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## The Article vs. the Artists: The Demise of the Definite Article in the Names of Popular Music Groups

**Abstract:** The paper documents and discusses a change in the English language that has not been described yet. The change involves definite article usage in the names of popular music groups and is shown to have started in the 1960s. The description of the change is based on data drawn from the list of hit singles that has been published in the UK every week since 1952. Since the list identifies not only the most popular singles in a given week but also the groups that perform them, from the point of view of linguistics the chart is a large random database of names of popular music groups that can be used for tracking and quantifying changes in the English language. Relying on such data, the paper documents the origins and spread of the change, identifies its key stages and shows that the rate of its progress closely approximates the S curve known to model the spread of linguistic innovations. Relying on recent accounts of article use with English proper names, the paper also discusses factors that may have triggered the change and frames it in a broader perspective of trends in article use.

### 1. The data and sources

Even a brief look at the history of popular music shows that when record charts were started 60 years ago, the name of virtually every group started with the definite article, while now such usage is quite rare, e.g.:

- |                  |                         |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| (1) the Platters | (2) Coldplay            |
| (3) the Shadows  | (4) Arctic Monkeys      |
| (5) the Drifters | (6) the Black Eyed Peas |

The contrast in article use between classics of the '50s — (1), (3) and (5) — and bands that have topped the charts recently — (2), (4) and (6) — is quite

stark and provides evidence of a little-noticed change in English that set in and progressed quite rapidly in the second half of the 20th century. Linguists are no strangers to music and at least some of the readers of this paper must have listened or danced to hits played by the groups listed above or discussed below, but so far nobody has commented on the grammatical change that has occurred in their names. This paper will document this development, quantify it and frame it in a more general perspective.

The discussion will be based on data drawn from record charts listing the best-selling singles, which have been compiled weekly in the UK since November 14, 1952. Along with the title of the number-one single in a given week, the charts also identify its performer, which makes the charts a large random sample of the names of popular music bands and artists that have been active over the last 60 years. In order to track the developments in the use of the definite article illustrated in samples (1) through (6) above, the names of all the music groups with number-one singles were extracted from the chart, along with the dates on which they first topped it; the names were then plotted on a timescale. Each name was extracted only once, upon its initial appearance in the number-one spot, to make sure that the results were not skewed by groups that released best-selling singles over a wide timespan, during which the pattern of article use this paper investigates might have changed from the week of the band's first number-one single. Consequently, one-hit wonders nobody remembers any more are given the same treatment in this paper as eternal classics, which might be unsound from the point of view of the history of popular music but is fully justified from the perspective of the history of English, since the names of all these groups stand equal as witnesses of language change.

## 2. A record of change

At the outset of record-chart making, the use of the definite article in band names was ubiquitous. It is found in the name of every single group that climbed to the top of the listings in the 1950s, whether the band grew to be as famous as examples 1, 3 and 5 (above) or faded into oblivion as quickly as those enumerated below:

(7) the Stargazers

(8) the Dream Weavers

(9) the Teenagers

(10) Emily Ford and the Checkmates

The same pattern continued in the '60s, as testified to by the names of the classics whose songs are still played and cherished today, e.g.:

(11) the Beatles

(12) the Rolling Stones

(13) the Beach Boys                      (14) the Bee Gees

(15) the Animals                      (16) the Supremes

as well as by the names of bands whose existence was forgotten soon after their first charting single, e.g.:

(17) the Highwaymen                      (18) the Tornados

(19) the Bachelors                      (20) the Overlanders

Among these one-hit wonders, there are also two instances of groups whose names are in the singular:

(21) the Scaffold                      (22) the Move

which shows that in those times the use of the definite article was not limited to the plural, as might be surmised from the examples adduced so far.

