

The Indefinite Article before Adjectives Followed by the Word *Pain*

Kenji SONODA¹

Abstract The objective of this study was to identify before what kinds of adjectives the indefinite article, *a* or *an*, is used, and before what kinds of adjectives the indefinite article is not used, when these adjectives are followed by the word *pain*, and when the pain does not refer to a specific part of the body. This study was conducted making use of a large number of examples taken from the corpus in the BNC. The results of this study show that when the adjectives are describing the pain concretely, these noun phrases tend to be used with *a* or *an*, and that when the adjectives are describing the pain abstractly, these noun phrases tend not to be used with *a* or *an*.

Health Science Research 20(1): 17-21, 2007

Key Words : A, An, Zero article, Adjectives, *Pain*

Received 13 Jun 2007

Accepted 20 July 2007

1. Introduction

When the word *pain* is preceded by an adjective, and when these adjectives do not refer to a specific part of the body, we do not always use the indefinite article, *a* or *an*, before these adjectives. Sometimes we put the indefinite article before them, and sometimes we do not (zero article). This article deals with, firstly, before what kinds of these adjectives *a* or *an* tends to be used, and secondly, before what kinds of these adjectives *a* or *an* tends not to be used. It should be remembered that the adjectives dealt with here are not exhaustive, and that they are only a part of them.¹

2. The Indefinite Article before Adjectives Followed by the Word *Pain*

2.1. Adjective + *pain* that tends to be used with the indefinite article

When *pain* is preceded by an adjective, and when this noun phrase has *a* or *an*, the pain referred to here shows that it is countable and concrete, and that it is bounded or limited. The indefinite article used here also shows what kind of pain it is. When the pain is used in the plural, it shows that those who have the pains would be taking the pains as something that repeatedly comes and goes, as something continuous or recurrent.

2.1.1 An awful pain

With this noun phrase, *an* tends to be used before

it. In the BNC, four examples were used with *an*, one example was used without it, and one example in the plural. (1a-c) are examples of *an awful pain*, (2a) is an example of *awful pain*, and (2b) an example of *awful pains*:

- (1) a. There's an awful pain in my back, Doctor.
- b. I lay on my nail scissors by mistake...and just at the moment, well, to be graphic, an awful pain from outside was all I could feel.
- c. I had an awful pain in my chest and did not know whether it was a coronary or indigestion.
- (2) a. It's the fear of being abandoned...of awful pain that comes when no help is at hand.
- b. I keep getting awful pains in my side and it makes me go all hot.

2.1.2 A burning pain

A tends to be used before *burning pain*. In the BNC, four instances were used with *a*, and no instance of *burning pain* was found. Six instances were used in the plural. (3a-c) show instances of *a burning pain* and (4) shows an instance used in the plural:

- (3) a. This usually takes the form of a burning pain when you pass water....
- b. His upper body felt curiously numb, but he could feel a burning pain deep within him when he breathed.
- c. The craving for the cans had returned, this

¹ Department of Physical and Occupational Therapies, Health Sciences, Nagasaki University Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences

time coupled with a dull, burning pain that seared along her arms and legs.

(4) Burning pains, tearing and drawing pains.

2.1.3 A dull pain

With *dull pain*, *a* tends to be used before it. In the BNC, six examples were used with *a*, two examples without *a*, and one example was used in the plural. (5a-c) are examples of *a dull pain*, (6a) is an example of *dull pain*, and (6b) an example of *dull pains*:

- (5) a. There was a dull pain in his lower jaw, from hours of teeth clenching...
 b. There was a dull pain in his left biceps - Teresa's head was pillowed on it.
 c. I was aware of my heart being there...like a dull pain.
- (6) a. His stomach contracted and dull pain in his empty lungs spread.
 b. What do you mean they're aching, are they aching or sharp pains or dull pains?

2.1.4 A real pain

Real pain tends to be used with *a*. In the BNC, *a real pain* occurred in 25 instances and *real pain* in three instances. *Real pains* did not occur. (7a-c) are instances of *a real pain*, and (8) is an instance of *real pain*:

- (7) a. And Steve's back was a real pain - the cold got to it.
 b. Come to think of it, it was a real pain, that round.
 c. ...having to do it could be a real pain.
- (8) There was real pain in Li Shai Tung's face.

