

## Weak definites and reference to kinds

Ana Aguilar Guevara and Joost Zwarts

*Utrecht University*

In the analysis of definite articles one problematic class of examples is known as *weak definites* (Carlson & Sussman 2005). They do not seem to have the uniqueness presupposition typical of definites, given their felicity in contexts in which more than one object can satisfy their descriptive content (see also Birner & Ward 1994; Löbner 1985):

- (1) (Context: Lola sitting on the sofa of a waiting room reading a newspaper. There are some more newspapers lying next to her.) Lola is reading *the newspaper*.

Carlson & Sussman mention a range of properties (“#” indicates that the definite does not have a weak reading). Weak definites allow ‘sloppy’ readings in VP-ellipsis (2), take ‘narrow scope’ (3), occur only with a restricted class of nouns (4) and a restricted class of governors (5), while modification is also limited (6). They often show an enriched meaning (7). They don’t occur in subject position, unless with a generic reading (8).

- (2) Lola went to the hospital and Alice did too. (Different hospitals are possible)  
(3) Every boxer was sent to the hospital. (every boxer > the hospital)  
(4) You should see the doctor vs #the surgeon.  
(5) Sally checked the calendar vs read #the calendar.  
(6) Lola is in #the big hospital vs. the psychiatric hospital.  
(7) Eva called the doctor = Eva called a doctor + asked for medical assistance.  
(8) #The newspaper was stolen. vs. The newspaper brings many people their daily news.

In the literature there are only a few informal suggestions about how this phenomenon can be analyzed (non-uniqueness, semantic incorporation, idioms), but these fail to take into account the role of the definite article and the productivity of weak definites. The first option should be to derive the meaning of sentences with weak definites compositionally while preserving the uniqueness presupposition of the definite article. Two possible approaches then present themselves: i) weak definites refer to ordinary entities that are unique with respect to an appropriately restricted domain, ii) they refer to unique abstract objects with concrete realizations in the sentence situation.

In Schwarz’s (2009) situational uniqueness account a definite picks out its uniquely identifiable referent from a *minimal situation*, either the *topic situation* (that the sentence is about) or a *contextually salient* situation. The topic situation corresponds to an implicit question that the sentence would be answering:

- (9) Lola took the train.  
(10) Topic situation of (9) ≈ ‘How did Lola travel from Amsterdam to Utrecht last morning?’

Among all the ways to travel from Amsterdam to Utrecht last morning, there must then be one and only one train which Lola took. However, the problem is that (9) is also true if Lola actually took *two* trains (i.e. she made a transfer). The alternative, that *the train* has unique reference with respect to a contextually salient situation, also does not work here, because no such situation is

really necessary for (9) to be felicitous. In general, the problem with a situation-based approach is that in most cases the kind of minimal situations that give unique referents for ordinary definites can not be naturally assumed for weak definites.

We therefore assume that a weak definite is unique because it refers to one abstract object. More specifically, we propose that a weak definite like *the newspaper* or *the hospital* refers to a well-established kind, just like a singular definite generic like *the chinchilla* does (Carlson 1977, Krifka 2004), but unlike bare plurals, which refer to maximal entities. Treating weak definites in this respect like definite generics explains why they are lexically restricted (4) and resist modification (6) and why they can be used as generic subjects (8). Furthermore, weak definites are ‘generic’ in the sense that they are involved in expressing general, stereotypical patterns.

The difference between weak definites and definite generics lies in the predicates that apply to them. While definite generics are the argument of gnomic or inherently kind-level predicates (*has a long neck, died out*), predicates selecting weak definites are defined by a lexical rule taking an object-level two-place predicate P (like *read, check, be in, go to, take*) and defining an enriched kind-level interpretation for P, on the basis of certain conventionalized stereotypical properties:

- (11) If for a kind  $k$  and a predicate  $P$  applying to realizations  $x_i$  of  $k$ , it is typically the case that for an agent  $a$ ,  $\llbracket P \rrbracket(a, x_i)$  implies additional stereotypical properties  $E$ , then  $P$  has the following additional interpretation:  
 $\lambda x_k \lambda y \exists x_i [R(x_i, x_k) \ \& \ P(y, x_i) \ \& \ E(y, x_k)]$ , where  $R$  is Carlson’s realization operator and  $E$  is the sum of all enrichments for  $y$  and  $x_k$ .

For example, when someone is in a realization of a certain kind of institution (like a hospital or a shop), then typically this person will be there as a patient undergoing treatment or a customer buying goods (cf. Stvan 1998). This stereotypical regularity allows *be in* (but also *go to*) and *take* to be lifted to kind-selecting predicates, for example:

- (12)  $\lambda x_k \lambda y \exists x_i [R(x_i, x_k) \ \& \ \text{be-located-in}(y, x_i) \ \& \ \text{active-in-institution}(y, x_k)]$   
 $\lambda x_k \lambda y \exists x_i [R(x_i, x_k) \ \& \ \text{take}(y, x_i) \ \& \ \text{use-as-transportation}(y, x_k)]$

The  $\exists$  is part of the derived verb and therefore takes narrowest scope, accounting for (2) and (3). The realization relation  $R$  allows sums as realizations (e.g. two trains in (9)). Finally, not all predicate-kind combinations have developed the kind of stereotypicalities that allow (11) to apply; *check + calendar* has, but *read + calendar* hasn’t and hence the contrast in (5). In this way, a kind-based analysis allows us to explain how language through weak definites can make reference at a more abstract and stereotypical level.

**References:** BIRNER & WARD, 1994: *Uniqueness, Familiarity, and the Definite Article in English*, BLS 20. CARLSON & SUSSMAN, 2005: *Seemingly indefinite definites*. In Kepsar & Reis (eds.) *Linguistic Evidence*. Berlin: de Gruyter. CARLSON, 1977: *Reference to kinds in English*, PhD thesis, UMass. KRIFKA, 2004: *Bare NPs: Kind-referring, Indefinites, Both, or Neither?* In Bonami & Hofherr (eds.), *Empirical Issues in Formal Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 5. LÖBNER, 1985: *Definites*. *Journal of Semantics* 4; SCHWARZ, 2009: *Two Types of Definites in Natural Language* Ph.D. thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst. STVAN (1998). *The Semantics and Pragmatics of Bare Singular Noun Phrases*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Northwestern University.