

# Definiteness and English Prenominal Possessives

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Much of the recent work on English possessives has taken the prenominal possessive construction ("X's Y") to be inherently definite.<sup>1</sup> But there are widespread counterexamples:

- (1) We're going out tonight because **Jane's old friend** is in town.
- (2) **Oscar's finger** got bitten off by a parrot.
- (3) **Your car's headlight** is out.

*Prima facie*, the felicitous use of each of these NPs requires neither the uniqueness nor the discourse-familiarity of its referent. In particular, we experience no sense of contradiction or incompatibility between the prenominal possessive construction and our background beliefs that people have multiple great-grandfathers, fingers, and old friends, and cars more than one headlight. Supporting this intuition, each can be replaced by a postnominal possessive with indefinite article (e.g. **an old friend of Jane's**) with little change in meaning, while none can be felicitously replaced by a postnominal possessive with definite article.

Several semanticists have recognized the invalidity of attributing definiteness to prenominal possessives across the board, and have attempted to generalize the (potentially) non-definite nominals in terms of various structural and lexical phenomena. I believe that these accounts frequently mistake contextual (pragmatic) influences in their data for evidence about the prenominal possessive construction itself. Against this view, I argue that a satisfactory account of the referential properties of prenominal possessives will appeal to highly specific aspects of the way particular possessors, possessees, and their relationships are represented conceptually. I regard this as yet another aspect of the generally acknowledged semantic flexibility of the possessive relation.

There are several different ways in which definiteness is understood. I adopt what I take to be a fairly typical pragmatic conception: a nominal is definite iff its felicity is associated with its profiling one and only one maximally salient referent. I hold no strong belief as to whether familiarity can on some level be reduced to uniqueness (e.g. Abbott, 1999) or uniqueness to familiarity, but they are at least deeply intertwined. I essentially agree with von Stechow's (1995) position that "[t]he general function of the definiteness [sic] lies neither in uniqueness nor in anaphorical linkage or functional use but rather in the very property of referring to a salient object."

The linguistic phenomena described as uniqueness and familiarity both seem to reflect general cognitive abilities: just as we can search for a missing object by its

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Partee and Borschev (1998) give "John's team" the formal analysis  $\iota z[\text{team}(z) \ \& \ R_i(\text{John})(z)]$ , where  $\iota$  is "a definite description operator which applies to an open sentence to produce a term which denotes the unique entity which satisfies the open sentence, if there is one and only one such entity, and otherwise fails to denote anything."

prominent features (e.g. looking for red things) or by restricting our search domain (e.g. to our bedroom), so we can cause a nominal to profile a unique referent by adding descriptive content or by working within a domain established by discourse or extralinguistic context. The two mechanisms, of course, are not either-or, but regularly work together in rather complicated ways. In example (4), a fairly sophisticated definite description is built upon a domain (things in Boston) made salient by the preceding discourse. In (5), an incomplete description is filled out by extralinguistic context (the man's appearance) such that the listener is ideally able to distinguish between the many actors from that movie.

(4) We were in Boston at one a.m., and we were really hungry, but **the only decent restaurant open that late** was on the other side of town.

(5) A: Who's that guy over there? B: Oh, you know, he's **the actor from *Saving Private Ryan***.

Working from the above understanding of definiteness, I argue that an English prenominal possessive is not inherently definite or indefinite, and that recent attempts to explain the relationship between this construction and the nominal's referential status, fail to do justice to the diversity of the data. First, I respond to a proposal by Barker (2000) that attempts to explain some problematic referential properties of possessives without abandoning the position that they are definite. Second, I discuss a structurally defined class of prenominal possessives where the claim to mandatory definiteness has seemed very strong (those with overt number like "John's four dogs"), and present data collected from the World Wide Web to show that they can indeed be non-definite in appropriate context.

Barker (2000) points out that the referent of a prenominal possessive need not be familiar from the discourse or the extralinguistic context. In fact, a listener might have no prior reason to suspect its existence. Example (6), as he notes, is perfectly felicitous:

(6) A man walked in. **His daughter** was with him.

Since "his daughter" does not profile a maximally salient referent, I take (6) to be evidence against the view that prenominal possessives are inherently definite. Barker, preserving the definiteness assumption, accounts for this example by significantly modifying the notion of familiarity. According to his novel account, familiarity is a property held by tokens of a linguistic expression, not by discourse referents. Thus, crucially, an expression can count as familiar even if its referent is not salient. This, he argues, is often the case for a prenominal possessive, since it acquires its familiarity from the possessor nominal.

Naturally, the need for such an account is done away with if we regard nominals like "his daughter" in (6) as non-definite. Barker considers the possibility, but gives two reasons for (tentatively) ruling it out. First, he claims that the phrase "has uniqueness presuppositions, one of the hallmarks of definite descriptions." I argue, first, that this position is intuitively incorrect on any ordinary conception of presupposition, and second, that it would be incompatible with the motivation of Barker's analysis. If "his daughter" in (6) did uniquely refer, if it was a full-fledged Russellian definite description, then it

would not constitute a special problem for being a prenominal possessive. Rather, it would be an instance of the broader fact that definite descriptions are capable of introducing novel referents:

(7) A man came in. **The tallest player in the WNBA** was with him.

