Inherent vs. accidental uniqueness in definite descriptions

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Background Recent semantic literature has accumulated evidence that a single language can use more than one kind of definite descriptions. Most authors (Schwarz 2009, 2013, Arkoh & Matthewson 2013, or Jenks 2015) distinguish between UNIQUENESS- and FAMILIARITY-based definites (but Barlew 2014 argued that the notion of SALIENCE might also be independently needed). The semantic division receives support from two types of differential formal markings: (i) the distinction between weak and strong definite articles (e.g., German, Hausa), (1-a), and (ii) between bare NPs and NPs with determiners/demonstratives (e.g., Akan, Bulu, Thai, Czech), (1-b).

(1)   a.   Hans ging zu **-m**   / zu **dem**   Haus.   (German; Schwarz 2009)
           Hans went to -the$_{\text{weak}}$ / to the$_{\text{strong}}$ house
           'Hans went to the house.'
      b.   Honza to dal na $\emptyset$ / ten   stůl.   (Czech)
           Honza it put on   / DEM table
           'Honza put it on the table.'

Proposal I propose that uniqueness comes in two types: INHERENT and ACCIDENTAL. Given a resource situation s_r (relative to which a definite description is interpreted; see Schwarz 2009), an entity (the denotation of a definite description) is INHERENTLY UNIQUE if it is unique in s_r and in every prototypical counterpart of s_r; an entity is ACCIDENTALLY UNIQUE if it is unique in s_r, but not in every prototypical counterpart of s_r. The notion of a "prototypical situation" comes close to Fillmore's (1976) "frame" and is (perhaps necessarily) somewhat vague and dependent on the utterance situation and common ground. I provide a semi-formal definition of prototypicality in (2) (assuming that prototypical counterpart situations are epistemically accessible and possibly further restricted by a stereotypical ordering source). To give some examples: prototypically, a town (a "town situation") has a unique mayor, a classroom a unique blackboard, an office desk a unique computer, etc.

(2)   For any s, s' is a prototypical counterpart of s (PROTOTYPE$(s)(s')$) iff s' is a minimal situation that qualifies for the same name as s.

The lexical entries of the two hypothesized kinds of definite determiners are provided below. I assume that D$_{\text{inh(erent)}}$ ≈ weak article in German / covert iota in articleless languages and that D$_{\text{acc(idental)}}$ ≈ strong article / demonstrative.

(3) $[\![\text{D}_{\text{inh}}]\!] = \lambda s_r.\lambda P : |P(s_r)| = 1 \wedge \forall s[\text{PROTOTYPE}(s_r)(s) \rightarrow |P(s)| = 1.\iota x[P(s_r)(x)]$

(4) $[\![\text{D}_{\text{acc}}]\!] = \lambda s_r.\lambda P : |P(s_r)| = 1 \wedge \neg\forall s[\text{PROTOTYPE}(s_r)(s) \rightarrow |P(s)| = 1.\iota x[P(s_r)(x)]$

Basic predictions The proposal predicts that weak articles / bare NPs will be used in (small or large) situation uniqueness cases on the condition that uniqueness holds in the prototypical counterparts of the resource situation. This condition is satisfied by the examples standardly used to illustrate situational definites, e.g., 'the prime minister' (s_r: a country), 'the steering whell' (s_r: a car), 'the brain' (s_r: an animal). While certainly a matter of closer analysis, the basic prediction for anaphoric uses seems to be that they involve strong articles / demonstratives. The reason for this is that the resource situation includes the discourse situation and the uniqueness of an entity in discourse is always accidental (in fact, the question is whether there is any prototypical discourse situation involving some unique referent at all).

Strong articles in situational uniqueness cases The UNIQUENESS–FAMILIARITY approach seems to predict that any kind of situational uniqueness gives rise to the use of weak articles (or bare NPs). The present INHERENT–ACCIDENTAL approach, on the other hand, draws a line within situational uniqueness, since not all situational uniqueness is inherent. The contrast between (5-a) and (5-b) shows just that. In both cases, the resource situation corresponds to the addressee's desk. In both cases, the definite description under consideration ('the computer' and 'the book') denotes an entity that is unique in that situation. In neither case need the utterance be accompanied by a gesture. (Note also: The degree of salience for both entities might very well be the same.) Yet, despite all these similarities, a bare NP is clearly preferred in (5-a), while a demonstrative is preferred in (5-b). This contrast is predicted by the present approach insofar as a unique computer is an inherent part of the prototypical addressee's desk situation, but a unique book is not (in fact, since prototypical situations are minimal, a prototypical office desk situation will have no book in it). The same empirical situation replicates in German, only with a weak article used in the translation of (5-a) and a strong article used in the translation of (5-b) (to be demonstrated in the talk).

(5)   "Addressee's desk situation"
   a. *You are searching your desk for your pencil and I can see that it is next to the computer that is on your desk:*
       Ta   tužka (co   hledáš)   je vedle   (# **toho**) počítače.
       DEM pencil   that look.for.2SG is next.to   DEM   computer
       'The pencil is lying next to the computer.' [no pointing involved]
   b. *You are searching your desk for your pencil and I can see that it is next to the book that is on your desk:*
       Ta   tužka (co   hledáš)   je vedle   #(**té**)   knížky.
       DEM pencil   that look.for.2SG is next.to   DEM   book
       'The pencil is lying next to the book.' [no pointing involved]

Kind-denoting definite descriptions Singular definite descriptions can be used to refer to kinds, as in *The dodo is extinct* (see, e.g., Krifka et al. 1995). Two further generalizations are relevant here: First, unless anaphoric, kind-denoting definites are obligatorily accompanied by weak definite articles / expressed by bare NPs. Second, there is no known language that has a dedicated kind-article. The present inherent–accidental approach to definiteness provides a rationale for why these two generalizations should hold. In particular, kind-related uniqueness seems like a natural sub-instance of inherent uniqueness because a kind is always unique in prototypical counterpart situations (worlds) of the relevant resource situation (the actual world).

References
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