ENGLISH INDEFINITE *THIS* AND
REFERENTIAL PERSISTENCE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Depending on the context of use, the English determiner *this* can be either definite or indefinite (Prince 1981). On the one hand, it functions as a demonstrative determiner alongside *that*, and, on the other hand, it is a determiner for indefinite noun phrases alongside the simple indefinite article *a* (Perlman 1969, Prince 1981, Wald 1983, among others). This paper focuses on the latter use of *this*, which occurs in colloquial, mainly conversational English, as shown in (1).

(1) Well, I met *this guy* last night that is a year older than me at a pool Party in San Francisco (Well I live in LA but I was visiting family) and he told me *this story* about dolphins. Look at *this book* he gave me [...].[1] (emphasis mine)

In example (1), only the first two instances of *this* (i.e. this guy, this story) are indefinite, whereas the third *this* in *Look at this book* is an instantiation of the stressed, deictic use of *this*.

Indefinite *this* is interesting for several reasons. First, it represents a relatively new development of the English language, as its use is attested in colloquial English only since the late 1930's (Wald 1983). Second, indefinite *this*, as opposed to definite *this,* does not bear main stress and serves to introduce hearer-new and discourse-new referents. Third, a body of linguistic research (Prince 1981, Ionin 2006, among others) convincingly showed that indefinite noun phrases headed by *this* tend to have referential meanings (i.e. take wide scope with respect to different operators, are epistemically specific, etc.). Fourth, besides being semantically specific, indefinites headed by *this* are used as a signal to inform the hearer that more information about the referent marked in this way is going to follow (Prince 1981, Wald 1983, Wright & Givón 1987, Gernsbacher & Shroyer 1989).

The aim of this paper is to extend the analysis of indefinite noun phrases headed by *this* by investigating the subsequent discourse in which these indefinite noun phrases occur. I will show that referents headed by indefinite *this* are: (i) referentially more continuous in the subsequent discourse compared to indefinite descriptions preceded by the ordinary indefinite determiner *a* (this result echoes previous observations about indefinite *this,* e.g. Gernsbacher & Shroyer 1989) and (ii) are more prone to become topics (i.e. the grammatical subject) in the subsequent discourse. The findings of this paper show that indefinite *this* fulfills the same discourse functions as the differential object marker *pe* in Romanian and the determiner *so'n* in German (Chiriacescu & von Heusinger 2010, Chiriacescu 2011). On the basis of the findings of a web-based story continuation experiment, I show that seemingly conflicting uses of indefinite *this* in English share a fundamental commonality related to upcoming/future information: More specifically, English indefinite *this* is used when the speaker is aware that further information about this entity (beyond the information provided by the NP) is necessary for the addressee to arrive at the intended/correct denotation of the NP and/or to locate the intended referent. Use of the specific indefinite *this* in English is connected to the notion of discourse structuring potential (developed in Chiriacescu 2011 and Chiriacescu & von Heusinger 2010) on a very local level as it signals the need for more elaboration in the immediately subsequent discourse.

This paper is organised as follows. In section 2, I sketch out prior analyses on the "forward-looking" potential of referents accompanied by indefinite *this*. In the literature so far (Prince 1981, Gernsbacher & Shroyer 1989, Ionin 2006) it was suggested that *this* introduces accessible, important or noteworthy referents in the discourse, as such referents are often mentioned in the subsequent discourse. I argue that the discourse behaviour of *this* can be better accounted for in terms of discourse prominence, which is manifested through the referential persistence of the newly introduced referents and their topic shift potential. In section 3, I bring empirical evidence from a story continuation experiment in favour of the preferential discourse status of referents headed by indefinite this compared to the ordinary indefinite *a(n)*. The results of the experiment show that referents headed by *this*: (i) are referentially more continuous in the

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[1] http://www.ihav.net/vb/introductions/i-met-him-last-night-358268.html [viewed in March 2009]

subsequent discourse than referents headed by *a*, but (ii) do not necessarily show a stronger tendency of becoming the topic (i.e. the grammatical subject) in the following five continuation sentences. Section 4 concludes the paper and outlines an enriched analysis for indefinites headed by *this* in terms of discourse prominence.

