On some supposed counterexamples to a uniqueness-based theory of definiteness

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1. Aims

- To show that Hawkins' (1978, 1991) P-set theory of definiteness can profitably be re-expressed in consistently relevance-theoretic terms,[1] and that this version of the theory is complementary to that of Löbner (1985, 2011).
- To explore the consequences for this kind of uniqueness-based theory of definiteness of two apparent classes of counterexample:

  ➢ Cases of P-set presupposition failure:

  (1) Have you heard *the news*?!

  ➢ A particular type of 'weak definite' (label due to Poesio 1994):

  (2) He came to *the bank of a river*.

2. Hawkins on definiteness

(3) "*The* conventionally implicates that there is some subset of entities, {P}, in the universe of discourse which is mutually manifest to speaker and hearer on-line and within which definite referents exist and are unique."
(Hawkins 1991: 414)

Main advantage:

- ➢ Captures the insights of both major camps on the meaning of definiteness (**familiarity-identifiability** and **uniqueness**) without the obvious empirical inadequacy of simplistic versions of either, as in the case of, e.g.:

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[1] Relevance theory is based on a technical definition of 'relevance', whereby the relevance of an utterance to an addressee is in proportion to its positive cognitive effects, and in inverse proportion to the effort required to process it (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 265–6).

(4) *X* is a great book. *The author* is unknown.

Two problems:

➢ What is a P-set?
➢ If *the* gives rise to the conventional implicature suggested by Hawkins, does it have a distinct 'logical semantics'?

P-sets:

- A subset of the set of assumptions and entities that are mutually manifest (MM) to speaker and hearer at the moment of a given utterance.
- Mutual manifestness: "A fact [or an assumption] is *manifest* to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true". If two or more individuals share a set of facts or assumptions, and it is manifest to each of them that they share them, then these facts or assumptions are MM (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 39–42).
- In addition to their MM-ness in general, it will also be MM that the assumptions and entities that make up this subset have some property in common, so that they form a (MM-ly) natural class.
- This property could be of a number of different types:

  ▪ Membership of the set of entities referred to in previous discourse, e.g.:

    (5) I saw an odd-looking bird in the garden yesterday. I looked *the bird* up in my guide this morning.

  ▪ Membership of the set of entities associated by general knowledge with some 'trigger', e.g.:

    (6) A man drove past our house in *a car*. *The exhaust fumes* were terrible.

- The purpose of a speaker and hearer both accessing one of indefinitely many P-sets potentially available at a given time is to ensure that that P-set contains just one entity that MM-ly has the property predicated of it by the definite NP in question (i.e. the referent of the NP is "unique" in that P-set).
- Accessing the same P-set is achieved in accordance with the 'presumption of optimal relevance': "the [utterance] is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences" (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 270).
- I.e., the most accessible P-set containing a unique referent, such that processing utterance in this way satisfies the hearer's expectations of relevance, is the correct P-set for the hearer to select.

How to characterize the semantics of definiteness:

- Presumably by analogy with the Gricean analysis of connectives such as *but*, Hawkins divides the meaning of definiteness marking into a logical component, which he says, following Russell (1905), is "existence and uniqueness" (1991: 410), and the conventional implicature in (3).
- Evident redundancy in the duplication of "existence and uniqueness" in the conventional implicature…
- …and is "existence" really part of the semantics of definiteness, rather than merely something that can (usually) be assumed of a referent given the Communicative Principle ("Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance"; Sperber & Wilson 1995: 260)?
- A more efficient approach would be to combine the two elements into a single *procedural* meaning:

  (7) *The [+definite] status of a definite NP encodes a procedure indicating to the hearer that there is a unique referent of that NP within some MM subset of assumptions and concepts, {P}.*

- ['Concepts' rather than 'entities', since reference can be to more than just entities, and, from a representationalist cognitive perspective, even reference to entities is via concepts of those entities.]
- This formulation brings Hawkins' original insight into line with recent thinking on the role of procedural encoding beyond the domain of discourse particles (e.g. Hedley 2007, Jary 2008).
- And it retains the ability to account for the referential properties of a wide range of morphosyntactically definite NPs.
- Also complementary to a version of Löbner's (2011) concept type theory of determination which acknowledges the role of pragmatic inferencing in establishing 'what is said':
- Gives an account of how definite NPs with sortal common noun phrases undergo 'Level 2 shift' to express individual concepts.
- But what about (1) and (2)?

3. Presupposition failure (with and without accommodation)

(8) Have you heard *the news*?!
(9) I have *some news* to tell you.

Is (8) problematic for the theory in (7)?

➢ It is typically uttered precisely when the speaker suspects that the P-set within which the referent of *the news* is unique **is not mutually manifest** (cf. (9)).

