Claire Beyssade (Institut Jean Nicod, CNRS, Paris)

Weak definites and the type/token distinction

abstract

In this talk, I will focus on what are called "weak definites" in languages such as French or English, i.e. NPs built with a (singular) definite detemier but which don't presuppose the uniqueness of their referent. One can distinguish two subclasses of weak definites. The first one is composed of complex NPs embedding a genetive NP, such as (1); these have been studied by Poesio (1994), Barker (2005), Milner (1982), Flaux (1992, 1993), Corblin (2001). The second class, illustrated in (2), is composed of simple NPs which occur in verbal constructions which denote routines, habits…; these have been studied by Carlson et al. (2005, 2006, 2013), Klein et al. (2009), Aguilar & Zwarts (2010), Aguilar & Schulpen (2012), Corblin (2011), Aurnague (2012).

(1) I got this data from <u>the student of a linguist</u>.   (Poesio, 1994)
(2) Jacqueline took <u>the train</u> from Paris to Moscow. She had a transfer in Berlin. (Carlson et al., 2005)

    I propose a unified analysis of these two classes of weak DPs. Contrary to Barker, I don't assume two different syntactic analyses for definite DPs associated with weak or strong readings, respectively. Contrary to Carlson et al. (2005), I don't claim that the definite determiner is ambiguous and has to be analyzed as an expletive in the case of weak readings. My thesis is that there is one and only one definite determiner (in French as in English) and that the distinction between weak and strong readings comes from the noun. In the case of strong readings, the noun refers to a token, and in the case of weak readings, it refers to a type. And if, in general, there is no ambiguity between weak and strong readings, it is because the interpretation is contextually determined.

    Technically, I argue that the definite determiner doesn't trigger a uniqueness presupposition, but only a weaker presupposition, close to what is proposed by Coppock and Beaver (2012). They have suggested that the presupposition of the definite determiner is captured by (3). I propose that it corresponds rather to (4): (4a) and (4b) are logically equivalent, but (4b) highlights the importance of the context in the emergence of the weak reading, i.e the type reading.

(3)   If there is an X, then there is only one.
(4)   a. If an X exists and is a token, then there is only one X.
        b. If there is not only one X, either X doesn't exist or X isn't a token.

In one sense, my proposal is close to the proposal made by Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts who claim that weak definites can be analysed as kind-referring expressions. Nevertheless, it differs from their proposal in that I propose to revisit the content of the presupposition associated with the definite determiner, and in that I give up the idea that the definite determiner triggers a uniqueness presupposition. The core idea of my proposal is to challenge the traditional idea that definite determiners trigger a uniqueness presupposition. And I do that, not only for the case of weak definites, but also in the case of strong definites.

    To summarize, I will argue for two main ideas :
(a) The definite article only contributes a weak uniqueness presupposition, where uniqueness depends on existence.

(b) Weak DDs are used to refer to or to name types. A type groups together indistinguishable objects. The use of the weak definite determiner is licensed in this context where differences between tokens are erased.

References

Aguilar-Guevara, A. & Zwarts, J. 2011. Weak definites and reference to kinds. *Proceedings of SALT* 20, 179–196.

Aguilar-Guevara, A. & Schulpen, M. 2012. Modified weak definites. Paper presented at the conference on "(IN)Definites and Weak Referentiality", Florianapolis, Brazil. August, 2012.

Aurnague, M. 2012. Quand la routine s'installe : remarques sur les emplois de *à* de type 'routine sociale'. *Revue Romane* 47 :2, 189-218.

Barker, C. 1991. *Possessive Descriptions*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California at Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA.

Barker, C. 2005. Possessive weak definites. In Possessives and Beyond: Semantics and Syntax, eds. Kim, Ji-yung, Lander, Yury, and Partee, Barbara H. 89-113. Amherst, MA: GLSA Publications.

Carlson, G. 2006. The meaningful bounds of incorporation. in S. Vogeleer and L. Tasmowski (eds.), *Non-Definiteness and Plurality*, in the Linguistik Aktuell series. Amsterdam: Benjamins. 35-50.

Carlson, G., & Sussman, R. 2005. Seemingly indefinite definites. In S. Kepsar & M. Reis (Eds.), Linguistic Evidence. Berlin: de Gruyter, 71-86.

Carlson, G., Sussman, R., Klein, N. & Tanenhaus, M. K. 2006. Weak definite noun phrases. In Davis, Deal, & Zabbal (eds.), Proceedings of NELS 36. Amherst, MA: GLSA, vol 1, 179-196.

Coppock, E. & Beaver, D., 2012. Exclusivity, uniqueness and definiteness. In Piñon, C. (ed.), *Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics 9*, 59-66.

Corblin, F. 2001. Défini et génitif: le cas des définis défectifs. In *Cahier Jean-Claude Milner*, Jean-Marie Marandin (ed.), Editions Verdier, 19-54.

Corblin, F. 2011. Des définis para-intensionnels : *être à l'hôpital, aller à l'école*. *Langue Française* 171, 55-75.

Corblin, F. to appear. Locus et telos : *aller à l'école, être à la plage*. In Fagard B. & Stosic, D. (eds.), *Corela,* Special Issue on Expression(s) de l'espace en français.

Flaux, N. 1992. Les syntagmes nominaux : référence définie ou indéfinie ? *Le français moderne*, 23-45

Flaux, N. 1993. Les syntagme nominaux : référence définie ou indéfinie ? *Le français moderne*, 111-139.

Milner, J.-C. 1982. *Ordres et raisons de langue*, Paris, Seuil.

Poesio, M. 1994. Weak definites. *SALT IV*. Ithaca: Cornell.