

Specificity: two opposites, three variants

Eva Lavric, Vienna

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What is commonly understood by specificity is not one concept, but two different, although interrelated, semantic features. Leaving aside specificity in the sense of non-genericity, which would be a third meaning, specificity as a semantic feature of indefinites can be shown to have two different opposites: first, random choice as the opposite of specific choice (1 vs. 2), a choice guided by the identity of the referent;¹ and second, hypothetical existence as the opposite of factual existence, i.e. existence in the real world (ambiguity in 4).

1) *random* Tu n'es encore pour moi qu'un petit garçon semblable à cent mille petits garçons. Et je n'ai pas besoin de toi. Et tu n'as pas besoin de moi non plus. Je ne suis pour toi qu'un renard semblable à cent mille renards. Mais, si tu m'apprivoises, nous aurons besoin l'un de l'autre. Tu seras pour moi unique au monde. Je serai pour toi unique au monde.

2) *specific* Il y a une fleur... je crois qu'elle m'a apprivoisé...

4) *fact/hyp* teacher: Die Polizei sucht einen jungen Mann, der im Umkreis der Schule Mädchen belästigt!
pupil: Wo kann ich mich melden?

The second dichotomy can be explained with reference to a theory of possible worlds, in particular the one developed by Robert Martin (1983). It can be shown that factual existence can combine either with random choice or with specific choice, which means that the two oppositions do not coincide. As for hypothetical existence, it normally implies random choice (with some exceptions that can be explained through second order possible worlds).

It is the factual/hypothetical existence dichotomy that has clear correlates on the syntactic level, namely for definite pronominalization: only a factually existing referent can be re-presented through a definite pronoun or noun phrase; a hypothetically existing referent cannot, unless it is in the same (or in a depending) possible world:

4) Die Polizei sucht einen jungen Mann, der im Umkreis der Schule Mädchen belästigt.
4a) teacher's reading: ...Er hat grün gefärbtes Haar.

¹ Another interpretation of the same dichotomy would be: referent identity known versus unknown to the speaker. This means that specificity would be a kind of half-way definiteness, as definiteness can be understood as: referent identity known to both speaker and hearer.

Unfortunately, however, there are examples of indefinite specific reference in the sense of specific choice which do not fit the above definition.

3) - Qu'est-ce qu'un rite?

- C'est ce qui fait qu'un jour est différent des autres jours, une heure, des autres heures.
Instead of looking at knowledge of identity, a wider definition takes relevance of identity as criterion, knowledge of identity being only one possible aspect of it.

- 4b) pupil's reading: ...So einen jungen Mann kenne ich!
 4c) pupil's reading: ...Er sollte möglichst tätowiert und gepierced sein.

Moreover, in Romance languages like French or Spanish, the mood of a possible relative clause correlates with the existence status of the antecedent, hypothetically existing antecedents having subjunctive relative clauses:

- 5a) Je veux épouser un homme qui écrit des poèmes.
 5b) Je veux épouser un homme qui écrive des poèmes.
 (after Galmiche 1983:68-69)
 5c) Quiero casarme con un hombre que escribe poesías.
 5d) Quiero casarme con un hombre que escriba poesías.

On the other hand, the specific choice / random choice dichotomy can be shown to have correlates on the lexical level, i.e. in the semantics of indefinite determiners. Therefore, the second part of the presentation deals with the indefinite specific / non-specific determiners of the French, Spanish and German languages, namely the following forms:

[SPECIFIC]			[RANDOM]		
Fr.	Sp.	Ger.	Fr.	Sp.	Ger.
(un) certain/s	cierto/s	(ein) bestimmte/r (ein) gewisse/r	quelque n'importe quel/s un/de quelconque/s divers	algún cual(es)quier/a (un...cualquiera) diversos	irgendein irgendwelche diverse

The first distinction in this field is between existence- and random-centered forms, with existence being presupposed in random-centered (6), and asserted in existence-centered forms (7).² This is shown through their behavior under negation:

- 6) Je **ne** suis **pas** prête à épouser quelque poète / un quelconque poète.
 No estoy dispuesta a casarme con algún poeta / un poeta cualquiera.
 Ich bin **nicht** bereit, irgendeinen Dichter zu heiraten.
 7) Je **ne** suis **pas** prête à épouser n'importe quel poète.
 No estoy dispuesta a casarme con cualquier poeta.

But above all, specificity and non-specificity can be shown to exist in three different variants, which, in the languages examined, exist partly as nuances of usage of more general indefinites, but to a good part also as inherent meaning features of very specialized specific/non-specific determiner forms.

The first variant manifests itself most clearly in the combination of random determiners with all kinds of mass terms: the resulting meaning feature can be paraphrased as “any quantity whatsoever of” and shall be called QUANTIT-RANDOM:

- 8) Tendrás que darle algún dinero.
Il faudra lui donner quelque argent.
- 9) ...no sin derramar alguna sangre...
...non sans verser quelque sang...
- 10) ...si queda algún calor,...
...s'il reste quelque chaleur,...

Its opposite will be the feature QUANTIT-SPECIFIC, paraphrasable as “a certain quantity of”:

- 11) Il est resté un certain temps avec elle.
- 12) Hace falta un cierto valor para hacer eso.

Both semantic aspects can be shown to occur not only with mass terms, but also with certain types of count nouns, namely pluraliatantum and the nouns for measurables.

The second variant is the “normal” form of specificity/non-specificity, i.e. its “identity” variant, which has to be considered as only one variant among others as soon as the existence of other variants is taken into consideration. This aspect, which is probably the standard one, shall be called IDENT-SPECIFIC versus IDENT-RANDOM.

As for the third variant, some examples of specificity manifest the feature “a certain type of”, which is the combination of specificity with the “sorts of” reading of nouns – a form of reference possible for nearly all types of nouns and semantically close – though not identical – with “(definite-singular-)type” genericity. This form of specificity shall be called QUALIT-SPECIFIC (13), and it has its opposite in the feature QUALIT-RANDOM, i.e., the nuance “whatever type of” (14):

- 13) Comme vous le savez peut-être, notre gouvernement a récemment décrété un embargo sur l'exportation de certaines marchandises.
Como sabrán, nuestro Gobierno prohibió recientemente la exportación de ciertos productos.
Wie Ihnen vielleicht bekannt ist, verhängte unsere Regierung vor kurzem einen Ausfuhrstopp für gewisse Waren.
- 14) Tu peux combiner ce plat avec n'importe quelle bière...
Este plato lo puedes combinar con cualquier cerveza...

Just as the “quantity” variant is not restricted to mass terms, the “quality” variant is not restricted to nouns in “sorts of” readings either. Designations for persons, for instance, in general lack a “sorts of” reading. Nevertheless, they can be combined with QUALIT-SPECIFIC, and also with QUALIT-RANDOM, determiners. In the latter case, the result will be the appearance of an unexpected pejorative nuance.

The explanation of this pejorativity can be found in some special kind of cognitive schema, which points to the importance of specificity as a universal cognitive category of human beings and human societies.

² Only existence-centered forms are real indefinites, while random-centered determiners resemble the totalizers.

References

- Galmiche, Michel (1983): Les ambiguïtés référentielles ou les pièges de la référence, *Langue française* 57, pp.60-86
- Martin, Robert (1983): *Pour une logique du sens (Linguistique nouvelle)*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France