2.1.5 A searing pain

Searing pain tends to be used with *a*. In the BNC, 12 instances of this noun phrase were used with *a*, three instances without *a*, and one instance was used in the plural. (9a-c) are instances used with *a*, (10a) is an instance without *a*, and (10b) an instance used in the plural:

- (9) a. Across his scalp and down to his brows spread a searing pain.
 b. There was a searing pain in her leg and she fell.
 c. Charles Paris felt a searing pain as a bullet ripped into his flesh.
- (10) a. Instead there is searing pain, blistering of the skin and a rapidly discovered aversion to swimming in the sea.
 b. It hurts me now to realize how much I numbed myself from the searing pains of those years.

2.1.6 A sharp pain

Sharp pain tends to be used with *a*. In the BNC, *a sharp pain* was used 18 times, *sharp pain* once, and *sharp pains* four times. (11a-c) are instances of *a sharp pain*, (12a) is an instance of *sharp pain*, and (12b) an instance of *sharp pains*:

- (11) a. There was a sudden sharp pain in his ears.
 b. A sharp pain twisted in Theda's guts.
 c. Then one day at school I got a sharp pain in my stomach.
- (12) a. Irritating, pricking, stitching sharp pain in the point of the fracture.
 b. When she went to fetch the water, she felt sharp pains rushing through her body.

2.1.7 A stabbing pain

Stabbing pain tends to be used either with *a* or in the plural. In the BNC, *a stabbing pain* and *stabbing pains* were each seen three times. No instance of *stabbing pain* could be found. (13a-c) are instances of *a stabbing pain*, and (14) is an instance of *stabbing pains*:

- (13) a. He felt a stabbing pain at the back of his ankle.
 b. I got a sharp stabbing pain.
 c. I felt a stabbing pain in my caught wing....
- (14) He had declined an invitation to dinner, as the stabbing pains in his head had been getting steadily worse throughout the day.

2.1.8 A stinging pain

Stinging pain tends to be used with *a*. In the BNC, *a stinging pain* and *stinging pains* were each used four times, and no instance of *stinging pain* occurred. (15a-c) are instances of *a stinging pain*, and (16) is an instance of *stinging pains*:

- (15) a. Shingles is a rash of blisters on the skin accompanied by a severe stinging pain.
 b. Her hand came down on top of a large bunch of them and she felt a sudden stinging pain.
 c. His limbs bent and snapped, his helmet cracked open and there was a stinging pain in his eyes.
- (16) They feel warm and or hot with stinging pains and better cold applications.

2.1.9 A sudden pain

A tends to go before *sudden pain*. In the BNC, four instances of *a sudden pain* appeared. No instances of *sudden pain* or *sudden pains* were found:

- (17) a. As she straightened up she felt a sudden pain like a knife being thrust into her lower back.

- b. She clutched at herself to claw away a sudden pain.
- c. I get a sudden pain in my left eye and it starts streaming.

2.1.10 A throbbing pain

Throbbing pain tends to be used either with *a* or in the plural. In the BNC, *a throbbing pain* and *throbbing pains* each occurred three times. (18a-c) are instances of *a throbbing pain*, and (19) is an instance of *throbbing pains*:

- (18) a. The only consequence was a throbbing pain in my scrotum that persisted well into the spring.
- b. If the pain...had always been a throbbing pain, ...he would naturally associate it with his finger.
- c. Jenna slept badly, waking with a throbbing pain in her head.

(19) Redness, swelling and throbbing pains.

2.2 Adjective + *pain* that tends not to be used with the indefinite article

When *a* or *an* is not used before adjectives followed by the word *pain*, it shows that this pain is uncountable. The speaker is talking about the pain as something abstract, and unbounded. In this case, the pain has no concrete boundary. The zero article represents a general type of pain.

2.2.1 Acute pain

Acute pain tends to be used without *an*. *Acute pain* was used in the BNC with *an* once, but it was used without *an* six times. It was used in the plural three times. (20a-c) are examples used without *an*, (21a) is an example used with *an*, and (21b) an example used in the plural:

- (20) a. ...it was the cause of "unexpected and most acute pain"....
 - b. Chronic pain is continuous and unassociated with the physiological responses to acute pain such as sweating and tachycardia.
 - c. They may suffer sickness, vomiting or acute pain, but they do not die.
- (21) a. ...it wasn't an acute pain that I mean....
 - b. ...sensations of sickness, and sometimes of acute pains or gripings in us....