2. INTRODUCTION

Different studies showed that indefinites preceded by *this* are (discourse-) pragmatically specific in the sense of (Givón 1981), as they introduce a referent that has a relevant or important role to play in the ensuing discourse. I will argue that noun phrases introduced by *this* signal discourse prominence. I will show that this discourse prominence is mirrored by the referential persistence and topic-shift potential of the referent headed by *this*.

Fillmore (1977) was one of the first to note that indefinite *this* simultaneously fulfils two functions, which usually do not coincide. Referents headed by *this* introduce new referents in the discourse and simultaneously promote these referent to a topical position, as in (2b).

(2)   (a)   I met a friend of yours [*introduction of a new discourse referent*] last night. Well, this guy [*promotion to topic*] told me some pretty interesting things about you.   (Fillmore 1997: 105)

         (b)   I met this friend of yours [*introduction of new discourse referent AND promotion to topic*] last night who told me some pretty interesting stories about you.

Prince (1981), Ionin (2006), among others, that upon using indefinite-*this*, the speaker's referential intention is mirrored by the subsequent discourse, as the speaker is committed to adding more information about the referent headed by *this* (i.e. attributing properties to the noun phrase introduced by *this*). Interestingly, exactly like in the case of German indefinite *so'n*, nouns headed by *this* are distinguished in that they most often occur in combination with constructions that serve to immediately give further information on the recently introduced discourse referent. Wald (1983) concludes from corpus studies that indefinite-*this* noun phrases are often followed by a relative clause, by adnominal modifiers, or are left-dislocated. It seems that immediacy of reference guarantees that the hearer can properly and rapidly identify the referent established by *this*, even if this referent was newly introduced to him. However, as Ionin (2006) notes, speakers need not use elaborated modifiers so that the hearer can understand the expression preceded by *this*, but that a conjunction of "noteworthy" predicates (i.e. an unexpected adjective or surprising event) suffices to take up the referent, as shown in (3).

Noteworthy predicates
(3)   I was driving down the road, and suddenly, *this cat ran out of the bushes and jumped onto the roof of my car*!   (Ionin 2006: 186)

These observations echo those with respect to the Finnish demonstrative adjective *sellainen*, which is tight to immediacy of reference. Based on a corpus of elicited narrations and other naturally occurring examples, Kaiser (2011: 10) suggested that immediacy of reference is a response to "the information sufficiency of the form initially used" to introduce a referent in the discourse. Returning to the data central to this chapter, the fact that indefinite *this* introduces hearer-new and discourse-new referents that will be elaborated upon in the following discourse receives support from findings of naturally occurring discourse analyses and psycholinguistic investigations. Prince (1981), for example, found out on the basis of elicited narrations that 242 out of 243 occurrences of the indefinite *this* found in Terkel's (1974) book *Working,* introduced a new referent in the discourse. More importantly, 209 of the 242 referents (i.e. roughly 86%) headed by indefinite *this* were referred to again in the subsequent text. Wright & Givón (1987) extended Prince's (1981) study, which did not compare the discourse behaviour of indefinite *this* with that of indefinites headed by *a/an*. They recorded eight- and nine-year-old children telling one another stories and found out that children chose to use *this* for referents that they would continue talking about and *a/an* for referents that they would rather not pick up in the following discourse. More exactly, the average was 5.32 times for concepts introduced by *this* and 0.68 times when concepts were introduced by *a/an*.

Besides the high referential persistence that usually characterizes indefinites headed by *this*, it seems that the potential to change the current topic (i.e. the potential to become the grammatical subject of the next

sentence is a manifestation of the discourse prominence of *this* as well. Consider the riddle given in example (4) in which the new referent introduced in direct object position is headed by *this*. After its first mention, the same referent becomes the topic of the immediately following main sentence. In other words, the referent introduced by *this* shifts the current discourse topic as it is mentioned in subject position in the next sentence and is simultaneously highly persistent in the subsequent discourse.