Two possible responses to (8):

(10)   a. Yes.
       b. What news?

This illustrates two important points:

➢ Speakers are routinely able to misrepresent the mutual cognitive environment of the interlocutors for specific rhetorical aims.
➢ Where this involves definiteness marking, we can only properly understand the nature of the misrepresentation in terms of a theory such as (7) that takes into account the mutual cognitive environment.

Presupposition failure with accommodation:

An utterance can involve a presupposition failure but still succeed if the addressee is able to adjust the mutual cognitive environment appropriately after the fact "quietly and without fuss" (cf. von Fintel 2008).

(11)   [said to a stranger at a Formula One race]
       I wish I could drive *my Mercedes* that fast.

The possessive presupposition in (11) ('the speaker owns a Mercedes car') can be straightforwardly accommodated (added to the mutual cognitive environment) by the addressee after the fact.

(12)   [said to someone unacquainted with John and his possessions]
       My friend John doesn't like me any more because I broke *his plate*.
(13)   Huh, what plate?

- Accommodation in (12) is difficult or impossible. The definite *his plate* presupposes (wrongly in this context) that the addressee can access a P-set containing a unique referent for 'John's plate'.
- There is no simple assumption (e.g. 'John has one or more plates', or 'John has exactly one plate') that will allow the addressee to construct an appropriate P-set via accommodation.
- The addressee may choose to point out the presupposition failure with a response such as (13), or he may choose not to. Either way, P-set uniqueness is a non-negotiable part of the semantics of *his plate*.

Lyons' (1999: 263) example, supposedly problematic for the theory in (3) / (7):

(14)   [Uttered in a context where the addressee is unaware that the speaker employs a butler]
I'll get *the butler* to show you out.

- Examples such as (14) are easily accommodated in the same way as, e.g., (11).
- As such, they are rather common. But this does not alter the fact that they involve presupposition failure with accommodation.
- They are not, therefore, counterexamples to (3) / (7).
- But several of the examples Hawkins (1978: 112–138) himself gives **also** involve presupposition failure with accommodation:

(15)   [Sign on the gate of a house]
Beware of *the dog*.
(16)   [What's wrong with Bill?]
Oh, *the (/a) woman he went out with last night* was nasty to him.

- Hawkins (1978: 113) suggests that "there is an element of informativeness" about examples like (15).
- This is correct. As with (8), this is an instance of the speaker drawing attention to the existence of the referent by deliberating treating it as unique within a MM P-set, even though it evidently is not.
- Hawkins (1978: 136) also points out that definite and indefinite versions of the NP in (16) are "pragmatically equivalent".
- Again this seems correct and makes sense if the definite version once again involves presupposition failure with accommodation.
- But Hawkins nowhere mentions accommodation, and therefore contradicts himself by arguing that such examples are straightforwardly captured by his theory, when earlier (1978: 95) he maintains that definiteness involves a presupposition, not an assertion, of existence.[2]

Conclusion: (3) / (7) is necessary in order to understand why accommodation is possible in only a subset of cases of P-set presupposition failure.

4. Relational weak definites

(17)   He came to *the bank of a river*.
(18)   I stubbed *my toe* on *the corner of a table*.
(19)   I squeezed *my neighbour's thigh*.
(20)   *The son of a known felon* is coming to town.

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[2] Hawkins (1978) was wiser than Hawkins (1991) in this respect!

None of these examples involve P-set uniqueness (or familiarity/identifiability).

Alienable (non-relational) possessives <u>must</u> involve P-set uniqueness, however:

(21) I broke *John's plate*.
(22) *My golf club* was stolen.

Three attempts to rehabilitate relational weak definites:

1. Poesio's (1994) 'anchoring' approach depends on the premise that relational weak definites only occur with indefinite possessor NPs. This is **false**, as pointed out by Barker (2005), cf. (19).

2. Barker (2005) offers a formalization, but no explanation at all:

> "Therefore, with some reluctance, I must assume that the reason possessive weak definites don't violate uniqueness is because the uniqueness requirement simply can't apply to relations." (Barker 2005: 110)

3. Löbner's (1985: 304–7, 2011: 298) attempt to rehabilitate relational weak definites depends on their being used in the context of an abstract situation or 'configuration'.

