Weak definites
Linguistic evidence for cognitive constraints

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Look ahead

I. some observations on German contracted Prepositional Phrases and their referential status
II. some observations on English Weak Definites and their restrictions
III. an attempt to explain these observations via context-dependent identity conditions
I. German Prepositional Phrases & Contractions

German PPs generally have a structure like English PPs, but for some prepositions they also permit what looks like a contraction of preposition and definite determiner:

(1) a. Maria ging {zu dem / zum} Supermarkt  
   b. Maria went to the supermarket.

(2) a. Maria stand {an dem / am} Fenster  
   b. Maria was standing at the window.

We speak of contracted PPs (cPPs) and regular PPs (rPPs).

Note that both cPPs and rPPs translate into the same English equivalents.

I a. Distributional restrictions on cPPs

cPPs) are not always interchangeable with rPPs.

(3) Peter sitzt {in dem /* im} Auto, das er kaufen will.  
    [Peter is sitting in the car that he wants to buy]

(4) Nächste Woche ist Peter {im /* in dem} Urlaub.  
    [Next week Peter is on holiday]
I b. A semantic difference between cPPs & rPPs

The restriction on interchangeability hints at a semantic difference, which is brought out under VP ellipsis:

(5)  
   a.  Peter sitzt in dem Auto, und Karl auch.  
       [Peter is sitting in the car and Karl too]  
       is true only if Peter and Karl are sitting in the same car
   b.  Peter sitzt im Auto, und Karl auch.  
       [Peter is sitting in the car and Karl too]  
       is true if P & K are sitting either in the same or in different cars

I c. Different referential status of cPPs & rPPs

cPPs cannot easily pick up previously introduced discourse referents; they behave like indefinites and unlike definites:

(6)  
   Am Ulmenweg ist ein neuer Supermarkt mit einer herrlichen Käsetheke. Warst du schon  
   {bei dem / #beim / #bei einem} Supermarkt?  
   There’s a new supermarket on Elm Street with a great cheese counter. Have you already been to  
   {the / #a} supermarket?
Id1. Referentiality explains difference in VP ellipsis

The referential status of cPPs explains their behaviour under VP ellipsis.

- The rPP version in (5a) ascribes to Peter and Karl the same relation to the same discourse referent (a specific contextually determinate car), while

- the cPP version in (5b) ascribes to Peter and Karl the same property

(5)  
\[
\begin{align*}
&a. \quad \text{Peter sitzt in dem Auto, und Karl auch.} \\
&\quad \lambda x. \text{SIT}(x, \text{IN}(\text{CAR}(y))) \quad \text{Peter …}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&b. \quad \text{Peter sitzt im Auto, und Karl auch.} \\
&\quad \lambda x. \text{SIT}(\text{IN}_\text{CAR}(x)) \quad \text{Peter …}
\end{align*}
\]

Id2. Referentiality explains distributional difference

The referential status of cPPs explains the lack of their interchangeability with rPPs:

(3)  
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Peter sitzt \{in dem /*im\} Auto, das er kaufen will.} \\
&\quad \text{[Peter is sitting in the car that he wants to buy]}
\end{align*}
\]

The relative clause would restrict the reference to a particular car; but since in the cPP variant there is no referential term that could be restricted, the cPP variant of (3) is semantically odd.

In (4) the rPP variant would require reference to a particular holiday – which is not a plausible interpretation.

(4)  
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Nächste Woche ist Peter \{im /*in dem\} Urlaub.} \\
&\quad \text{[Next week Peter is on holiday]}
\end{align*}
\]
II a. Ambiguity of English PPs

The difference between German cPPs and rPPs surfaces in English as an ambiguity of the PP:

(7) Mary went to the supermarket, and Alice did, too.

is true if either M & A went to the same supermarket, or if both went shopping, not necessarily in the same supermarket.

If a specific supermarket has been introduced into the discourse, we get only an anaphoric referential reading: M & A went to the same supermarket.

(8) There’s a new supermarket on Elm Street with a great cheese counter.
Mary went to the supermarket, and Alice did, too.

II b. English WDs: lexical restrictions (1)

Carlson et al (2006) observe that WD reading is not easily available for all lexical nouns:

(9) Mary went to the store/ the desk.
(10) I'll read the newspaper / the book when I get home.
(11) Open the window / the cage will you please?

The sentences with desk, book, and cage resist a WD interpretation, as is shown by VP anaphora:

(9) a. Mary went to the store, and Alice did, too.
    (not necessarily same store)
    b. Mary went to the desk, and Alice did, too.
    (must be same desk).
II b. English WDs: lexical restrictions (2)

Carlson et al (2006) observe that availability of WD readings is restricted by verbs or prepositions governing the DP

(12) Mary went to the store / went behind the store.
(13) Mary closed the window / smashed the window.

