

An Empirical Investigation of Typicality and Uniqueness Effects on Article Choice

Previous analyses of English definite article use have generally taken one of two approaches, characterizable as FAMILIARITY (e.g. Heim 1983, Prince 1992) and UNIQUENESS (e.g. Hawkins 1978, Lewis 1979, Kadmon 1990, Roberts 1993, Gundel *et al.* 1993). More recently, Roberts (2003) has argued that use of a definite NP presupposes that its referent is both contextually unique in bearing the property in question *and* WEAKLY FAMILIAR, i.e. an entity whose existence is entailed by the local context of utterance. However, problematic for all previous analyses are attributive-possession NPs (McKercher 2001); consider (1) in a context where two similar-looking men, one of whom is using a cane, are in view:

(1) [to companion] The man with the/a cane is my neighbor.

The felicity of both the definite and indefinite articles here suggests that neither (weak) familiarity nor uniqueness is driving article choice for NPs of this type; if the unique cane is taken to be (weakly) familiar (being clearly visible), then the indefinite should be disfavored, while if it taken not to be (weakly) familiar, then the definite should be disfavored; however, neither is the case. Rather, we argue that what is relevant for the (in)definiteness of an attributive-possession NP is whether it is interpreted as property-denoting or object-denoting (Partee 1987). Property-denoting NPs are generally indefinite (e.g. *Pat is {a/#the} marvel*); their uniqueness/familiarity status is irrelevant. Robert's felicity conditions, on the other hand, apply only to object-denoting NPs, which may be either definite or indefinite, depending on their uniqueness/familiarity status. The results of our empirical study suggest various factors contribute to whether an attributive-possession NP is interpreted as object-denoting or property-denoting.

Participants (n=58) were presented with various scenes consisting of four silhouetted human figures optionally wearing/holding various items, which varied with respect to their typicality and uniqueness within the context. Participants were told that a remote teammate would be seeing the same figures but arranged differently. One figure would begin to flash on the participant's screen only, and s/he would direct the purported teammate to select the corresponding figure. All responses were recorded; only those NPs with either a definite or indefinite attributive-possession NP were considered. Participants were then asked to rank the objects for typicality on a four-point scale.

Consistent with previous accounts, our results reveal that an attributive-possession NP is sensitive to the uniqueness of that NP's referent (n = 57, $F(1,57) = 17.21$, $p < .001$). However, when uniqueness is not satisfied, participants rely significantly on the typicality of that NP ($t(57) = 2.22$, $p < .04$); i.e. the more **atypical** the referent (as judged by the participants themselves), the more likely it is to be interpreted as object-denoting, favoring the definite. Conversely, the more **typical** the referent, the less likely it is to be construed as a discourse entity in its own right and, therefore, the more likely it will be interpreted as property-denoting, thus favoring the indefinite.