

An Empirical Investigation of Definite Descriptions in Attributive-Possession NPs

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Previous analyses of the English definite article have generally taken one of two approaches, characterizable as FAMILIARITY (e.g. Christophersen '39, Heim '83, Prince '92) and UNIQUENESS (e.g. Hawkins '91, Lewis '79, Kadmon '90, Gundel *et al.* '93, Birner & Ward '94, Abbott '99). Proposing a hybrid account, Roberts ('03) argues that use of a definite NP presupposes that its referent is both contextually unique in bearing the property in question *and* WEAKLY FAMILIAR, i.e. an entity whose existence is entailed by the context. However, problematic for all previous analyses are definite ATTRIBUTIVE-POSSESSION NPs (McKercher '01), a type of EMBEDDED NP (Meier '03, Champollion & Sauerland '09) that seems to lack a uniqueness presupposition; consider (1):



(1) The man with the/a cane is my neighbor.

The felicity of both the definite and indefinite embedded NP in (1) suggests that neither (weak) familiarity nor uniqueness is determining article choice for attributive-possession NPs (APNPs). Under a uniqueness-based approach, the presence of two equally salient canes should render the definite infelicitous. Under a familiarity account, if the man's cane (being visible) is taken to be familiar, then the indefinite should be disfavored, while if it is not, then the definite should be disfavored; however, neither is the case. Nor can such NPs be analyzed as 'weak' (Poesio '94, Carlson & Sussman '05, Barker '05, Schwarz '09) as they fail to display any of the characteristics associated with such NPs; e.g. in (2) only the 'strict' interpretation – under which everyone saw the same cane – is available:

(2) Everyone saw the man with the cane.

Rather, in this paper (representing joint work with Christopher Ahern and Tom Hayden), we hypothesize that what is relevant for the (in)definiteness of an APNP is whether its referent is interpreted as a typical or atypical member of its class.

To test our hypothesis, we presented naïve participants (n=58) with various scenes consisting of four silhouetted figures optionally wearing/holding various items, which varied with respect to their (a)typicality and uniqueness. Participants were told that a remote teammate would be seeing the same figures but arranged differently. One figure would begin to flash only on the participant's screen, and s/he would direct his/her teammate to select the corresponding figure. Participants were then asked to rate the objects' typicality on a four-point scale.

Consistent with previous uniqueness-based accounts, our results show that an APNP is sensitive to the uniqueness of that NP's referent ($n = 57$, $F(1,57) = 17.21$, $p < .001$). However, when uniqueness is not satisfied, participants rely significantly on the atypicality of the referent ($t(57) = 2.22$, $p < .04$); i.e. the more **atypical** the referent (as judged by the participants themselves), the more likely it is to be realized with a definite APNP. We propose that atypical APNPs are being interpreted more as object-denoting, while typical APNPs are being interpreted more as property-denoting (Partee '87). The (in)felicity of subsequent discourse anaphora and the results of various Google searches are offered as additional evidence in support of our analysis.

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