A Study of the Definite Article Usage for the Word Police

Hideo Kobayashi

Abstract This study explores the usage of the definite article (the) for the noun police when it is used as sentence subject in an American newspaper and in The Bank of English (2003). Longman Essential Activator (2006, p. A64) states that in news reports, journalists often use the word police without the definite article at the beginning of a sentence in the present tense and present continuous tense when describing the ongoing activities of the police. However, I have found that newspaper reporters also quite often use the word police without the definite article at the beginning of a sentence when describing what the police have done in the past. I have collected 352 sample sentences from The Los Angeles Times online. Present tense and present continuous tense sentences account for about 26% of the sample population and past tense sentences account for about 61%. In order to verify these findings from The Los Angeles Times, I also explored The Bank of English (2003). It shows that present tense and present continuous tense sentences account for about 46% of the sample population and past tense sentences account for about 39%. This study confirms what Longman Essential Activator (2006, p. A64) states, but also presents counter evidence to it.

Keywords: collective noun police, zero article, newspaper article
詞+police が主語になっている用例は過去形の文章でも存在し、母集団の61%を占めていることが察取される。
結論として、LEA（2006）における主張にかなう用例は存在するものの、他方で過去形の文章において無冠詞
+police が主語になっている用例も存在するということが本研究の主張点である。

キーワード：集合名詞 police、無冠詞、新聞記事
Introduction

Motivation for this study

It is generally recognized that the definite article (the) is used when the writer or the speaker wishes to refer to and identify a thing which is in a certain space or context (Oda, 2007). In this case, not only the writer or the speaker, but also the reader or listener refers to the noun with the definite article (cf. Leech, 1981). A noun which the speaker assumes that the listener knows about is used with the definite article (cf. Ishida, 2002), but a noun which the speaker assumes that the listener does not know is used with the indefinite article. Therefore, a noun is used with the definite article when it is readily recognized because the speaker or the writer and the listener or the reader both know which one it refers to (Saito & Suzuki, 1984; Oda, 2007).

In the unmarked case, the definite article is used for the collective noun police (See (1) and (2) below). Kanaguchi (1970) claims that collectiveness is emphasized when the definite article is used for the collective noun. In other words, the collective noun with the definite article means the whole body of the collective noun (A New English Grammar § 2030, § 2036). For example:

1. Should the police carry guns? (Swan, 1995, p. 63)
2. The police are looking for a fair-haired man in his twenties. (Swan, 1995, p. 525)

Longman Essential Activator (2006) (hereafter, LEA) states that the collective noun police is also often used as sentence subject without the definite article when the media reports the ongoing activities of the police (See (3) and (4) below). In this study, this is considered as the marked case.

3. Police are hunting for the killer. (LEA, 2006, p. A64)
4. Police want to hear from anyone who was in the area. (LEA, 2006, p. A64)

English monolingual dictionaries also use the collective noun police both with and without the definite article. This often leaves Japanese learners of English uncertain about the usage of the definite article for the collective noun police. The following are excerpts from Macmillan Phrasal Verbs Plus (2005) (hereafter, MPVP) and (COBUILD, 2006). In (5) and (7), the definite article is used, whereas in (6) and (8), it is not used.
5. The police are checking the woman out. (*MPVP*, 2005, p. 71)
6. Police threw a cordon around the offices to keep away members of the public. (*MPVP*, 2005, p. 462)
7. The police are looking for a second car. (*COBUILD*, 2006, p. 1104)
8. Police say that they have arrested twenty people following the disturbances. (*COBUILD*, 2006, p. 1104)

*COBUILD* (2006) and *LDCE* (2009) state that there are two distinct meanings of the noun *police*. One meaning refers to an official organization that enforces the laws, investigates criminal activities, and arrests suspects. The other meaning refers to the people who work for this organization. *LAAD* (2007, p. 1216) and *LDCE* (2009, p. 1338) state that the definite article is used when the noun *police* refers to the former meaning.