However, besides offering multiple cases which confirm the universality and uniformity of the pattern illustrated above, the data from the '60s also show the first symptoms of its imminent collapse. The first sign of the times came on April 8, 1965, when the number-one position was first reached by a band whose name did not open with the definite article: (23), followed by another one (24) on June 8, 1967:

(23) Unit Four Plus Two                      (24) Procol Harum

These two pioneers of article-dropping, whether now completely forgotten (23) or enjoying the status of a classic (24), were soon followed by a wave of other article-free bands. The third one appeared on the chart in 1968, and four more, listed below, did so in 1969:

(25) Marmalade                      (26) Fleetwood Mac

(27) Amen Corner                      (28) Credence Clearwater Revival

The change in article use heralded by such names gathered even more momentum in the '70s as evidenced by the classics of those times as well as by less famous groups and one-hit wonders whose careers happened to peak in that decade, e.g.:

(29) Slade                      (30) Queen

- |            |                        |
|------------|------------------------|
| (31) Abba  | (32) Pink Floyd        |
| (33) Pilot | (34) Dawn              |
| (35) T-Rex | (36) Lieutenant Pigeon |

The definite article still held some ground but its use remained robust only in the plural, where it continued to predominate, e.g.:

- |                   |                           |
|-------------------|---------------------------|
| (37) the Osmonds  | (38) the New Seekers      |
| (39) the Floaters | (40) the Bay City Rollers |

In the singular, as has been shown in examples (29) through (36), most band names had by that time already come to follow the article-free pattern. The only two notable exceptions were:

- |                 |                             |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| (41) the Police | (42) the Manhattan Transfer |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|

The process of change that accelerated so much in the 1970s continued into the '80s. The article-free pattern further solidified in the singular, spreading to less typical cases that range from acronyms — (43) and (44) — to an onomatopoeic exclamation (45) and a clause (46):

- |            |                                |
|------------|--------------------------------|
| (43) UB 40 | (44) U2                        |
| (45) Wham! | (46) Frankie Goes to Hollywood |

By the end of the decade it had gained a firm foothold in band names that are explicitly plural, e.g.:

- |                    |                            |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| (47) Pet Shop Boys | (48) New Kids on the Block |
|--------------------|----------------------------|

Perhaps the most symbolic moment came, though, in 1984: for the first time ever, throughout the entire year, every band with a number-one single sported a name that was devoid of the definite article.

The article-free pattern also kept proliferating in the following decade. In the 1990s it spread to band names that are adjectival — (49) and (50) — and numerical (51) in structure, and finally came to predominate in the plural as well, as in (52) through (54):

- |                 |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|
| (49) Simply Red | (50) Wet Wet Wet |
|-----------------|------------------|

(51) Five

(52) Manic Street Preachers

(53) Simpsons

(54) Backstreet Boys

Consequently, the use of the definite article in band names dwindled to only a handful of cases, usually framed in the plural, e.g.:

(55) the Spice Girls

(56) the Chemical Brothers

The frequency of the article-free pattern continued to rise in the first decade of the 21st century as well, and is found in almost 80% of the names of groups with number-one singles in that period, e.g.:

(57) Coldplay

(58) Sugababes

(59) Oasis

(60) Arctic Monkeys

In just fifty years the pattern that reigned supreme in the early days of popular record charts has thus been reduced to the status of a minor variant, e.g.:

(61) the Black Eyed Peas

(62) the Ting Tings

When the spread of article-free names is plotted on a time scale, the resulting graph closely resembles the S-curve that is well known to reflect the progress of language changes (Croft 2000: 183):