(4)   I was walking on a bridge and I saw *this man*. He tipped his hat and drew his can, in this riddle he mentioned his name. What was his name?[2]

The rest of this paper is dedicated to determining the discourse-pragmatic contribution of *this*, i.e. whether and in what way this specifier gives structure to the discourse. In comparison to earlier work investigating the properties of English indefinite *this*, I conduct a more detailed analysis, over multiple sentences, which allows me to get a better and understanding of the functions of this determiner. In the next section I discuss a sentence-continuation experiment that was designed to verify the discourse prominence of indefinites headed by *this*.

3.   THE STORY CONTINUATION EXPERIMENT

It was noted so far that *this* introduces new referents in the discourse, exactly like the indefinite article, while on the other hand, it functions as a signal to the speaker that the referent in question is more discourse prominent. In this chapter, I will substantiate the empirical findings made so far with a sentence-continuation experiment.

The aims of this chapter are twofold. On the basis of a sentence continuation experiment, I will first analyse the nature of discourse prominence of indefinite-*this* by means of two textual characteristics (i.e. referential persistence and topic-shift potential). The current investigation differs from previous experimental studies (e.g. Prince (1981) or Gernsbacher & Shroyer (1989), as it focuses on the discourse structuring potential of referents headed by indefinite *this* which are characterized by the semantic feature [+human] and which appear in direct object position. The second aim of this study is to analyse the behaviour of indefinites preceded by the simple indefinite article *a* under the same conditions in order to better filter out the discourse characteristics of the concepts introduced by indefinite *this*. It was already noted that discourse prominence is expected to be reflected in the participants' continuations in two ways: by (i) referential persistence and (ii) topic-shift potential. In light of the findings from two experiments that investigated the discourse prominence of *pe*-marking with indefinite NPs in Romanian and of *so'n*-marking in German (Chiriacescu 2011), the following two predictions about the discourse prominence of *this*-indefinites can be made:

(5)   *Prediction 1 (referential persistence)*
        If referents headed by *this* show discourse prominence, then they will be referentially persistent, appearing in the subsequent discourse more often.

(6)   *Prediction 2 (topic-shift potential)*
        If discourse prominent, the referents of indefinite-*this* will be mentioned in grammatical subject position in a matrix clause within the next five continuation sentences.

3.1 The experimental setup

Method and design
The methodology used was an open-ended sentence continuation task with four test items (Gernsbacher & Shroyer 1989, Chiriacescu & von Heusinger 2010, Chiriacescu 2011). Participants (n=21) read 4 mini-discourses and were instructed to add 5 logical and natural-sounding sentence continuations to each of them. We manipulated the form of the direct objects in the critical sentence, which resulted in two conditions, i.e. one in which the direct object realized as a definite unmodified noun phrase is *this*-marked, and one in which the same direct object is unmarked, as in Table 1. As indefinite *this* in English is encountered in conversational, less formal language, the target and filler items were written in a colloquial tone.

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[2] http://www.trickyriddles.com/riddle/3904-The-Man/show/answer [viewed in January 2011]

The sentence continuation experiment included four target stories and six filler stories. Each target story had two versions, one with indefinite-*this* and the other with indefinite-*a*. The type of determiner (this vs. *a*) was manipulated between subjects: Each participant either saw all four target items with *this*, or s/he saw all four target items with *a*. The full list of target items used for each condition is given in Table 1.

	***this*-condition**	***a*-condition**
TI1	*Yesterday evening was so warm that James decided to hang out with friends at the local coffee shop. On his way downtown, he saw **this kid** coming down the street.*	*Yesterday evening was so warm that James decided to hang out with friends at the local coffee shop. On his way downtown, he saw **a kid** coming down the street.*
TI2	*Let me tell you what happened to me some years ago. I met a cool lifeguard at Zuma Beach in Malibu. He was always busy and one day I saw him save **this girl** from drowning.*	*Let me tell you what happened to me some years ago. I met a cool lifeguard at Zuma Beach in Malibu. He was always busy and one day I saw him save **a girl** from drowning.*
TI3	*It had been only 2 hours but it seemed like the party would never end. Anna was extremely bored. After a while she saw **this man** sitting alone on a couch next to the fridge.*	*It had been only 2 hours but it seemed like the party would never end. Anna was extremely bored. After a while she saw **a man** sitting alone on a couch next to the fridge.*
TI4	*Alice was rushing around the office yesterday morning, because she had to go to the local high school for a presentation in the afternoon. She shook hands with **this man** and sat down near the window.*	*Alice was rushing around the office yesterday morning, because she had to go to the local high school for a presentation in the afternoon. She shook hands with **a man** and sat down near the window.*

