1 Possible interpretations of nominals

(1) DEFINITE (strong, referential)
   a. [The snake] had been killed.
   b. Sarah had killed [the snake].
   c. Also: Pronouns, proper names, possessives (except for indefinite possessors).
   d. NB: Some languages (e.g. Lakota) split definites into uniqueness and familiarity definites.

(2) DEMONSTRATIVE (strong, referential)
   a. [That snake] was killed.
   b. Sarah killed [that snake].
   c. Also: This, that, these, those, yon.

(3) STRONG QUANTIFICATIONAL (strong, quantificational)
   a. [Every snake] had been killed.
   b. Sarah has killed [every snake].
   c. Also: Each, most, all, both, all #, every #

(4) SPECIFIC INDEFINITE (weak or strong, wide-scope referential)
   a. [Some snake] has been killed.
   b. Sarah has killed [some snake].
   c. Also: Some (stressed), a certain/particular/specific, indefinite this, and indefinite quantifiers in (5) except no, any, more than #, less than #, at least #, at most #
   d. NB: Some languages (e.g. Lillooet Salish, Malagasy) have a single article for specific indefinites and definites.

(5) EXISTENTIAL INDEFINITE (weak, quantificational or predicative)
   a. [Sm snakes] have been killed.
   b. Sarah has killed [sm snakes].
   c. Also: Sm (unstressed), a(n), no, any, several, (a) few, many, (a) little, a couple, a lot of, numerals (#: one, two, three, ...), less than #, more than #, at least #, at most #.

(6) PREDICATIVE (weak, predicative)
   a. The cobra is [a snake].
   b. Cobras and pythons are [snakes].
   c. Also: Possessive nominals.

(7) GENERIC (weak, narrow-scope referential)
   a. [Snakes] are intelligent.
   b. [A snake] is intelligent.
   c. Sarah loves [snakes].
   d. Also: all strong non-quantificational nominals can be interpreted generically.

(8) KIND-LEVEL (weak, narrow-scope referential)
   a. [Snakes] are extinct in the Americas.
   b. [The snake] is extinct in the Americas.
   c. Neanderthals discovered [snakes].
   d. Neanderthals discovered [the snake].

• NB: Bare nouns cannot simply be viewed as a plural indefinite (Carlson 1977). The distinc-
tions between generic and kind-level interpretations of bare nouns depends on the choice of predicate; they are otherwise the same, though generic predicates allow a wider range of nominals.

2 Elicitation tests

2.1 Major divisions

The diagnostics in this section split nominals into three broad categories, strong vs. weak vs. predicative, with overlap expected between weak and predicative.

2.1.1 Strong vs. weak

- Weak noun phrases can occur in the existential construction (9-a), strong noun phrases cannot (9-b); indefinites which tend to be interpreted partitive (e.g. *some, many) also may pattern be strong.

(9) THE EXISTENTIAL CONSTRUCTION (Milsark 1977)
   a. *There is [the snake] in my bed
   b. There is [a snake] in my bed.
   c. There are [snakes] in my bed.

- Note that (10-a) is possible with the interpretation of temporary, alienable possession.

(10) INalienable possession with ‘have’
   a. *The snake has [the tail].
   b. The snake has [a tail].
   c. Snakes have [tails].

- Presuppositionality (all strong determiners have an existence presupposition)
   a. *Sarah didn’t see the snake, because there was no snake.
   b. Sarah didn’t see a snake, because there was no snake.
   c. Sarah didn’t see snakes, because there were no snakes.

2.2 Referential vs. quantificational

This section identifies tests for distinguishing i) definite from strong quantificational readings and ii) specific indefinite from existential indefinite readings.

2.2.1 Definite vs. strong quantificational

- The basic difference involves scope; the must always take widest possible (i.e. it is scopeless). To test for scope, make the context clear to your consultant first, then ask whether a particular sentence can be used.

(19) Scope relative to negation
   a. Sarah didn’t see [every snake]. (not > every, every > not)
   b. Sarah didn’t see the [snakes]. (*not > the, the > not, i.e., she can’t have only seen some snakes)
   c. [Every snake] didn’t see Sarah. (not > all, all > not)
   d. [The snakes] didn’t see Sarah. (*not > the, the > not, i.e., no snakes saw her)

2.2.2 Referential vs. quantificational

Some strong and quantificational nominals can often occur in this category when modified, for example, with superlative adjectives.

(18) a. The cobra is the most dangerous snake.
   b. Mary and Susan are two talented students.

- Additionally, kind-NPs can occur with weak quantifiers even in these environments. Note that the nominals without an overt noun kind can occur in this environment as long as the ‘kind’-reading is available.

(17) a. The cobra and the python are [sm snakes].
   b. *The cobra and the python are [sm snakes].

