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Article systems between referentiality and specificity

The case of three indefinite articles in German

I aim to show that not only systems of indefinite pronouns may be quite complex, but that article systems can also express quite subtle differences with respect to their referential properties. One case in point is German which exhibits an interesting article system with three indefinite articles: (i) the unmarked indefinite article *ein* 'a(n)', (ii) the indefinite demonstrative *dieser* 'this' (similar in function to English indefinite *this* (Prince 1981, Ionin 2006) and (iii) and *son* (< *so-ein* 'such-a' (Hole & Klumpp 2000, Lenerz & Lohnstein 2005).

The German article system, roughly, exhibits a two-fold (in)definiteness contrast between the definite article *der/die/das* (with the respective plural forms) and the unmarked indefinite article *ein/eine/ein* (no form for plural). However, there is also a weak definite form (Schwarz 2008), and the two indefinite articles *dieser* and *son*, both unaccented and used primarily in informal registers. The three indefinite articles are licensed in existential contexts, one classical test for indefiniteness.

- (1) Es gibt da *einen / diesen / sonen / *den / *jeden* Typen in meinem Englischkurs...
'There is a / this / such-a / *the / * every guy in my English course...'

The three expressions can be assigned article status in German, since they are situated at the edge of the nominal or determiner phrase [DP Art [(Adj) N (RC)]]. Thus, other modifiers or determiners of the noun phrase cannot precede them (Hole & Klumpp 2000, Lenerz & Lohnstein 2005):

- (2) *ein / dieser / son* schöne(r) Mann
 ‘a / this / such-a beautiful man’
- (3) *schön *ein / dieser / son* Mann
 ‘beautiful a / this / such-a man’

According to this semantic and syntactic behavior, indefinite *dieser* and *son* can be, categorized as indefinite articles: they occupy the same position as the indefinite article *ein* and show the respective semantics.

Indefinite *dieser* and *son* appear to exhibit different referential properties compared to the unmarked indefinite article *ein*, with respect to specificity, scopal behavior, scope escaping properties, the possibility to get intermediate readings and functional reading. In the following we focus on the specificity or the scopal behavior in intensional contexts. We suppose that the unmarked indefinite article *ein* in (4) can express a specific (wide scope) or a non-specific (or narrow scope reading), while both indefinite *dieser* and *son* only express a wide-scope reading.

- (4) Eva will einen / diesen / son Film über Eliade sehen.

Eva wants to watch a/ this / such-a movie about Eliade.

ein: specific, non-specific (wide scope, narrow scope)
dieser wide scope
son wide scope

In order to confirm these intuitions we conducted a pilot experiment in form of an online judgment task in which the acceptability (“sounds good” vs. “doesn’t sound good”) of sentences including *ein*, *dieser* and *son* on either forced specific (wide-scope) or forced non-specific (narrow-scope) readings was tested. 27 native speaker of German saw sentences of the following type (3 test items in total, varying with respect to the type of indefinite expression and +/- specificity):

Non-Specific (forced narrow-scope):

- (5) Maria will *einen / diesen / son* Spanier heiraten. Sie hat aber noch keinen kennen gelernt.
 ‘Maria wants to marry a / this / such-a Spaniard. She has not met one yet.’

Specific (forced wide-scope):

- (6) Maria will *einen / diesen / son* Spanier heiraten. Er heisst Pedro und kommt aus Mallorca.
 ‘Maria wants to marry a / this / such-a Spaniard. His name is Pedro and he is from Mallorca.’

The test sentences of the type “non-specific” were used in order to check if the respective article allows for narrow-scope interpretations and the test sentences of type “specific” were used in order to check the general acceptability of wide-scope interpretations.

	non-specific	specific
<i>ein</i>	77,8%	81,5%
<i>son</i>	29,6%	51,9%
<i>dieser</i>	7,4 %	74,1%

Figure1: Degree of acceptability of the sentences in specific / non-specific contexts dependent on the respective indefinite determiner

The intuitions about the differences with respect to the referential behavior of the unmarked indefinite article *ein* and the indefinite *dieser* are confirmed: Sentences with *ein* were acceptable in both contexts, showing that *ein* is ambiguous between a specific (wide scope) and a non-

specific (narrow-scope) reading. Indefinite *dieser* cannot be used in the narrow-scope contexts, which is mirrored in the low acceptability of the sentences in those contexts (7,4%). However, the results for *son* are not so clear: First, *son* is generally not well-accepted which may be due to the fact that it is assumed to be informal, colloquial and therefore “not-correct”. Furthermore, *son* in narrow-scope context was accepted by roughly a third of the participants which leads the conclusion that it allows for those interpretations, at least for those informants that find it acceptable in general.

The preliminary picture can be summarized as follows: The unmarked indefinite article shows specificity contrasts (expressed by the free variation of scope), indefinite *dieser* behaves like the “referential indefinites” of Fodor & Sag (1982), i.e. as direct referential expression. *Son* seems to have two readings, a referential reading like indefinite *dieser* and a “concept” reading, where it refers to a general concept (of being a Spaniard), rather than to an individual. We aim to support and refine these assumptions with data from a large-scale follow up experiment in which we will investigate the referential behavior of the three expressions with respect to (i) specificity, (ii) dependency and co-variation with extensional universal operators, (iii) scope islands and (iv) contexts that favor functional reading.

References:

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Studierende und andere Interessierte sind herzlich willkommen.