Table 1. List of target items used in each condition of the experiment

Each target story comprised two or three sentences. These sentence fragments set the context of the story and contained an individual reference to a character that was the clearly established topic constituent, as it was mentioned at least once in grammatical subject position and was the referent the story evolved around. In the third and last sentence of each target item, the critical referent was introduced in grammatical direct object position (except for target item 4, TI4) and was realised as an indefinite noun phrase headed by *this* in the *this*-condition, and as an indefinite headed by a in the *a*-condition. In order to compare the results from the three experiments reported in this thesis, both subject and direct object referents were human and of different genders, except for target item one in which both referents are male.

Procedure and Data Analysis
I coded and analysed the first five main sentences (including subordinate clauses, if there were any) provided by the participants as continuations to the given sentence fragments. The textual characteristics analysed were: (i) referential persistence and (ii) topic shift potential. To determine the referential persistence of the critical items, I counted the number of mentions for each referent in the subsequent discourse. This method indicates at what stage in the continuation fragment there are more anaphoric expressions referring to the direct object referent than to the subject referent. Furthermore, each instance in which the time a critical item became the grammatical subject in a matrix clause was considered an instance of topic shift. Whether this change was maintained after this point or not, was unimportant for the present analysis. Finally, the last textual characteristic established whether there are significant differences between indefinite-*this* and indefinite-*a* with respect to the type of the first anaphoric expression used to refer back to them.

3.2   Results and discussions

One continuation was excluded from the analysis, because the participant was not a native speaker of English. This left a total of 10 continuations for each condition of the experiment (i.e. *this*-condition and *a*-condition) to be coded and analysed.

Referential persistence
The findings with respect to the referential persistence of referents reveal several interesting patterns. Figure 1 displays the average number of anaphoric references to the direct object referents for each continuation sentence (S1-S5) in both conditions of the experiment up to the last continuation sentence S5. Prediction 1 is

confirmed, as the referents of the direct objects in the *this*-condition are referentially more persistent than the direct objects in the *a*-condition. In other words, upon reading the target stories, participants showed a preference to continue talking about the referent of the critical item when it was preceded by *this* rather than when it was introduced by *a*. The presence of *this* shows a boosting effect upon the noun phrase it precedes in terms of referential persistence. Thus, the presence of *this* makes a better competitor out of the referent of the critical item in terms of referential persistence.
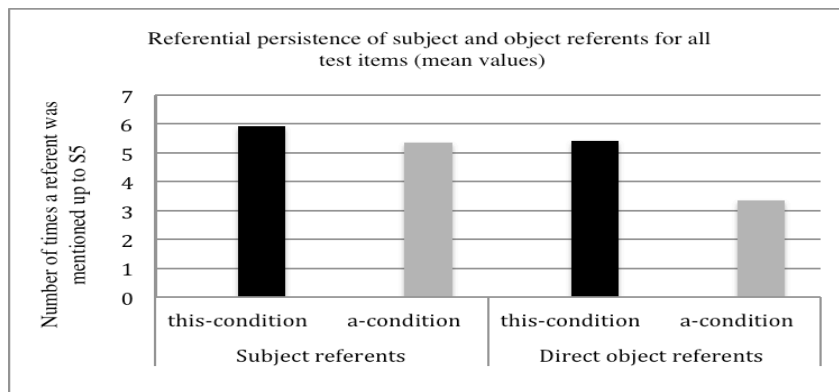

Figure 1. Mean values for referential persistence of subject and object referents for both conditions up to S5.