(16) a. *The cobra and the python are [sm snakes].
   b. *I consider the cobra and the python [sm snakes].

- Some strong and quantificational nominals can often occur in this category when modified, for example, with superlative adjectives.

(15) SMALL CLAUSES
   a. *I consider the cobra [the snake].
   b. I consider the cobra [a snake].
   c. I consider the cobra and the python [snakes].

- While predicative environments seem to make the same cut as the weak vs. strong diagnostics in the previous section, predicative environments do not allow weak quantifiers (English *it is exceptional in this regard), while weak quantifiers freely occur in the weak environments in the previous section.

(14) a. There are [sm snakes] in my bed.
   b. These snakes have [sm scales]. (context: some disease where snakes lose their scales)

(13) Predicational copular clause
   a. The cobra is [a snake].
   b. *The cobra is [the snake].
   c. The cobra and the python are [snakes].
Noun phrase interpretations questionnaire

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2.2.2 Referential indefinite vs. quantificational indefinite

• The first good test for specific indefinites is partitives, described in section 2.3.5.
• Many specific indefinites pattern as strong, i.e. they cannot occur in existential constructions, described in section 2.1.1.
• This distinction is tricky since most indefinites are genuinely ambiguous between the two readings. Still, some languages (e.g. Maori, Tongan) have distinct indefinite articles for the two uses (Chung and Ladusaw 2004; Hendrick 2005).

(21) OPAQUE ENVIRONMENTS
a. I want to pet [the snake], (*any one will do).
b. I want to pet [some snake], (*any one will do).
c. I want to pet [a snake], (any one will do).
d. I want to pet [the snakes], (*I don’t care what kind.)
e. I want to pet [sm snakes], (I don’t care what kind.)
f. I want to pet [snakes], (I don’t care what kind.)

• The nominals which allow the tag in parentheses are non-specific. Indefiniteness must be independently diagnosed via the strong vs. weak tests in section 2.1.1. Note that only (21-f) does not allow a specific reading (see ‘bare plurals’ below).

(22) QUANTIFICATIONAL VARIABILITY
a. *[The snake] is often long.
b. *[Some snake] is often long.
c. *[A snake] is often long.
d. *[Snakes] are often long.

(23) GENERIC USES
a. *[All snakes] slither.
b. *[The snakes] slither.
c. *[Some snake] slithers.
d. *[A snake] slithers.
e. *[Snakes] slither.
f. *[The snake] slithers.

• Generics group together strong and weak quantificational determiners, excluding specific indefinites. Note that the instance of the definite article in (23-f) is an instance of kind-reference, not a referential definite (Dayal 2004).

2.3 Definites
This section identifies different environments for identifying definite noun phrases and distinguishes definites from demonstratives.

2.3.1 Definite environments

• The following five environments are common environments where definite interpretations are found (cf. Hawkins 1979; Schwarz 2009). Context is crucial for these cases, since definiteness is a pragmatic concept.
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2.3.2 Familiar vs. uniqueness definites

- Many languages distinguish two kinds of definites: those that occur anaphorically/in familiar contexts, and those that occur with uniquely identifiable definites (Schwarz 2009, 2013). The following elicitation sentences will help you distinguish them.
- First, the contexts in (33), (35), and (36) should be translated with uniqueness definite expression.
- Additionally, weak definites (definites which do not refer because they refer to a prototypical location or activity, Carlson et al. 2006; Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts 2010) should be translated with the uniqueness definite expression (Schwarz 2009):

(37) EXAMPLES OF WEAK DEFINITES
- I need to go to [the store/market].
- All the children are going to [the school].
- Take this sick person to [the hospital].

- The following environments should only allow an anaphoric definite expression, because the intended referent is not unique:

(38) CROSS-CLausal ANaphor WITH NO CONTRASTING LexICAL CONTENT (compare (32))
- Yesterday I met a student from another city.
- [The student] was very tall.

(39) INDISTINGUISHABLE PARTICipants (‘bishop’ SENTENCES) (Heim 1990) (awkward, but will be impossible with the uniqueness definite)
- If a bishop meets a bishop, [he/the bishop] blesses [him / the bishop].
- If a snake meets another snake, [the / that snake] attacks [the / that snake].

(40) COVARYING ANaphora WITHOUT C-COMMAND (‘donkey’ sentences)
- If a farmer has a donkey, he beats [it / the donkey / that donkey].
- Every farmer that has a donkey beats [it / the donkey / that donkey].

(41) SAGE-PLANT SENTENCES (Heim 1982)
- Everybody who bought a sage plant here bought eight others along with [it / that plant].
- Every house that has a window has another window right next to [it / that window].

