



How to tell when you definitely need an indefinite article



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

WHEN do we use “a” and when do we use “an” as the indefinite article? Before a word that starts with a consonant sound you use “a” and before a word that starts with a vowel sound you use “an”, so that we write “an elephant”, “an Irish jig” but “a crocodile”, “a Scottish jig”. It’s “a university” because, although the first letter of university is “u”, the first sound is a y-sound, a consonant sound.

There are a few cases with initial “h” where this gets a bit messy. In French, the letter “h” is not pronounced in initial position, so words that we took from French spelt with “h” used to start with a vowel sound. The Americans still pronounce “herb” this way, as though it were written “erb”.

But New Zealanders, like Britons, pronounce the “h”, and thus talk about “a herb” while the Americans would say “an herb”. At one time the same was true of a few other words, notably “hotel” and “historical”.

These are taken from French, so the “h” was silent and you said “an hotel” and “an historical”. Then some people pronounced the “h”, and said “a hotel”, “a historical”.

A few, though, remembered that you

said “an” before “hotel”, even though they now pronounced the “h”. And to this day, some people say “an hotel” and “an historical novel” with a pronounced “h”.

The difference between “a” and “an” is nice and clear, because we write the two forms differently.

But for most speakers, there is a similar difference between “the elephant” and “the crocodile”, even though the word “the” is written the same way in both cases. “The” in “the elephant” is pronounced like “thee”, while “the” in “the crocodile” is pronounced as “thuh”. Again, it’s the initial consonant sounds or vowel sounds in the following word that make the difference.

But now we come to a problem. In languages like German, a word that is spelt as though it begins with a vowel actually has a consonant sound pronounced at the start, a kind of catch or glottal stop, such as you find in “Hawai’i”, or in “fa’aSamoa” or in the Cockney pronunciation of “butter” as “bu’er”.

This consonant is never meaningful when it occurs word-initially, so it’s rather hard for us to hear. And over the last many years, English speakers have started to add this to words which, in the spelling, start with vowels.



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At first, this happened only when there was great emphasis: “That was ‘awful’”, people would say, with a glottal stop at the beginning of “awful”. Such pronunciations persist. Then it spread to less emphatic contexts.

But if you say “elephant” with a glottal stop on the beginning, does it start with a consonant or a vowel? Phonetically, at least, it starts with a consonant. So people started to say “a elephant” and “thuh elephant”, completely losing the word “an” and the “thee” pronunciation of “the”. In fact, it vanishes in other places, too.

When I lived in Edinburgh there was a shoe-shop with a sign over the door that read “Baird ‘the’ bootmaker”.

The inverted commas round “the” indicated that you were supposed to stress this word, and it was pronounced “thee”.

Most young New Zealanders asked to stress “the”, or say it in isolation, say “thuh”, rather than “thee”, despite the fact that there is no other word in English

that ends in a stressed short-u sound.

Then something strange happened. People stopped saying the initial glottal stop all the time. It had a very short life. But the “a” and “thuh” before vowels sounds were retained. So now we have, for some speakers at least, only one of form of each of the articles, one that occurs both before vowels and before consonants.

In the meantime, some speakers still retain the old systems. If you listen hard, you might hear speakers who have any one of several systems operating in this area; they may not even be consistent about which system they use.

This is not just a matter of something that is happening in New Zealand, you can hear it in the English of several countries.

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