

Direct Reference and Specificity: A short introduction

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The central aim of this workshop is to get linguists and philosophers of language and mind together to talk about a topic important to both of them - a topic that has meant different things to the two communities, has inspired them to different questions and answers, and where interaction of the kind that is possible within the setting of an ESSLI workshop could benefit either side.

Specificity, we believe, is such a topic. On the one hand it is a subject which in recent years has had much attention from linguists, primarily in connection with indefinite noun phrases: "Specific" indefinite NPs differ from other "non-specific" indefinites in linguistically relevant ways, the most salient of which is their scopal behavior: Specific indefinites in certain syntactic positions appear to have wider scope than they should if they were quantifier phrases subject to the same island constraints as "genuine" quantifying NPs (such as English NPs beginning with *every* or *most*), as illustrated by (1), which has a reading where the indefinite takes scope over *each student*.

- (1) Each student has to come up with three arguments that show that **some/a condition proposed by Chomsky** is wrong.

Sometimes the "specificity" of indefinite NPs is overtly marked - e.g. in Spanish by the particle *a*, in Turkish by the accusative case suffix *-ı*, or in English by adjectival modifiers like *certain*, and so on.

- (2) Vi *(*a*) **la / una mujer.** (Standard Spanish)
see.past-1.sg the a woman
'I saw the / a (certain) woman.'
- (3) (ben) **bir kitab-ı** oku-du-m (Turkish)
I a book-acc read-past-1sg
'I read a **certain** book.'

Gradually the inventory of "specificity" markings that linguists have registered and studied for their semantic and pragmatic effects has been growing; and the time seems ripe for asking more general questions: Is what we are seeing in these various instances really the same kind of specificity from a semantic or pragmatic point of view? If so, what is the semantic or pragmatic nature of specificity. And if not, what are the different kinds of specificity they involve?

But even though specificity (of whatever sort) is sometimes marked overtly, overt marking is not a general necessity; indeed, it is very far from being the rule. In many languages indefinites can behave like specifics even when superficially indistinguishable from those which behave in a non-specific way. Whatever it is that makes the interpreters of such indefinites interpret them as specific - or that allows speakers to use them so - it is evidently not their perceivable syntactic or morphological form. Thus it is one of the principal questions about indefinites to determine what it is about their general role and meaning which accounts for the fact that so many of them display specificity-like behavior.

From the perspective of the philosophy of language and mind specificity is a concept which is crucially connected with the presence of identifying information. A "specific" use of an indefinites is possible when the speaker has a individual in mind about which he has information that he takes to uniquely identify the individual . (In fact, in many such cases the available information will be well in excess of what unique identification requires). Under such conditions the speaker may choose not to bring his uniquely identifying information fully into linguistic play but instead to talk about the individual through the use of an indefinite NP whose descriptive content covers only a (often small) part of that in formation, which isn't enough for unique identification. What renders the speaker's use of the indefinite "specific" in such cases is at a minimum a causal-intentional link between the object he has in mind and his use of the indefinite to say something which he takes to be true of that object. There also is an interpretational side to the specific use of indefinites in this sense: For the recipient of an indefinite NP the NP can appear as "specific" insofar as she takes the speaker to have made a specific use of it, assuming that the speaker takes himself to have uniquely identifying information about some thing and to use the indefinite to talk about that thing.

- (4a) A student in the syntax class cheated on the final exam. We all know him.
- (4b) A student in the syntax class cheated on the final exam. Nobody knows who it is.

Connected with this picture are certain questions that have been seen as important for the philosophy of language and where a closer attention to the ways in which specific indefinites (especially those which are overtly marked as such) work in actual natural languages. One of these questions has to do with the relation between thought and language: Assuming it is correct that the specific use which a speaker makes of an indefinite involves his having uniquely identifying information for what he wants to talk about, and that the recipient' interpreting the indefinite as specific involves her infer that this is what the speaker is doing, this still leaves a certain latitude for what we may want to say is the actual content of the message that is passed from the one to the other. Is the content that is transmitted in such cases a "singular" proposition, which attributes a certain property to the object the speaker "has in mind"; and is what is transmitted the same as what is expressed? Or is the expressed content something weaker – an existential proposition, to the effect that something exists which has the given property?

A different question has to do with where the identifying information is supposed to be. So far we have only spoken of information in the mind of the speaker who uses an indefinite specifically. But it appears that the specificity phenomena which can be observed in natural languages are limited to just this case. In fact, a closely related concern has been prominent within the philosophy of language and logic for over half a century, ever since Quine and others began to consider the problem of "de re" occurrences of indefinites within modal and attitudinal contexts, parallel to the behavior of definite NPs.

- (5a) Peter intends to marry **a merchant banker** – even though he doesn't get on at all with her.
- (5b) Peter intends to marry **a merchant banker** – though he hasn't met one yet.
- (6a) Joan wants to present the prize to **the winner** – but he doesn't want to receive it from her.
- (6b) Joan wants to present the prize to **the winner** – so she'll have to wait around till the race finishes.

Occurrences of indefinites within such contexts, it was noted, often allow for interpretations according to which the NP has wide scope with respect to a modal or attitudinal operator. This has been widely taken to entail that the content of the described attitude is a singular proposition; and in the case of attitudinal contexts some have seen this as meaning that the attitude attributes some property to an object for which the bearer of the attitude has identifying information.

These views are consistent with what can be observed for languages with overt specificity marking (such as Spanish *a*, Turkish *-I*, or English *a certain*). Depending on the language particular properties, the presence of such markings either signals speaker-related specificity, as in (8a), or else specificity relating to some other "protagonist" of the given sentence or discourse, as in (8b); and prominent instances of the latter possibility are those in which the sentence attributes to this participant some propositional attitude.

- (7) George: "I met a certain student of mine"
- (8) James: "George met a certain student of his."
 - a: James knows who
 - b: James does not know, but George knows.

Much the same distinction is found in sentences which attribute propositional attitudes to each of a range of different protagonists, as in (9).

(9) Every politician had decided that a certain institute had to be closed.

(10.a) With such unanimity of opinion it was clear that the institute could not be saved.

(10.b) But since they couldn't agree which institute should be closed down, everything remained the way it had been.

(9) can be interpreted as involving some kind of specificity irrespective of whether it is followed by (10.a) or by (10.b). It is clear, however, that in the case of (10.b) the specific indefinite does not have maximal scope. This shows that there is at least one kind of specificity which does not entail maximal scope as a matter of course. Scopal behaviour of indefinite NPs and questions of specificity must thus be distinguished. One of the linguistic challenges is to understand better how the two are related. An important issue connected with this is whether there are parallels here with the different uses of definite descriptions, and how these parallels might be stated.

We hope that through the joint efforts of linguists and philosophers during the workshop we will arrive at a clearer understanding of at least some these issues.