**Research question**

The research question for this study is: In sentences which describe the ongoing activities of the police, is the noun *police* always the subject of sentences which are in the present tense and the present progressive tense? In this study, 352 sample sentences from the newspaper *The Los Angeles Times* and 61 sample sentences from *The Bank of English* (2003) are analyzed where the noun *police* without the definite article is the subject of the sentence. The kind of verbs used for the sentence subject *police* will be also investigated because dynamic verbs are likely to be used for describing the police’s ongoing activities when *police* is the subject of the sentence (*LEA*, 2006, p. A64).

**Literature Review**

This section reviews the uses of the definite article, indefinite article, and zero article. I have not found any past studies to thoroughly investigate the question of when and why the collective noun *police* takes the definite article or does not take it (cf. Ishii, 2003, p. 182; *LEA*, 2006, p. A64).

**Indefinite article versus zero article**

The indefinite article is used when describing a single distinctive unit that has a clear boundary between the object and other objects (Takami, 2003, p. 47). On the other hand, the zero article is used for describing an indistinctive unit that has a
blurred boundary between the object and other objects. For example, in (9) below, a dog is alive and barking as it does by nature, and it has a body. The body of a dog is a single unit and there is a clear boundary between the body of the dog and all other objects. However, in (10) below, there are many pieces of a dog’s corpse on a street, and therefore in this sentence, the dog’s body does not have a clear boundary between itself and other objects (Yoneyama & Kaga, 2001, p. 24).


10. There was dog all over the street. *(Yoneyama & Kaga, 2001, p. 24)*

**Definite article versus zero article**

The definite article is used for the noun when the speaker or the writer assumes that a particular thing has already been referred to in the context (Kanaguchi, 1971, p. 763; Higuchi, 2009, p. 133-134; Leech, 1981, p. 282; Takami, 2003, p. 61). For example, everyone knows that the earth is rotating around the sun periodically. So the definite article is used for the noun “earth,” as in (11) below. COBUILD (2006, p. 446) states that the noun “earth” needs the definite article when it means the planet where human beings live. By contrast, when the noun “earth” means the earth as part of the universe, it does not use the definite article, as in (12).

11. Everyone knows the earth goes around. *(Takami, 2003, p. 61)*

12. The space shuttle Atlantis returned safely to earth today. *(COBUILD, 2006, p. 446)*

These examples tell us that the same English noun can have a different meaning depending on whether or not the definite article is used with the noun (cf. Yotsukura, 1970, p. 17; Fodor, 1975, p. 6). The definite article is also used for generalizing countable nouns (cf. CCEG, 1990, p. 44). For example, in (13) below, the noun “guitar” takes the definite article because it means the guitar in contrast to other musical instruments such as for example, oboe, xylophone, trumpet, or violin (Takami, 2003, p. 61). So this sentence does not mean that John plays a particular kind of guitar, but that John plays any kind of guitar (Takami, 2003, p. 61).

13. John plays the guitar well. *(Takami, 2003, p. 61)*
However, the definite article is not needed for a musical instrument when describing that the subject of the sentence plays the instrument in a band (Matsumoto & Matsumoto, 1996, p. 82; Higuchi, 2009, p. 49), as in (14) and (15) below.

15. She used to play piano in a jazz band. (Matsumoto & Matsumoto, 1996, p. 82)

These examples show that the meaning of the same noun can differ depending on whether or not the definite article is used (cf. Yotsukura, 1970, p. 17; Fodor, 1975; 6).

Zero article

The definite article is not needed when an uncountable mass noun is used in a general meaning, as in (16). However, when an uncountable mass noun is modified by an adjective clause, then the definite article must be used, as in (17).

16. Butter is expensive today. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 121)
17. The butter that we bought in England was comparatively inexpensive. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 121)

The definite article is also not needed for an abstract noun that describes the personality and character of a person, as in (18) and (19).

18. Ignorance is no excuse for breaking the law. (Brender, 2001, p. 73)
19. Defiance is a trait shared by many people. (Brender, 2001, p. 73)

The definite article is also not needed for a noun that describes human emotion. For example:

20. Suspicion began to creep into her mind. (MPVP, 2005, p. 104)
21. Tiredness crept over her, making her eyelids droop. (MPVP, 2005, p. 104)

In addition, the definite article is not needed for a noun that describes a person’s
action or activity, as in (22) and (23).

