Definiteness asymmetries and concept types: Semantic and pragmatic uniqueness

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According to Löbner (1985) all definite descriptions are construed as functional concepts. In other words, any definite noun phrase (for example, *the moon, the begin of the conference*) can be assigned exactly one referent. A crucial distinction within Löbner’s theory is that between semantic and pragmatic uniqueness. By semantic uniqueness it is meant that the reference of an NP is unambiguous for reasons independent of the context or situation (hence semantic reasons), while pragmatic uniqueness refers to those uses of NPs that refer unambiguously only due to the given context of utterance, as in, e.g., deictic or anaphoric use. The goal of the talk is to exploit this distinction in order to motivate a number of asymmetries with regard to the use or non-use of the definite article(s) in various languages.

Among the better-known examples is the absence of the article in configurational uses of (otherwise sortal) nouns as functional concepts, as in *go to school, at court, be in hospital/prison*; similarly, in the German equivalents the article is fused with the preceding prepositions as in *zur (to-DEF.DAT.FEM) Schule gehen, im (in-DEF.DAT.NON_FEM) Krankenhaus/Gefängnis sein*, whereas full article forms are required in case of pragmatic uniqueness.

The various splits one encounters can be assigned to one of the following two types:

(i) Pragmatic uniqueness is marked by the definite article, whereas semantic uniqueness is unmarked. For example, in both English and German, functional concepts are often found as bare nouns in the singular, as in *the items differ in shape, colour, and size*. As a diachronical corollary, the use of the article tends to spread from pragmatic to semantic definiteness, eventually also covering those concepts where it is of little functional load, as is the case with proper names for persons in colloquial German. Moreover, the use of demonstrative pronouns as definite articles in some West Slavic languages tends to cover precisely the contexts pragmatic uniqueness (see Breu 2002 and Scholze 2007 on Upper Sorbian).

(ii) Pragmatic and semantic uniqueness is morphosyntactically distinguished by different article forms. Lakhota with its two definite articles *ki* and *k’u* is a case in question. Likewise, the phonological contrast of weak and strong definite articles in Frisian (Ebert 1970) as well as many dialects of German (in particular, Ripuarian and Alemannic; see Schroeder 2006 on the former and Studler 2004 on the latter) can be shown to reflect the same distinction.

The talk will underpin and further elaborate on this distinction by providing case studies for each of the two kinds of splits:

– the diachrony of Georgian: In the earliest Old Georgian text, while the article occurs fairly systematically in contexts of pragmatic uniqueness (especially anaphoricity; cf.
also Boeder 1997), it is hardly found in contexts of semantic uniqueness. Only in later sources is the domain of the use of articles extended so as to occur also with underlying lexical functional concepts, where it is semantically redundant. The situation is mirrored by the later decrease of article uses: they are most stable where they are not redundant, that is, in contexts of anaphoric definiteness.

- Dutch, with its weak article forms *de* (utrum gender) and *het* (neuter) in addition to the strong forms *die* and *dat*, respectively. (The latter forms are traditionally referred to as demonstrative pronouns.) A study on the basis of selected novels reveals that the form distinction corresponds to semantic and pragmatic definiteness, respectively.

In analysing the relevant data, particular attention will be paid to more subtle cases of uniqueness such as non-lexical functional concepts (in particular, nouns preceded by ordinals or superlative adjectives), as well as definite associative anaphora (a phenomenon also known as ‘bridging’). This latter kind of definite description combines properties of pragmatic uniqueness (by virtue of anaphoricity) and semantic uniqueness (by virtue of involving a functional concept). It is therefore expected that the phenomenon gives rise to variation both between languages and within individual languages/varieties as to the use of articles (cf. also Schwarz 2008). I show that this is indeed the case, but that nevertheless the generalization emerges that languages with a split of type (i) tend to use (rather than leave out) the article, like they do in contexts of pragmatic uniqueness, whereas languages with a split of type (ii) tend to use the weak article, i.e., the one used with semantic uniqueness. It is proposed that the cross-linguistic variation in the uses of definite articles can be described in terms of the spreading along a concept hierarchy that is defined by the narrowness in the choice of possible referents.