It is true that all the examples he gives (as well as (17)–(19)) "are not really referential, except for the respective subject NPs" Löbner (1985: 305), but this is **not a necessary condition** for a weak interpretation of a definite-marked relational noun (cf. (20)):

(23) *The uncle* [<u>Kamil Kaplan</u>] of the baby thrown from a blazing building in Germany has spoken of the "life or death" decision he took to save the boy. […]Yesterday, the eight-month-old was being looked after by *his uncle*, <u>Erdal Calar</u>. (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-512219/Uncle-miracle-baby-hurled-blazing-flat-I-kissed-let-fall.html)

In fact, that a relational noun is used configurationally is also **not a sufficient condition** for a weak definite interpretation:

(24) a. The defender broke *the leg of the other team's star striker.*
      b. ?The defender broke *the rib of the other team's star striker.*
(25) a. He crashed his bike into *the door of a parked car.*
      b. ?Cutting *the spoke of a bicycle wheel* is a serious matter.
(26) ?People often trip over *the root of the tree outside my house.*

(24)b, (25)b and (26) cannot be used weakly, because, although these nouns are relational, they have **low inalienability**, due to the inherent numerosity of the sets they belong to and their resulting greater conceptual independence from the possessor (cf. Heine 1997).

Löbner (2011: 307) predicts that, because **definite** determination of a singular relational noun is <u>incongruent</u> according to his theory, it ought to be <u>less frequent</u> than **indefinite** determination.

But this is not borne out, at least for some of the most commonly attested relational nouns with explicit possessors in an *of*-genitive construction, e.g.:

Relevant hits in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English / British National Corpus*:

'the brother of the':   89 / 25
'a brother of the':   9 / 7
'the brother of a':   32 / 6
'a brother of a':   4 / 1

'the parent of a':   89 / 7
'a parent of a':   53 / 4
'the parent of the':   25 / 8
'a parent of the':   2 / 2

So perhaps relational weak definites aren't semantically definite after all, despite their morphosyntactic appearance (cf. *the more, the merrier*).

But then how do they come to be marked definite?

> ➢ Grammaticalization of articles (at least partly) driven by processing considerations
> ➢ An article rapidly and unambiguously constructs a (grand)mother NP node (cf. Hawkins forthcoming)
> ➢ Referential properties of articles a by-product of the material recruited for this purpose
> ➢ Therefore clashes between these separate semantic and syntactic processing functions not unexpected.

E.g.:

(27)   ?I then came across *a side*, which turned out to be *the side of a mountain*.

Why is (27) odd?

> ➢ An indefinite NP invokes the category described by the determined noun and contributes some token of that category to the proposition expressed.
> ➢ More linguistic material can then express any relations obtaining between this token and other entities, but the semantics of the indefinite article is neutral to any such specific relations.

> ➢ In fact, the indefinite article presupposes that the category invoked by the noun it modifies has some independent reality.
> ➢ But the category invoked by a relational noun cannot exist independently of some other category to which it is related.

A similar example with a slightly more independent relational noun:

(28)   I then felt *a hand*, which turned out to be *the hand of the person sleeping next to me*.

With a highly independent relational noun:

(29)   a. I then came across *a feather.* [independent use fine]
        b. ?It turned out to be *the feather of a rare South American parrot.*
           [weak reading unavailable]

The crucial difference between definite and indefinite reference here is that the referent of an NP marked definite is necessarily evoked in the context of a P-set in which it is unique.

> ➢ A relation to other entities is an inherent part of the (procedural) semantics of definiteness.
> ➢ Therefore the semantics of relational nouns is more compatible with definite than indefinite reference (but the entities that relational nouns refer to are no more or less likely to be unique within a P-set than the denotations of other nouns).

This is irrelevant in cases of inalienable possession expressed with a synthetic genitive as in (19), where the definiteness of the head remains unspecified:

(19)   I squeezed *my neighbour's thigh*.

The head of a possessive construction with an *of*-genitive, however, must be marked with an NP constructor in the form of an article.

> ➢ The NP-constructor of choice is *the* thanks to its inherently greater semantic compatibility with relational nouns,
> ➢ But its referential properties are lost as a result and it becomes unspecified for definiteness in the context of relational nouns…
> ➢ … but not all relational nouns: ones, like those in (24)–(26) and in (29), which are conceptually highly independent of their possessors must be unique in an MM P-set when marked definite, since there is no clash with indefinite determination.

5. Summary

- Hawkins' theory of definiteness re-expressed in relevance-theoretic terms accurately captures the semantics of definiteness.
- I have argued that two classes of what look like exceptions to the theory are not:
  - o P-set presupposition failures (section 3)
  - o Relational weak definites (section 4)
- Genuine definite NPs always have a semantic requirement for uniqueness in a MM P-set. Definite reference in the absence of an appropriate MM P-set is infelicitous, but such utterances may be judged acceptable to the extent that the addressee is willing and able to accommodate.
- Relational weak definites arise through the semantic clash between indefinite reference and (strongly inalienable) relational nouns that occurs when NP-constructors in the form of articles become obligatory.
- Neither class constitutes a true counterexample to the theory defended here. In fact, both receive a principled explanation in terms of this theory.

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