22. Many businessmen play golf. (Brender, 2001, p. 76)
23. He went to work on the car and had it repaired by lunch. (MPVP, 2005, p. 193)

The definite article is also not needed for a noun that describes an act of nature, as in (24), and the collective conduct of human beings, as in (25) and (26).

24. I heard thunder last night. (Brender, 2001, p. 79)
26. They hope that the treaty will bring peace and stability to Southeast Asia. (COBUILD, 2003, p. 1057)

The definite article is also not needed for a noun for a particular building that is regarded as an institution (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 122), as in (26) and (27).

27. School begins at 8:30. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 123)
28. His background seems to fit him for government. (MPVP, 2005, p. 123)

In addition, the definite article is not needed for a noun that describes a season in a general sense, as in (29). However, sometimes the definite article is used, such as in (30) (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 123). The reason for this discrepancy is not clear (cf. Higuchi, 2009, p. 58).

29. Spring is the best season for visiting Death Valley. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 123)
30. We always go to the mountains in the summer. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 123)

The definite article is not needed for a noun that signifies a kind of meal, as in (31). But, the definite article is needed when the noun is post-modified by a relative clause, as in (32).
31. We always have lunch at 12:30. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 124)
32. I did not like the dinner we had yesterday. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 124)

The definite article is not needed for a noun that signifies a means of transport, as in (33).

33. We travelled by bicycle. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 124)

The definite article is also not needed for a noun that signifies a certain time during the day or night, as in (34). In addition, the definite article is not needed for a noun that describes an event that occurs during the day, as in (35).

34. We arrived at midnight. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 124)
35. We got up before sunrise. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 124)

The definite article is not needed for the noun “man” and “woman” in the general sense:

36. Women are not invariably treated as the equal of men. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 125)

The definite article is also not needed for a noun that signifies a job position which only one person can hold during a limited period of time, as in (37) and (38) (cf. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 409). However, an indefinite article is used when there are several job positions to be held during a limited time, as in (39).

37. He became Pope in 1978. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 129)
38. As chairman of the committee, I am not free to express my personal views. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 129)
39. Justin was hired on as a construction worker. (MPVP, 2005, p. 210)

The definite article is also not needed for a noun which is in an idiomatic expression, as in (40).
In addition, the definite article is not needed for the noun "town" in the expressions "to town," "around town," "in town," and "into town," as in (41) and (42) below (cf. Brender, 2001, p. 120; Higuchi, 2009, p. 14). In these expressions, the noun "town" refers to the central "downtown" area where most of the shops and offices are (COBUILD, 2003, p. 1536; Higuchi, 2009, p. 14). However, the noun "town" takes the definite article when referring to the people who live in a town, as in (43). This shows that whether or not certain English nouns take the definite article depends on the meaning of the word (cf. Yotsukura, 1970, p. 17; Fodor, 1975, p. 6).

41. Let’s go to town tonight. (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 123)
42. I caught a bus into town. (COBUILD, 2003, p. 1536)
43. The town takes an immense pride in recent achievements. (COBUILD, 2003, p. 1536)

Textbooks of English as a foreign language (EFL) usually do not provide learners of English with theoretical reasons which explain why certain nouns do or do not take the definite article, which is one of the reasons why many learners of English have a very difficult time mastering the definite article in English, except for learners whose native language also has a definite article (cf. Scovel, 2001, p. 114).

**Analysis**

**Methodology**

In this study, it was predicted that in newspapers, the definite article would not often be used for the sentence subject *police* in sentences which describe the police’s ongoing activities and actions in the present tense and present continuous tense. To verify this hypothesis, I conducted two kinds of corpus-based research. From *The Los Angeles Times* online, 352 sample sentences which have the noun *police* as the main sentence subject were collected. In addition, 61 sample sentences were also collected from *The Bank of English* (2003) on CD-ROM in order to see if the findings from *The Los Angeles Times* online concurred with the findings from *The Bank of English* (2003).

*The Bank of English* (2003) contains both American usage and British usage, but in this study, it was assumed that there is no difference in the usage of the definite
article between American English and British English for the sentence subject *police*, even though there are clear differences in definite article usage for other nouns. For example, Americans say “She is in the hospital,” whereas British people say “She is in hospital” (Higuchi, 2009, p. 56).