2.2.2 Chronic pain

Chronic pain tends to be used without *a*. In the BNC, no examples with *a* were to be seen: all of the 17 examples of this phrase were those without *a*. No example was used in the plural.

- (22) a. Many residents suffer chronic pain.

- b. A great many sufferers from addictive disease of any kind have chronic pain in the back....

- c. ...research by Dr Michael Gentle...has shown that the animals experience chronic pain for weeks or months afterwards.

2.2.3 Colicky pain

Although the instances of this phrase are somewhat few, *colicky pain* seems to be more often used without *a*. The BNC gave only three instances of this phrase and all of them did not have *a*. No example was found that was used in the plural.

- (23) a. Teething with green, foul diarrhoea smelling of rotten eggs and there may be colicky pain and bloating.
- b. ...and a history of episodes of colicky pain or tenderness in the flank, macroscopic haematuria, and hypertension.
- c. The reason for hospital admission was severe colicky pain in the right upper abdomen for two months.

2.2.4 Considerable pain

In the BNC, no examples of this phrase with *a* appeared, and 18 examples were used without *a*. One example was used in the plural. (24a-c) are examples of *considerable pain*, and (25) is an example used in the plural:

- (24) a. Although of course they still cause considerable pain to any animal caught in them wild or domestic.
 - b. There may be marked swelling and considerable pain in the genital region....
 - c. Participants may experience considerable pain, grief, frustration and bitterness....
- (25) Crawford was a British star on Broadway and, for his considerable pains, won two Best Actor honours....

2.2.5 Constant pain

In the BNC, *constant pain* with *a* was seen in only one instance. Fifteen instances were used without *a*, and one instance was used in the plural. (26a-c) are examples of *constant pain*, (27a) is an example of *a constant pain* and (27b) an example of *constant pains*:

- (26) a. ...medical difficulties such as bladder and bowel movement, skin diseases, constant pain, spastic muscle movement....
- b. Her back by now was giving her constant pain.
- c. The court heard he ignored professional advice that the animal should have an operation,

leaving it to suffer chronic and constant pain.

- (27) a. Platt had originally planned to undergo the operation during the Christmas break but felt a constant pain in his knee during his warm-up....
- b. Father-of-four Mr Ayre, 38, died at his home in Radyr, Cardiff, the day after complaining of constant pains.

2.2.6 Emotional pain

Emotional pain tends to be used without *an*. While one instance was used in the plural, the other 25 instances were used without *an*. (28a-c) are instances used without *an*, and (29) is an instance used in the plural:

- (28) a. Acute emotional pain is a powerful threat.
- b. The fact that it doesn't cause you immense emotional pain doesn't mean you're not committed to it.
- c. Physical or emotional pain, illness, and some drugs also tell us that now is not the time to eat.
- (29) By having someone in our adult lives...by feeding them to ourselves we can ease emotional pains and keep them at bay for a while.

2.2.7 Excruciating pain

In the BNC, three examples were used with *an*, and six examples were used without it. Examples used in the plural were not found. Thus, *excruciating pain* tends to be used without *an* rather than with it. (30a-c) are examples without *an*, and (31) is an example with it:

- (30) a. Excruciating pain stabbed up into his groin.
- b. There was excruciating pain in my bottom.
- c. And then, suddenly, without warning, a bomb-burst of excruciating pain exploded inside his skull and sent him reeling.
- (31) Suddenly, as my shoes and socks got soaking wet and frozen, there came an excruciating pain and I cried with the intensity of it.

2.2.8 Great pain

In the BNC, *a great pain* appeared once, *great pain* 54 times, and *great pains* 46 times, all of which show that this noun phrase tends to be used in the plural or without *a*. However, the plural form, *great pains*, is mostly used figuratively, and this plural form often does not have to do with an actual bodily or emotional pain. On the other hand, *great pain* without *a* is used in connection with an actual bodily or emotional pain. (32a-c) are examples without *a*, (33a) is an example

of *a great pain*, and (33b) an example of *great pains*:

- (32) a. All agreed they had a rough deal as their work often involved great pain.
- b. Bougies were inserted, and these got bigger, inflicting great pain and considerable nausea.
- c. Very deliberately, and as if it were giving him great pain, the Germans who had said little began to work.
- (33) a. Soon I felt a great pain in my head and my breathing became more and more difficult.
- b. Macmillan took great pains to husband his energies.