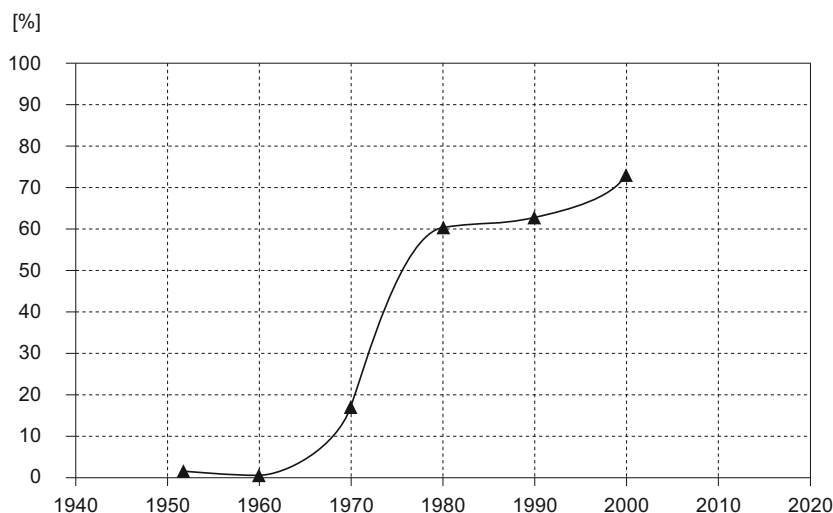


Figure 1. The rise of the article-free pattern in the names of popular music groups

The decline in the use of the definite article in such names is, obviously, represented by the mirror image of the same curve:

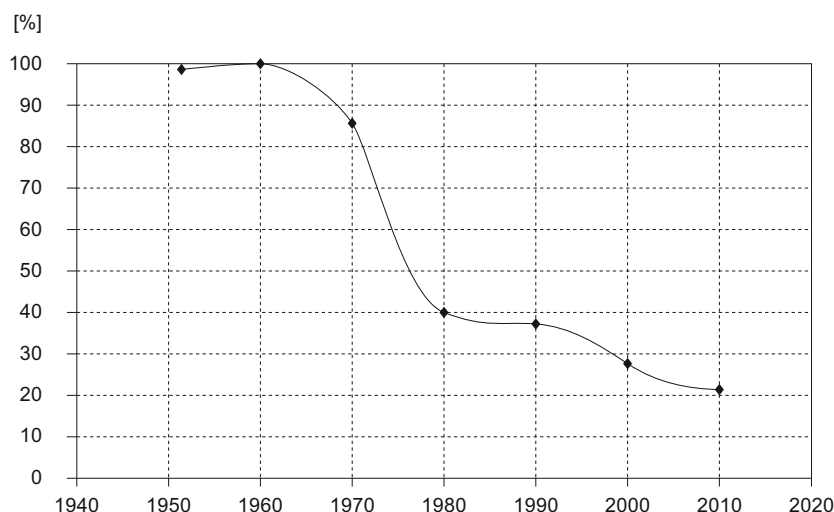


Figure 2. The decline in definite article use in the names of popular music groups

The developments in the names of popular music bands discussed above display thus the properties of a typical language change which is now on its protracted final stage (Labov 1994: 65).

### 3. The winds of change

The data presented in the previous section also hint at the motivation which seems to be driving the process illustrated in Figure 1. The discussion below will inquire into the origin of the article pattern in question and probe the factors that might have been instrumental in causing its collapse.

A fact which appears to have played a significant role in the rise of the article pattern in the 1950s is the family orientation of a number of band names in this period:

- (63) the Everly Brothers      (64) the Johnston Brothers

In (63) the group was really made up of two brothers, while in (64) the musicians were in fact unrelated, but in both cases the names followed a well-established pattern in which the use of a surname to refer to multiple family members is accompanied by the definite article, e.g.:

- (65) the Brothers Grimm      (66) the Wachowskis

The plural suffix may be added to the common noun that follows or precedes a proper name, as in the case of the fairy tale writers and collectors in (65), or may be attached directly to the proper name itself as in (66), where doing so focuses the reference of the nominal on the brothers who developed *Matrix* and its sequels, but in either scenario English grammar requires the use of the definite article.

As has been shown in Berezowski (2002) and confirmed in Radden and Dirven (2007), the use of the definite article in such cases reflects the atypical nature of the referents of proper names. Names are prototypically given to individual entities whose unique status goes without saying and need not be explicated by the use of the definite article. However, if a proper name is given to an entity which is atypical in that it refers to a collection, as in (63) through (66), its uniqueness has to be explicitly confirmed by the use of the definite article.

