

Weak definites

Linguistic evidence for cognitive constraints

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Look ahead


- I. some observations on German contracted
Prepositional Phrases and their referential status
- II. some observations on English Weak Definites and
their restrictions
- III. an attempt to explain these observations via context-
dependent identity conditions


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I. German Prepositional Phrases & Contractions	
<p>German PPs generally have a structure like English PPs, but for some prepositions they also permit what looks like a <u>contraction of preposition and definite determiner</u>:</p> <p>(1) a. <i>Maria ging <u>{zu dem / zum}</u> Supermarkt</i> b. <i>Maria went <u>to the</u> supermarket.</i></p> <p>(2) a. <i>Maria stand <u>{an dem / am}</u> Fenster</i> b. <i>Maria was standing <u>at the</u> window.</i></p> <p>We speak of contracted PPs (cPPs) and regular PPs (rPPs).</p> <p>Note that both cPPs and rPPs translate into the same English equivalents.</p>	
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I a. Distributional restrictions on cPPs	
<p>cPPs) are <u>not always interchangeable</u> with rPPs.</p> <p>(3) <i>Peter sitzt <u>{in dem /*im}</u> Auto, das er kaufen will.</i> [Peter is sitting <u>in the</u> car that he wants to buy]</p> <p>(4) <i>Nächste Woche ist Peter <u>{im /*in dem}</u> Urlaub.</i> [Next week Peter is <u>on holiday</u>]</p>	
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I b. A semantic difference between cPPS & rPPs	
<p>The restriction on interchangeability hints at a <u>semantic difference</u>, which is brought out under VP ellipsis:</p> <p>(5) a. <i>Peter sitzt <u>in dem</u> Auto, und Karl auch.</i> [Peter is sitting <u>in the</u> car and Karl too]</p> <p>is true only if Peter and Karl are sitting in the <u>same</u> car</p> <p>b. <i>Peter sitzt <u>im</u> Auto, und Karl auch.</i> [Peter is sitting <u>in the</u> car and Karl too]</p> <p>is true if P & K are sitting either in the <u>same or in different</u> cars</p>	
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I c. Different referential status of cPPs & rPPs	
<p>cPPs cannot easily <u>pick up previously introduced discourse referents</u>; they behave like indefinites and unlike definites:</p> <p>(6) <i>Am Ulmenweg ist ein neuer Supermarkt mit einer herrlichen Käsetheke. Warst du schon {bei dem / #<u>beim</u> / #bei einem} Supermarkt?</i></p> <p><i>There's a new supermarket on Elm Street with a great cheese counter. Have you already been to {the / #a} supermarket?</i></p>	
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I d1. Referentiality explains difference in VP ellipsis	
<p>The referential status of cPPs explains their behaviour under VP ellipsis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The <u>rPP version</u> in (5a) ascribes to Peter and Karl the <u>same relation to the same discourse referent</u> (a specific contextually determinate car), while ▪ the <u>cPP version</u> in (5b) ascribes to Peter and Karl the <u>same property</u> <p>(5) a. <i>Peter sitzt <u>in dem</u> Auto, und Karl auch.</i> $\lambda x.SIT(x, IN(\iota y.CAR^c y))$ Peter ...</p> <p>b. <i>Peter sitzt <u>im</u> Auto, und Karl auch.</i> $\lambda x.SIT(IN_CAR)(x)$ Peter ...</p>	
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I d2. Referentiality explains distributional difference	
<p>The referential status of cPPs explains the lack of their interchangeability with rPPs:</p> <p>(3) <i>Peter sitzt <u>{in dem /*im}</u> Auto, das er kaufen will.</i> [Peter is sitting <u>in the</u> car that he wants to buy]</p> <p>The relative clause would <u>restrict the reference</u> to a particular car; but since in the cPP variant there is no referential term that could be restricted, the cPP variant of (3) is semantically odd.</p> <p>In (4) the rPP variant would require reference to a particular holiday – which is not a plausible interpretation.</p> <p>(4) <i>Nächste Woche ist Peter <u>{im /*in dem}</u> Urlaub.</i> [Next week Peter is <u>on holiday</u>]</p>	
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II c. English WDs: meaning enrichment		
<p>Carlson et al. 2006 hint that weak definites, like bare singulars, bring about <u>meaning enrichment</u> – because they designate some typical or habitual activity.</p>		
<p><i>being in prison</i> (unlike <i>being in the garden shed</i>) is not just being in the location, but more: being incarcerated.</p>		
<p><i>going to the cinema</i> (unlike <i>going to the desk</i>) on the modifier reading means going there with the usual film-watching intentions.</p>		
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II c. English WDs: meaning enrichment		
<p>The denotation of phrases like <i>going to the cinema</i> thus cannot be the result of a merely compositional process:</p>		
<p>There are meaning components to the modifier or weak definite reading of <i>going to the cinema</i> that are not the result of composing the meanings of <i>go</i> + <i>to</i> + <i>cinema</i>.</p>		
<p>Also <u>indefinites</u>, which are otherwise truth-conditionally identical to weak definites do <u>not</u> bring in meaning enrichment: <i>going to a cinema</i> just means going to a cinema.</p>		
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III a. English WDs: concepts required		