2.3.3 Definite vs. indefinites

- First, definites are almost always strong while indefinites are almost always weak.
- The consistency test below can be used to distinguish definites from (specific) indefinites.

(42) CONSISTENCY (Löbner 1985)
- *[The snake] is sleeping, though [the snake] is not sleeping. (contradiction)
- [A snake] is sleeping, though [a snake] is not sleeping.

- Many languages allow sluicing; only indefinite noun phrases can serve as the antecedent to a sluiced wh-expression:

(43) SLUICING
- I saw [somebody] outside but I’m not sure [who].
- I saw [the man] outside but I’m not sure [who].

- A true indefinite should not be able to be used discourse anaphorically, i.e. in familiar contexts.

2.3.4 Definite vs. demonstrative

- The test below distinguishes definites and demonstrative nominals, and can also function as a diagnostic for ‘pure’ definiteness.
3.1 Narratives: Discourse status

2.3.5 Partitives (definite vs. specific indefinite/quantificational)

Partitives get their own section because they are actually two diagnostics in one: in English, the ‘outer’ nominal must be specific indefinite, while the ‘inner’ nominal must be definite (Enç 1991):

(46) **Definiteness of inner nominal** Context: “Yesterday, I saw several snakes…”
   a. Three of [the/those snakes] were black.
   b. *Three of [several snakes] were black.
   c. *Three of [snakes] were black.

(47) **Outer nominal must be a) strongly quantificational or b) specific indefinite**
   Context: “Yesterday, I saw several snakes…”
   a. *[Those/the of the snakes] were black.
   b. [All/each of the snakes] were black.
   c. [Some/three of the snakes] were black.

3 Distribution in texts

3.1 Narratives: Discourse status

See Gundel et al. (1993) for a clearer discussion of these issues; this familiar/uniqueness definite distinction made in section 2.3.2 is closely related.

**Indefinites** are used to introduce novel or unexpected discourse referents into the story.

**Definite descriptions** (the N) are used to refer back to discourse referents that have already been introduced or whose existence can be inferred.

**Distal demonstrative descriptions** (that N) are often used to refer back to previously mentioned discourse referents.

**Demonstrative pronouns** (that, this) are often used to refer back to previously, recently mentioned discourse referents.

**Pronouns** are typically used to refer back to discourse referents that are ‘in focus’ or under discussion.

3.2 Procedural texts

- Can be useful for anaphoric contexts: the movement or manipulation of a single item or person is often tracked throughout one of these texts, making it useful for studying definiteness.

3.3 Conversations

- Useful for tracking discourse referents.
- Includes question-answer pairs, including naturally occurring instances of sluicing (which tracks indefinites).
- Questions and negation are more common in conversations, and are common environments for finding narrow-scope indefinites such as Negative Polarity Items.

4 Constructions that care about definiteness and specificity

The constructions or positions below are ones that are frequently associated with definite or specific interpretations, although languages vary as to what the precise restrictions are.

4.1 Some constructions requiring definiteness/specificity

Many of these positions require specific or definite noun phrases. Thus, they prohibit not only weak indefinites, but in some languages, all quantifiers.

**Subject positions** must be definite and/or specific in many languages.

**Topics** must be specific or definite in many languages, typically cannot be quantificational.

**High modification** outside of the article or demonstrative, especially possessive NPs or relative clauses, forces a definite or specific interpretation of the noun phrase in many languages.

**Optional object case** as an instance of **differential object marking** can only occur with definite or specific objects in many languages.

**Optional object agreement** also called ‘clitic doubling’, is another instance of **differential object marking** that can only occur with definite or specific objects in many languages.

**Word order** permutations or scrambling often are sensitive to specific or definite interpretations; ‘theme’ or definite/specific noun phrases can sometimes be obligatorily preverbal, although in Algonquian they are obligatorily postverbal. Additionally, languages such as Hungarian require that quantifiers appear preverbally.

**Partitives** Require that the inner noun phrase be definite and the outer be specific, as described above in section 2.3.5.

4.2 Some constructions requiring indefiniteness

These constructions in many cases double as tests for strength (weak vs. strong).

**Existential constructions** require a weak/indefinite noun phrase.

**Predicate positions** are often obligatorily weak or indefinite
Nominal modifiers such as 'apple picker' are often weak or indefinite, or completely bare.

Incorporated nominals are closely related to nominal modifiers and are also often obligatorily non-referential or indefinite. This can include cases of 'pseudo-incorporation', where the NP or noun is not actually phonologically incorporated into the verb.

Antipassives are required with indefinite or quantificational objects in many languages, especially those with ergative alignment.

5 References


Heim, Irene. 1982. The semantics of definite and indefinite noun phrases. Doctoral Diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst.