What is crucial, though, is the fact that the feature at stake is the collective construal of an entity and not the morphological plurality of its name, e.g.:

(67) the Bush family

(68) the Bushes

(69) the Cascade Range

(70) the Cascades

The definite article is used in all four cases because the referent of the proper name is a collection each time, and the regularity of the pattern is affected neither by the grammatical number of the names of the collections nor by the animacy of their members. The article pattern remains the same whether the name is singular or plural, and whether it refers to a collection of humans with the same last name or a range of adjacent peaks, passes and valleys.

Thus, the use of the definite article in the names of bands referring to a number of real or fictitious family members, exemplified in (63) and (64), followed a standard English pattern, and it appears to have been extended by analogy to cases in which group members were not linked by family ties but by an idea they shared. For example, the members of the Crickets disclosed that they were inspired by a number of groups named after birds; the Beatles confessed to choosing a modified insect name because they admired the music of the Crickets; the Shadows were originally a backing band for Cliff Richard, whom they “shadowed” on stage; the Beach Boys initially sang so much about surfing on Southern California beaches that their music was called surf rock, etc. In other words, the analogy underpinning the extension of the article pattern from family-oriented names to more general ones was aided by the fact that the latter tended to be descriptive and revealed the musical and/or lifestyle ideals of band members.

As was shown in the previous section, the use of the definite article was first seen in plural names, which are the easiest to construe collectively, and then, in the mid-1960s, spread to names framed in the singular. However, the same period when the article pattern reached the peak of its universality also saw the first signs

of its imminent dissipation. It was in 1965 that a band with a name devoid of the definite article first had a number-one single, and by the end of the '60s around 16% of popular music groups had article-free names. The final years of the '60s and the early years of the '70s thus form a critical period in which the article-free pattern first began to seriously challenge established article usage, and then quickly gained enough momentum to eventually overtake it.

The analogy underpinning the extension of article use from family names to the names of music groups must have then started collapsing, and it may be surmised that its weakest point, where the process could have started, was the collective construal of band names. If music groups really ceased to be construed as associations of musicians who write songs and do gigs, and increasingly came to be conceptualized as music industry brand names that release hits and go on tours to promote them, the motivation for the use of the definite article identified in the preceding paragraphs would inevitably dissipate.

One piece of evidence supporting this scenario comes from the numerical data compiled in Table 1, below.

Table 1. The relationship between grammatical number and article use

|                     |                  | 1950s | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s |
|---------------------|------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| plural band names   | definite article | 10    | 39    | 17    | 14    | 8     | 9     |
|                     | no article       | 0     | 0     | 3     | 7     | 10    | 8     |
| singular band names | definite article | 0     | 5     | 6     | 9     | 11    | 0     |
|                     | no article       | 0     | 7     | 38    | 38    | 44    | 26    |

As shown in Table 1, most of the bands that innovated by dropping the article in the critical period defined above structured their names in the singular, which is obviously a more natural choice for entities that are construed as single units than for collections. Such a change in construal would also explain why plural band names proved to be quite resistant to the article-free pattern and did not succumb to it in substantial numbers until almost twenty years after the bulk of names in the singular. After all, giving an entity a plural name is perhaps the most obvious way to mark its collective construal, and diluting such a clear cognitive link took some time. In other words, the grammatical plurality of a band name both accompanied the definite article pattern in its heyday, as shown in the previous section, and then delayed its dissipation in the years of decay, as witnessed by the fact that the use of the definite article with plural names has outlasted its use with singular names.

Another piece of evidence that can be adduced in support of the change in construal argued for above is the rise in the frequency of arbitrary band names. As has been shown above, the analogy that underpinned the spread of the article pattern from family-based names to more general ones was buttressed by a preference for descriptive designations revealing the musical and/or lifestyle predilections of



the group members. The occurrence of arbitrary designations that do not disclose much about the performers but are merely catchy labels that attract interest and boost sales would then weaken this analogy and, consequently, undermine the motivation for the use of the definite article in band names. Such arbitrary names indeed proliferated in the critical period identified above, e.g.:

(71) Procol Harum

(72) Fleetwood Mac

(73) Dawn

(74) Marmalade

The musicians who formed Procol Harum named their band after a cat; the name Fleetwood Mac was an amalgamation of the names of two musicians whom the founder of the group wanted to entice to join it; the name Dawn was coined to conceal the identity of a singer who was bound by a contract with one record company but wanted to release a single with another one without risking legal problems; and while the inspiration behind the group name Marmalade is not well known, it does not reveal much about the ideals cherished by its members either. The rise of such naming practices in the late '60s and early '70s was thus in stark contrast with the domination of descriptive designations in the period when the use of the definite article was universal.

