Definites, demonstratives, and reference

The project investigates the meaning and use of definite referential phrases - plain definites as well as demonstratives, pronouns as well as full lexical noun phrases (the woman, this man, that child, dieses Auto, jene Behauptung, he, she, it, der(da), diese, etc.), mainly in English and German, but also other languages, as they occur in spoken language as well as in written discourse.

The classic assumption still is that such phrases are referentially unambiguous in the discourse domain, which is taken to mean that their referents are either unique in the discourse domain, or at least familiar to the speaker and addressee. This assumption may be in part correct, but it is meanwhile generally understood that it covers only some of uses of these expressions.

On the one hand, there are many examples that show the insufficiency of the simple uniqueness theory, in particular cases of s.c. weak definites (e.g. I was talking to the student of a linguist [Poesio] does not presuppose that there is exactly one student of a linguist; He put his hand on her knee [Löbner] does not presuppose that he had only hand and she had only one knee; and Peter is going to the supermarket does not presuppose that there is exactly one supermarket in the discourse domain that Peter is going to, but may be used to mean rather something like Peter is going to do the shopping [Carlson]). On the other hand the classic theory does not explain differences even between closely related languages, e.g., the fact that English often forbids the use of the definite article, where German requires it, and vice versa (e.g. Das Leben ist schwer translates into Life is hard – the English with a definite article added (*The life is hard) would be ungrammatical and so would be the German without (*Leben ist schwer). Also the fact, observed long ago by Karen Ebert, Dietrich Hartmann, and others that some German or Frisian dialects have two distinct definite articles, each with its own restrictions, does not fit the simple classic theory.

To account for such facts one would probably need a to take a broader, if you like cognitive, view of definite reference than the simple form of the uniqueness or familiarity theory can offer, and one would probably also need to be more specific about the notion of reference. In particular, we may need to take into account factors as such the focus of attention of speaker and listener as well as the common knowledge of speaker and listener. Such parameters are required both to distinguish demonstratives from regular definites, and to distinguish among the different forms of demonstrative reference: der vs. dieser vs. jener, etc.

The methods used in the project consist of corpus work, experimental psycho- and neurolinguistic work, field work, plus theoretical work from which the hypotheses for the empirical work are derived.

-------------

Some references to related work by the CL Project Group that show some aspects of what we have been doing so far (downloadable from the homepages of Bosch, Hinterwimmer, and Umbach, all accessible via the CL homepage http://www.cogsci.uni-osnabrueck.de/~CL/)

Peter Bosch, Sascha Alexeyenko, Kerstin Brukamp, Maria Cieschinger, Xiaoye Deng, Peter König (2011) Salience is only a poor substitute for uniqueness. (PRE-CogSci 2011, Workshop on Production of referring expressions, July 20, 2011, Boston)


Malte Wöstmann, Carina D. Krause, Peter König, Peter Bosch (2011) An ERP study of linguistic preference and world knowledge plausibility in pronoun resolution. (Talk at Experimental Pragmatics 2011, June 2-4, 2011, Barcelona)


In addition, there are a number of BSc/MSc theses that are linked to the project, downloadable from the CL homepage http://www.cogsci.uni-osnabrueck.de/~CL/ (menu item completed BSc/MSc theses)