VP anaphora demonstrates that the WD reading is not automatically available:

(12) a. Mary went to the store, and Alice did, too.
    (not necessarily same store)
b. Mary went behind the store, and Alice did, too.
    (must be same store)

II c. English WDs: similar to bare singulars

Why should there be this difference between store and desk, or between open and smash, or between to and behind?

Similar restrictions are known from bare singular NPs:

(14) a. He went to prison.
b. # He walked to prison.
c. # He went past prison.
d. # He went to penitentiary.

(14a) has only a modifier reading (no specific prison referred to), but this reading – which licences the omission of the definite determiner – is not available in (b)- (d), which accordingly turn out odd.
Carlson et al. 2006 hint that weak definites, like bare singulars, bring about meaning enrichment – because they designate some typical or habitual activity.

- *being in prison* (unlike *being in the garden shed*) is not just being in the location, but more: being incarcerated.
- *going to the cinema* (unlike *going to the desk*) on the modifier reading means going there with the usual film-watching intentions.

The denotation of phrases like *going to the cinema* thus cannot be the result of a merely compositional process:

There are meaning components to the modifier or weak definite reading of *going to the cinema* that are not the result of composing the meanings of *go* + *to* + *cinema*.

Also *indefinites*, which are otherwise truth-conditionally identical to weak definites do not bring in meaning enrichment: *going to a cinema* just means going to a cinema.
Enriched interpretations of WDs require VP denotations that abstract from the referential identity of the denotation of the (prepositional) object NP:

(15) a. Fred went to the shop, and Alice did, too.  
     (same or different shop)

requires a concept of going to the shop that abstracts from the particular referent of the shop to permit the weak reading.

b. Fred went to the desk, and Alice did, too.  
     (same desk only)

would similarly require a concept of going to the desk to permit the weak reading – but normally no such concept is available. So we are here stuck with only the referential reading.

III a. English WDs: concepts required

Same for German WDs:

(16) a. Fred las die Zeitung und Anna auch.  
     (same or different paper)

requires a concept of reading the newspaper for a weak definite reading – which is available; hence the ambiguity.

b. Fred las das Buch und Anna auch.  
     (same book only)

requires a concept of reading the book for a weak definite reading – which is normally not available.
III b. German cPPs: concepts required

Same for German cPPs, which have only the WD reading:

(3) Peter sitzt \{in dem /*im\} Auto, das er kaufen will.

[Peter is sitting in the car that he wants to buy]

requires a concept of sitting in the car that one wants to buy (with no reference to a particular car!) – which is not easily available.

(3) Peter sitzt \{in dem / im\} Auto.

only requires a concept of sitting in the car – which is available; hence the cPP with its weak reading is permissible.

III c. WDs: making concepts available

Lexical restrictions on WD readings are restrictions on the ease with which the required concepts are available.

Let’s test this for

(15) b. Fred went to the desk, and Alice did, too. (same desk only)

Suppose we have this game with competing teams of people who carry out various problem solving tasks and deposit a written report of their result at a desk assigned to their group, etc.

Obviously, in this context (15b) would also have the reading on which Fred and Alice went to different desks, namely those of their respective group.

The context makes a concept of going to the desk available!
III d. WDs: new identities required

What is required for the new concept, and what the game context does, is

establish new situation-specific identity conditions for “the desk”, under which all desks that fulfil the same role in the game count as identical.

This role-in-the-game identity of desks differs from the default physical identity of desks.

Similarly, when you play the everyday game of going to the shop, the identity of “the shop” shifts to the more abstract role-in-the-game identity – which differs from physical identity.

III d. WDs: contextual types

WDs, including German cPPs,

- differ from regular definites by not being discourse referential (we saw that they can’t function anaphorically).
- Instead they refer to what may be called “contextual types” (which is not a form of discourse reference!)
- are straightforwardly definite (with the usual presuppositions).

Contextual types are not kinds, as in generic kind reference, but something vaguely similar and restricted to contexts that enable the relevant identity conditions.
The meaning enrichment that comes with weak definites is a direct consequence of the establishment of the types:

You learn to count as identical all (physical) shops that are alike with respect to your going there and doing your shopping.

You learn to count as identical – in the game – all (physical) desks that are alike with respect to your going there to deposit your group’s results.

That’s why there is no meaning enrichment in the otherwise truth-conditionally identical indefinites: Indefinites presuppose neither discourse referents nor contextual types.

Unlike Carlson et al. (2006) we are
- not assuming lexical restrictions for the availability of weak definite readings, but
- we believe that what looks like lexical restrictions are productive conceptual restrictions, and, furthermore that
- these restrictions depend on, and hence can be manipulated by, the choice of context.
Thank you!