Barker's second argument for the definiteness of certain prenominal possessives (those whose possessors are definite) is that they fail the syntactic "existential *there*" test:

(8a) There is a man's daughter in the garden.  
(8b) \* There is his daughter in the garden.

In response, I raise some doubts about the traditional analysis of "existential *there*" as a simple test for indefiniteness, such as its incompatibility with certain indefinite relationals:

(9a) A cousin came to my house. [=a cousin of mine]  
(9b) \* There was a cousin outside my house. [=a cousin of mine]

Storto (2000), following Zamparelli (1995), argues that prenominal possessives with an overt number "always trigger maximality entailments", based upon examples like (10a). Since maximality, in this sense, is just uniqueness for a nonatomic nominal, this would mean that all such phrases are definite. If this hypothesis were correct, then we would at least have a well-defined structural environment in which the referential properties of the prenominal possessive construction are essentially uniform.

(10a) #These [pointing left] are my four dogs, and those [pointing right] are my four dogs too.

A deeper consideration of English, however, reveals that even a prenominal possessive with overt number can introduce a novel referent without entailing uniqueness (maximality), given appropriate context. In (10b), I find no presupposition or entailment that the speaker has only those four dogs, belying the maximality explanation for the infelicity of (10a). Certainly it is required that a group of the appropriate size be identifiable; if the speaker were pointing in the general direction of ten dogs, and there were insufficient clues from discourse or context to make a group of four maximally salient, then the assertion would be highly infelicitous. But this correct requirement should not be confused with the incorrect requirement of maximality, which would mean that the speaker could have no other dogs anywhere in the world.

(10b) These [pointing to a group of four dogs] are my four dogs.

Turning to my own data, Google searches for "his two fingers" and "his two friends" revealed numerous examples, from widely different modes and registers, of non-definite use. I base these judgments on the apparent novelty the referents, together with

the complete lack of suggestion that the person in question has only two fingers or friends.

- (11) “...then we realized he was having a seizure and that we had to keep him down and keep his tongue from choking him,” said Rivera. ... Rowe held down Rodriguez while Rivera suppressed his tongue with **his two fingers** wrapped in a T-shirt.<sup>2</sup>
- (12) He hesitantly drew his hand close to her face, watching her eyes intently, fearing that by some fluke, she might suddenly turn her head and glare at him, wondering what he was doing. She didn’t. He touched her cheek gently and led **his two fingers** down its slope to her chin.<sup>3</sup>
- (13) Paddy and **his two friends** are talking at a bar. His first friend says: “I think my wife is having an affair with the electrician...”<sup>4</sup>
- (14) A nurse rushed to the Al Wayli police station and accused her boyfriend and **his two friends** of raping her in his apartment.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly we should expect some dialectal and even idiolectal variation amongst English speakers’ acceptance of certain possessives; where feasible, examination of appropriate corpora should greatly aid our analysis of this construction. Since English associates several different constructions with roughly the same set of “possessive” meanings, we run the particular risk of confusing *the best* form, the one we would use in writing or more measured verbal discourse, with the only form that the language or dialect renders grammatical. Some of the search results for non-definite “his two fingers” and “his two friends” I would regard as marginal, yet they appear to have been produced by native speakers. Regardless, there are quite a few examples, like (11)-(14), which I and most of my acquaintances find completely natural. As expected, just like in examples (1)-(4), the possessives in (11)-(14) can be replaced by the indefinite postnominal possessive “two friends of his” but not by the definite postnominal possessive “the two friends of his.”<sup>6</sup> The cases where overt number in possessives leads to maximality entailment are clearly not universal, and, moreover, they seem to be in just the same sorts of context where overt number would tend to imply or entail maximality in nominals that are not possessives. At present, I see no good reason to treat such possessives any differently than other nominals involving number, where uniqueness effects are generally dependent upon pragmatic information about the things described and the purpose of their mention.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.yuma.usmc.mil/pao/readarticle.asp?article=52>

<sup>3</sup> [http://kirkis-elf.com/w\\_hpotter/first\\_kisses02.html](http://kirkis-elf.com/w_hpotter/first_kisses02.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gore-high.school.nz/sudentwork/09/Hillart/Jokes.htm> [sic]

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.metimes.com/issue39/commu/streets.htm>

<sup>6</sup> “Two fingers of his” is rather awkward; it seems that certain body part terms in certain contexts require the prenominal possessive construction, being incompatible with the postnominal possessive and also with the definite article, even when the referent would seem to be appropriately salient. I intend to investigate this phenomenon in the near future.

- a. John went to the vet to buy heartworm pills for **the dog**.
- b. \*John went to a dermatologist to have a wart removed from **the back**.

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