’m staying at the hospital.
I’m in the hospital.

b. I’m going to hospital.
I’m staying at hospital.
I’m in hospital.