**Results**

A data corpus of 352 target sentences from *The Los Angeles Times* online was collected from articles that were between early October 1988 and late October 2009. In this corpus, 69 of the target sentences were in the present tense, 22 were in the present continuous tense, 33 were in the present perfect tense, 214 were in the past tense, 4 were in the past continuous tense, 8 were in the past perfect tense, and 2 were in the future tense (See Figure 1 below).

![Figure 1. The ratio of the tense used for the sentence subject police in The Los Angeles Times (N=352)](image)

In addition, 61 target sentences were collected from *The Bank of English* (2003). In this corpus, 18 of the target sentences were in the present tense, 10 were in the present continuous tense, 6 were in the present perfect tense, 24 were in the past tense, 2 were in the past continuous tense, and 1 was in the past perfect tense (See Figure 2 below). In this corpus, none of the target sentences were in the future tense.
Discussion

In *The Los Angeles Times* (N=352), past tense sentences account for 61% of the target sentences, the combination of present tense and present continuous tense sentences accounts for 26% of the target sentences, and present perfect sentences account for 9%. The combination of past continuous and past perfect sentences accounts for 3%, and future tense sentences account for only 1% of the sentences which have the sentence subject police. On the other hand, in *The Bank of English* (N=61), past tense sentences account for 39% of the target sentences (N=24) and the combination of present tense and present continuous tense sentences account for 46% of the target sentences (N=28). Present perfect sentences account for 10% and the combination of past continuous and past perfect sentences account for 5% of the target sentences.

*LEA* (2006, p. A64) states that in news reports, journalists often use the word *police* without the definite article at the beginning of a sentence in the present tense and present continuous tense when describing the ongoing activities of the police. However, the data which are in these two corpuses have shown that *LAE* (2006, p. A64) does not accurately reflect the actual usage of English which is used in American newspapers because many sentences in these corpuses have the sentence subject police in the past target sentences as well. (See Figure 1 above.)

The followings are actual sentences that were in *The Los Angeles Times* data corpus, one target sentence for each tense:

Present Simple Tense:

44. Police believe that Le fought for her life. (Sep. 18, 2009)
Present Continuous Tense:
45. Police are investigating the attack as a case of child neglect. (Sep. 9, 2009)

Present Perfect Tense:
46. Police have not offered a possible motive. (Sep. 27, 2009)

Past Simple Tense:
47. Police denied using gas. (Sep. 26, 2009)

Past Continuous Tense:
48. Police were looking for the robber, who fled on foot. (Oct. 9, 2008)

Past Perfect Tense:
49. Police also had kept people away from the airport. (Apr. 17, 2009)

Future Tense:
50. Police will put more cars on the streets. (Mar. 28, 2008)

Past studies reveal that conciseness is very much sought after in writing newspaper articles, due to limited space provided in the paper, and the definite article is customarily omitted in newspaper headlines (Christophersen, 1939, p. 193-194; Fujii, 1992, p. 39; Shimizu, 1999, p. 41; Higuchi, 2009, p. 196). However, past studies only claim that the definite article is omitted in headlines. When examining both of the data corpuses which were used in this study, no evidence was found that the definite article is also omitted in the body of the newspaper for the reason of conciseness.

Verbs for the sentence subject police in present tense and present continuous tense sentences.

In this section, I categorize the verbs which were commonly used for the sentence subject noun police in the present and present continuous tense sentences of the two data corpuses. Van Ek & Robat (1984, p. 211) state that English verbs can be categorized as either dynamic verbs or stative verbs. Dynamic verbs describe an event that has a clear beginning point and ending point (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 211). In contrast, stative verbs describe a state of being that does not have a clear beginning point.
or ending point (van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 211).

Figure 3 below shows the frequency of the verbs which were used in the present tense sentences in *The Los Angeles Times*. The dynamic verb “say” (N=35) was the most frequently used verb in the target sentences. The stative verbs “believe” (N=7), “suspect” (N=3), and “have” (N=3) rank second, third, and fourth, respectively.

![Figure 3. Graph of verbs used in the present tense target sentences in *The Los Angeles Times*](image)

The verbs which were used in the target sentences in *The Bank of English* (2003) were similar to the verbs used in *The Los Angeles Times*. The verb “say” and “believe” were the most frequently used verbs for the sentence subject *police* in that data corpus (See (51) and (52) for examples).