Furthermore, Figure 1 reveals an interesting insight into the relation between the referents of the critical items and the subject referents as well. The difference in referential persistence between the initial subject and direct object referents is higher in the *a*-condition, where the subject referent clearly exceeds in referential continuity the referents headed by the indefinite article *a*. In the *this*-condition, however, the values of referential continuity for the subject and object referents are nearly the same. This observation brings up an interesting question, namely whether the presence of *this* on the direct or oblique object has an impact upon the referential persistence values of the subject referent as well. Because of lack of space, I will not discuss this aspect at this point, but see Chiriacescu (2011) for a discussion of this and related issues.

Topic shift potential
The second textual characteristc investigated is the topic shift potential of the referents of the critical items headed by *this* compared that of the referents preceded by the indefinite article *a*. Recall that, for matters of simplicity, the first time the referent of a direct object is mentioned in grammatical subject position in a following matrix clause is counted as an instance of topic shift (Givón 1983). The counts for the topic shift potential are cumulative.

The results in Figure 2 reveal two interesting patterns. First, the topic shift potential of *this*-indefinites is higher than that of indefinites headed by *a*. In other words, referents headed by *this* are more prone to be mentioned in grammatical subject position in the subsequent discourse than their simple indefinite counterparts. Second, for both types of target items, continuation sentence 3 (S3) seems to play an important role, as the probability that a referent will be mentioned in subject position after this point clearly drops. Thus, it seems that the effects of *this* in terms of topic shift potential are best seen up to S3. After this 'turning point', the topic shift potential remains constant (i.e. it is not expected to increase).
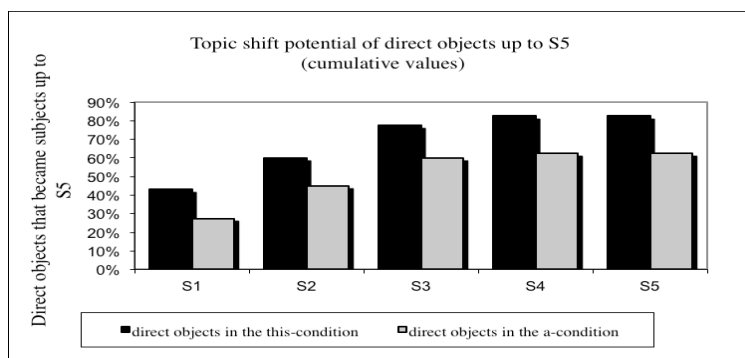

Figure 2. Topic shift potential of *this*- and *a*-direct objects for each continuation sentence (S1-S5)

Overall, the results of the sentence-continuation study presented in this section parallel those reported in Chiriacescu & von Heusinger (2010) and Chiriacescu (2011) about the discourse behaviour of indefinite noun phrases in direct object position, as *this*-marking contributes to the higher discourse prominence of the noun phrase that it precedes.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper I built upon different analyses on indefinite *this* (Prince 1981, Ionin 2006, and others) and argued for an analysis of indefinite *this* as indicating the speaker's referential intention to introduce a discourse prominent referent. I have brought experimental evidence for the fact that indefinite-*this* signals discourse prominence, as its referents are highly persistent and as they show a high potential to become topics in the subsequent discourse. First, the results presented in this chapter confirm previous findings (Prince 1981, Ionin 2006, Wright & Givon 1987, Gernsbacher & Shroyer 1989) by showing that indefinites headed by *this* are highly referentially persistent. Moreover, referents introduced by *this* were shown to even suppress the referential persistence values of the sentence's subject, whenever other factors (e.g. animacy, event schema) did not influence the global structure of the narrative. Second, the experimental results reported here show that the discourse prominence of indefinites headed by *this* is mirrored in the topic shift potential of the referents as well. More concretely, referents introduced by *this* are more prone to become the grammatical subject of the next matrix sentence, compared to referents headed by the simple indefinite article *a*.

The findings of the study described in this paper can be best accounted for in an expectancy-driven approach to language processing (e.g. Kehler et al. 2008, Arnold 2010). I showed that referents realized in positions that are otherwise low in accessibility (i.e. referents realized in direct object position) will display high discourse prominence values, whenever this potential is encoded by a special marker, such as *this* in English.

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(ABSTRACT)

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