2.2.9 Intense pain

In the BNC, *intense pains* was used five times, and *intense pain* 12 times. *An intense pain* was not used at all. It shows that although this phrase is sometimes used in the plural, it is more often used without *an*. (34a-c) are examples of *intense pain*, and (35) is an example of *intense pains*:

- (34) a. He'd suffered intense pain before his death.
- b. The RSPCA says the dog suffered intense pain for several weeks.
- c. Intense pain or spasm of the surrounding muscles which may suggest a fracture.
- (35) Intense pains, neuralgic pains, can not bear to be touched.

2.2.10 Persistent pain

Persistent pain tends to be used without *a*. All of the six instances of this phrase in the BNC were used without *a*. Instances used in the plural were not found:

- (36) a. ...(seven men, three women, age range 44-73 years) who had persistent pain after vagotomy and pyloroplasty....
- b. ...10 patients with persistent pain after gastric surgery.
- c. Patients with persistent pain after gastric surgery often had several symptoms.

2.2.11 Physical pain

In the BNC, 10 examples of this phrase had *a*, and approximately 24 examples did not have *a*. No example used in the plural was found. Thus, this noun phrase tends to be often used without *a*. (37a-c) are examples without *a*, and (38) is an example with it:

- (37) a. She hurt so much it was physical pain, like a knife twisting back-wards and forwards.
- b. After all, he detested physical pain and discomfort - and this excursion had promised both.

- c. The fact that I do not have envelopes causes me physical pain.

(38) Desire had become a physical pain.

2.2.12 Severe pain

Severe pain tends to be more often used without *a*. In the BNC, five instances of *a severe pain* and approximately 23 instances of *severe pain* were found. With respect to *severe pains*, three instances were found. (39a-c) are examples of *severe pain*, (40a) examples of *a severe pain*, and (40b) is an example of *severe pains*.

- (39) a. Otherwise this will cause quite severe pain.
- b. Severe pain in one leg necessitated her admission.
- c. The spitting cobras of Africa are capable of shooting the venom at an enemy from a distance of 6 feet, causing eye damage and severe pain.
- (40) a. Her main complaint was a severe pain which radiated to the left eyeball.
- b. Louisa was taken ill with severe pains in her stomach.

2.2.13 Terrible pain

This phrase tends to be used without *a* rather than with it. Of the instances of this noun phrase in the BNC, six instances were used with *a*, and nine instances were used without *a*. Three instances were used in the plural. (41a-c) are examples of *terrible pain*, (42a) is an example of *a terrible pain*, and (42b) an example of *terrible pains*:

- (41) a. She looked into his eyes and saw terrible pain and inconsolable grief.
- b. Then they put pins and knives into it, and the person feels terrible pain.
- c. Yes...be all right...terrible pain...give me a few minutes....
- (42) a. Asleep, he'd felt a terrible pain in his upper arm.
- b. I'm having terrible pains in my chest.

2.2.14 Unbearable pain

Unbearable pain tends to be used without *an*. All of the five instances in the BNC did not have *an*, and no instance used in the plural was found:

- (43) a. When we suffer unbearable pain, we too anaesthetize.
- b. Richard was "unbearable pain"....
- c. If the spray hits the eyes there is almost unbearable pain and temporary blindness.

3. Conclusion

The results of this study show that when the adjectives followed by the word *pain* are suggesting the pain as something concrete or bounded, these adjectives tend to be preceded by *a* or *an*, whereas when these adjectives are suggesting the pain as something abstract or unbounded, these adjectives tend not to be preceded by *a* or *an*.

This paper did not deal with the question of whether the indefinite article is used, when nouns or adjectives are followed by the word *pain*, and when the pain refers to a specific part of the body, such as *chest pain* and *stomach pains*. This will be discussed at the next opportunity.

NOTES

1. All the examples cited here were taken from the BNC Online (BNC).

REFERENCES

- Andou, S. 2005. *Gendai-Eibunpou-Kougi (Lectures on Modern English Grammar)*. Tokyo: Kaitakusha.
- Ishida, H. 2002. *Eigo-Kanshi-Kougi (Lectures on English Articles)*. Tokyo: Taishukan.
- Leech, G., B. Cruickshank and R. Ivanič. 2001. *An A-Z of English Grammar & Usage*. Essex: Pearson Education.
- Swan, M. 2005. *Practical English Usage*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.