<p>Enriched interpretations of WDs require VP denotations that abstract from the referential identity of the denotation of the (prepositional) object NP:</p>		
<p>(15) a. Fred <u>went to the shop</u>, and Alice did, too. (same or different shop)</p>		
<p>requires a <u>concept of going to the shop</u> that <u>abstracts from the particular referent of <i>the shop</i></u> to permit the weak reading.</p>		
<p>b. Fred <u>went to the desk</u>, and Alice did, too. (same desk only)</p>		
<p>would similarly require a <u>concept of going to the desk</u> to permit the weak reading – but normally <u>no such concept is available</u>. So we are here stuck with only the referential reading.</p>		
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III a. German WDs: concepts required		
<p>Same for German WDs:</p>		
<p>(16) a. Fred <u>las die Zeitung</u> und Anna auch. (same or different paper)</p>		
<p>requires a <u>concept of reading the newspaper</u> for a weak definite reading – which is available; hence the ambiguity.</p>		
<p>b. Fred <u>las das Buch</u> und Anna auch. (same book only)</p>		
<p>requires a <u>concept of reading the book</u> for a weak definite reading – which is normally not available.</p>		
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III b. German cPPs: concepts required	
<p>Same for German cPPs, which have only the WD reading:</p> <p>(3) <i>Peter sitzt <u>{in dem /*im}</u> Auto, das er kaufen will.</i> [Peter is sitting <u>in the</u> car that he wants to buy]</p> <p>requires a <u>concept of sitting in the car that one wants to buy</u> (with no reference to a particular car!) – which is not easily available.</p> <p>(3) <i>Peter sitzt <u>{in dem / im}</u> Auto.</i></p> <p>only requires a <u>concept of sitting in the car</u> – which is available; hence the cPP with its weak reading is permissible.</p>	
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III c. WDs: making concepts available	
<p>Lexical restrictions on WD readings are restrictions on <u>the ease with which the required concepts are available</u>.</p> <p>Let's test this for</p> <p>(15) b. Fred <u>went to the desk</u>, and Alice did, too. (same desk only)</p> <p>Suppose we have this game with competing teams of people who carry out various problem solving tasks and deposit a written report of their result at a desk assigned to their group, etc.</p> <p>Obviously, in this context (15b) would also have the reading on which Fred and Alice went to different desks, namely those of their respective group.</p> <p>The context makes a concept of <u>going to the desk</u> available!</p>	
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III d. WDs: new identities required		
<p>What is required for the new concept, and what the game context does, is</p> <p style="text-align: center;">establish new situation-specific <u>identity conditions</u> for “the desk”, under which all desks that fulfil the same role in the game <u>count as identical</u>.</p> <p>This <u>role-in-the-game identity</u> of desks differs from the default <u>physical identity</u> of desks.</p> <p>Similarly, when you play the everyday game of <u>going to the shop</u>, the identity of “the shop” shifts to the <u>more abstract role-in-the-game identity</u> – which differs from physical identity.</p>		
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III d. WDs: contextual types		
<p>WDs, including German cPPs,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ differ from regular definites by <u>not being discourse referential</u> (we saw that they can't function anaphorically). ▪ Instead they refer to what may be called “<u>contextual types</u>” (which is not a form of discourse reference!) ▪ are straightforwardly definite (with the usual presuppositions). <p>Contextual types are <u>not kinds</u>, as in generic kind reference, but something vaguely similar and <u>restricted to contexts that enable the relevant identity conditions</u>.</p>		
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III d. WDs: types & meaning enrichment	
<p>The meaning enrichment that comes with weak definites is a direct consequence of the establishment of the types:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">You learn to count as identical all (physical) shops that are <u>alike with respect to your going there and doing your shopping</u>.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">You learn to count as identical – in the game – all (physical) desks that are <u>alike with respect to your going there to deposit your group's results</u>.</p> <p>That's why there is no meaning enrichment in the otherwise truth-conditionally identical indefinites: Indefinites presuppose neither discourse referents nor contextual types.</p>	
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Summing up	
<p>Unlike Carlson et al. (2006) we are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not assuming <u>lexical restrictions</u> for the availability of weak definite readings, but ▪ we believe that what looks like lexical restrictions are productive <u>conceptual restrictions</u>, and, furthermore that ▪ these restrictions depend on, and hence can be manipulated by, the choice of context. 	
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Thank you!