51. Police say that they negotiated the man’s release because he complained of feeling unwell.
52. Police believe he may have killed up to 175.

Figure 4 below shows the frequency of verbs which were used in the present tense target sentences in *The Bank of English* (2003). The verb “believe” (N=3) and verb phrase “be able to” (N=3) are the most frequently used verb for the sentence subject *police* in *The Bank of English* (2003).
Figure 4. Graph of verbs used in the present tense sentences in *The Bank of English* (2003)

Figure 5 below shows a graph of the most common verbs in the target sentences of *The Los Angeles Times* for the sentences which were in the present continuous tense. Notice that the verb “investigate” is the most frequently used verb for the present continuous tense sentences. The verb “search” for ranks second and “look for” ranks third. These three verbs are all dynamic verbs (cf. van Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 211).

Figure 5. Graph of verbs used in the present continuous target sentences in *The Los Angeles Times*

In *The Bank of English* (2003), the most frequently used verbs in the present continuous target sentences were “hunt” and “treat.” However, these verbs were not found in the present continuous tense sentences in *The Los Angeles Times* for the sentence subject *police*. Figure 6 below shows the frequency of verbs which were used in
the present continuous sentences in *The Bank of English* (2003) which had sentence subject “police.” When both data corpuses are combined, the verb “investigate” is the most frequently used verb in the present continuous sentences which have sentence subject *police*. (Compare Figures 5 and 6.)

![Graph of verbs used in the present continuous target sentences in *The Bank of English* (2003)](image)

**Figure 6.** Graph of verbs used in the present continuous target sentences in *The Bank of English* (2003)

Verbs for the sentence subject *police* in the past tense.

See Figure 7 below for a chart of the most common verbs which were used with the sentence subject *police* for past tense sentences in *The Los Angeles Times*. In these sentences, the dynamic verb “say” (*N*=77) was the most frequently used verb. The dynamic verbs “arrest” (*N*=15) and “find” (*N*=15) were also common, but not nearly as common as “say.”

![Graph of verbs used in the past target sentences in *The Los Angeles Times*](image)

**Figure 7.** Graph of verbs used in the past target sentences in *The Los Angeles Times*
Stative verbs, such as "believe" and "suspect," were not used in any target past tense sentences in *The Los Angeles Times*.

In *The Bank of English* (2003), there were 24 target sentences which were in the past tense, and the verb "say" was the most frequently used verb for the sentence subject police (N=7). Stative verbs such as "believe" and "suspect" were not used in any of the target past tense sentences in this data corpus either. (See Figure 8.) Also, note that the majority of the verbs used in the past tense target sentences were dynamic verbs.

![Figure 8. Graph of verbs used in the past target sentences in The Bank of English (2003)](image)

**Future study**

This research has revealed one research question for a future study. The research question pertains to *LAAD* (2007, p. 1216) and *LDCE* (2009, p. 1338), which claim that the definite article is used when the word *police* refers to the official organization. There is a marked case such as (53) and (54) in which this rule does not govern. In (53) and (54), the noun *police* refers to individual police officers, although the definite article is used in this sentence. This marked case is clearly understood by native speakers of English, but it could be difficult for learners of English as a second language (ESL) because English determiners are difficult for them to master (Scovel, 2001, p. 114). Future research is needed in order to determine when the rule in *LAAD* (2007, p. 1216) and *LDCE* (2009, p. 1338) applies and when it does not apply.

53. The police started shooting and scared them away. (*MPVP*, 2005, p. 376)
Conclusion

LEA (2006, p. A64) states that in news reports, when describing the ongoing activities of the police, journalists often use the word *police* without the definite article when *police* is the subject of sentences which are in the present tense and present continuous tense. However, in this study, counter evidence was presented to what LEA (2006, p. A64) claims because in my data corpus from *The Los Angeles Times*, there were 214 past tense sentences in *The Los Angeles Times* in which the word *police* was the subject of the sentence. However, LEA (2006, p. A64) is not completely false because there were also 69 present tense sentences and 22 present continuous sentences in which the noun *police* was the sentence subject.

References


A Study of the Definite Article Usage for the Word Police (Kobayashi)


