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Expressing weak definiteness: With or without article

abstract

In the domain of weak referentiality there are three closely related phenomena, as illustrated in the examples in (1).

- (1) a. Peter was in prison. [English]
b. Peter was in de gevangenis. [Dutch]
c. Peter war im Gefängnis. [German]

The stereotypical message that Peter is a prisoner (and not just located inside a prison building) can be expressed through a bare nominal (e.g. Stvan 1998), through a weak definite (e.g. Carlson & Sussman 2005), and (in German) through the contraction of the preposition and the definite article (e.g. Waldmüller 2008). Similar patterns with stereotypical meanings are found with other nouns, sometimes as objects of verbs, but mostly with prepositions.

Taking the weak definite and the analysis of Aguilar Guevara & Zwarts (2010) as our point of departure, we show that all three constructions are based on unique reference to an abstract kind of object. This uniqueness is usually marked by the definite article, but this article can be combined with the preposition or the noun, overtly or covertly. German allows contraction of the article into the preposition for a class of definites that includes the weak definites (Waldmüller 2008, Schwarz 2009, Cieschinger & Bosch 2011). English allows the article to be dropped with a fairly large class of locative nouns (hospital, church, university, town, etc., Stvan 1998, Baldwin et al. 2006), a process that we compare to the formation of bare proper names (Matushansky 2006). Dutch only allows bare definite nominals in combination with a preposition or verb, which we treat as a combination of the English and German pattern. We propose a formal mechanism that accounts for all three cases in a unified way, closely related to the compositional and lexical semantics and to the functional motivation for reducing or dropping definite articles. It also extends to various other case, like bare musical instrument nouns in various languages (e.g. play guitar) and bare transportation constructions (e.g. by boat).