Thirdly, there is also direct evidence of evolution in the article-use preferences of particular bands active in the critical period identified above. Perhaps the best known example of such developments is the case summarized below:

(75) the Specters

(76) the Status Quo

(77) the Quo

(78) Status Quo

Originally the band was known by the name as shown in (75); in 1967 it changed its name to the designation in (76), which was somewhat informally abbreviated as (77); and then in 1970 it finally assumed the article-free name cited in (78). The definite article was thus shed at a time when the article-free pattern was first gaining momentum, and the name in question is both singular and arbitrary, which corroborates the arguments advanced in the preceding paragraphs.

Further corroborating evidence is provided by more such changeovers recorded in the same period of time, e.g.:

(79) the Hot Chocolate Band    (80) Hot Chocolate

(81) the Pink Floyd

(82) Pink Floyd

(83) the Marmalade

(84) Marmalade

An especially interesting case is the development evidenced in (81) and (82), as the band name is an amalgamation of the nickname and first name of two American blues guitarists (Pinkney “Pink” Anderson and Floyd Council) whose music was cherished by the group founder. The name, then, seems to have been coined along the same lines as designations that revealed the preferences of band members and, consequently, opened with the definite article, as has been shown above to have been the case with the Beatles or the Beach Boys. However, the allure of the article-free pattern that developed in the late 1960s proved to be strong enough to overcome even such potent motivation for the use of the definite article, and put Pink Floyd side by side with the far more arbitrary designations cited in (80) and (84).

The case for viewing the change in definite article use documented in section 2 as being driven primarily by a switch in the construal of bands from collective to unitary is thus reasonable and supported by observable linguistic evidence. It seems quite plausible, though, that in later years the spread of the article-free pattern was additionally aided by the popularity of groups formed in non-English speaking countries, i.e. by bands whose designations did not start with the definite article because they followed non-English naming traditions, e.g.:

(85) Abba

(86) Kraftwerk

The group in (85) originated in Sweden and the one in (86) came from Germany. Thus, the article-free pattern cannot be directly attributed in either case to the change that was unfolding in English, but both names could conceivably have served as models to be followed by those who wanted to emulate the success of these two bands in English-speaking countries.

## 4. Conclusions

As a result of the change documented in section 2 and for the reasons identified in section 3, the names of popular English-language music groups came to follow the same article pattern as numerous designations of companies and sports clubs, i.e. entities which are well known to be made up of large numbers of individuals but operate as single units, e.g.:

(87) Westlife

(88) Arsenal London

(89) Take That

(90) Yahoo! Inc.

Besides serving as the trademarks of their unique referents, any such article-free designations are also arbitrary, in that they do not reveal what type of music

a band composes, which products or services a company markets, how a team plays, etc. Such information can, obviously, be easily obtained from a variety of sources, e.g. it may be retrieved from the context or gained from direct contact with the goods and services offered by the entity in question, but it is not explicitly indicated by any of the components of the proper name itself.

This point is vital, because English grammar is sensitive to encoding any such referent characteristics in a proper name, e.g.:

(91) the Coca-Cola Company (92) the Reds

The proper name in (91) identifies the key product of the company, and the nickname of Liverpool Football Club in (92) specifies its home colors. Both designations are then non-arbitrary, which makes them atypical English proper names and requires the use of the definite article.

In more general terms, it may be concluded that the evolution of band names described above has led to their reclassification as typical proper names that refer to unique single entities without disclosing their characteristics, which in the case of English is tantamount to dispensing with the need to explicate the definiteness of such nominals by the use of the definite article.

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