

**Specificity and Incomplete Descriptions**  
*dedicated to Tanya Reinhart*

I. Specificity

I.A. Unusually Wide Scope Indefinites

- (1) Each teacher overheard the rumor [RC that *a student of mine* had been called before the dean]. Fodor & Sag (1982)
- in situ:*  $\forall_{\text{teac}} \exists_{\text{student}}$   
*wide:*  $\exists_{\text{student}} \forall_{\text{teacher}}$

Relative clauses are typically scope islands:

- (2) At least one teacher heard a rumor about every student.
- in situ:*  $\exists \geq 1_{\text{teacher}} \exists_{\text{rumor}} \forall_{\text{student}}$   
*wide:*  $\forall_{\text{student}} \exists_{\text{rumor}} \exists \geq 1_{\text{teacher}}$

- (3) At least one teacher heard a rumor [RC that *every student* had cheated].
- in situ:*  $\exists \geq 1_{\text{teacher}} \exists_{\text{rumor}} \forall_{\text{student}}$   
*wide:*  $* \forall_{\text{student}} \exists_{\text{rumor}} \exists \geq 1_{\text{teacher}}$

- (3') At least one teacher heard a rumor that Steven had cheated.
- $\text{Steve}_i \exists \geq 1_{\text{teacher}} \exists_{\text{rumor-about-}i}$   
 $\text{Steve}_i \exists_{\text{rumor-about-}i} \exists \geq 1_{\text{teacher}}$

- (4) Every professor rewarded every student who read some book he had recommended Abusch (1993)
- Possible interpretation:  $\forall_{\text{prof}} \exists_{\text{book}} \forall_{\text{student}}$

Reinhart (1992/1995/1997): Use of choice functions to interpret “specific indefinites”.  
A function  $f$  is a choice function (CH( $f$ )) if it applies to any non-empty set and yields a member of that set.. (1997:372)

- (5) If we invite some philosopher, Max will be offended.  
(6)  $\exists f (\text{CH}(f) \ \& \ \text{we invite } f(\text{philosopher}) \rightarrow \text{Max will be offended})$   
'a function exists, s.t. if we invite the philosopher it suggests, Max will be offended'  
Reinhart's (1997:374):

Kratzer (1998): Indefinites are ambiguous, between the usual quantificational interpretation and one on which they involve a parameterized choice function. Both types can lead to specific interpretations.

Parameterized choice function:

- choice function: an (often very) partial function from sets of individuals that picks a unique individual from any non-empty set in its domain.
- parameterization:
  - complex pronominal element,  $f_x$ 
    - $f$ : function variable, value maps individuals into choice functions
    - $x$ : the parameter, the argument of  $f$ . Binding is pragmatically given.
      - might be bound by a wider scope QP to yield “intermediate scope”
      - might be bound by the speaker [default assumption?]
  - $f(x)$ : a choice function, takes set denoted by CN as its argument

(7) Each husband had forgotten a certain date—his wife’s birthday.

(7')  $\forall x(\text{husband}(x) \rightarrow \text{had forgotten}(x, f_x(\text{date})))$

Here, the denotation of *a certain date* is  $f_x$ , which is cataphoric to *his wife’s birthday*, is a function from husbands (the binder of  $x$ ) to (unique) dates (chosen from the domain specified by *date*).

There’s evidence that the two kinds of specificity—that involved in ordinary quantificational indefinites and that in the functional types—behave differently. Back to this in a moment.

Schwarz (2005) argues that quantificational and functional indefinites represent different kinds of “long distance” indefinites:

- a) Functional indefinites (including those with *certain*) always have the potential for long-distance intermediate scope (yielding the sort of reading we see in (2)), but
- b) It isn’t the case that all indefinites that can have a long-distance intermediate scope interpretation are functional, and
- c) Long-distance intermediate readings with functional indefinites differ in certain ways from long-distance intermediate readings with non-functional indefinites, a difference that comes out when they receive intermediate readings under the scope of a downward entailing or non-monotone quantificational NP.

Support for (a):

(8) Every boy finished the cookies a certain woman he knows had brought.

(8) can be used to (“somewhat secretly”) express the speaker’s belief that every boy finished the cookies his mother had brought. This “entails that for every boy there is a woman such that he finished the cookies she had brought, and thereby indeed expresses an intermediate reading of sorts.”

Support for (b):

(9) has a functional specific interpretation. For example, the speaker might have in mind the function ‘mother of’:

(9) Every child who hates a certain woman he knows will develop a serious complex.  
Possible interpretation: ‘every child who hates his mother will develop a serious complex’

Compare with (10):

- (10) a. Each boy ate all the cookies someone had brought.
- b. Every boy who hates someone will develop a serious complex.

Support for (c):

- (11) a. No student reads every article that some professor has published.  
‘there's no student s.t. for some professor that student reads every article that that professor has published’
- b. No student reads every article that a certain professor has published.  
‘there's no student s.t. for a certain professor (his advisor) that student reads every article that that professor has published’

But these intermediate readings are not truth-conditionally equivalent. E.g.:

- If some student at MIT read all the articles by a professor in Amsterdam, (a) is false but (b) may still be true.
- The fact that no student read every article by his advisor may be sufficient to verify (b), but not (a).

Is the free variable required for the intermediate reading?:

- (12)a. [Every professor]<sub>i</sub> rewarded every student who read *a certain* book *she*<sub>i</sub> had reviewed for the New York Times.
- (12)a'. [Every professor]<sub>i</sub> rewarded every student who read *a certain* book reviewed in the New York Times.

Portner (2002) and Schwarzschild (2002): restriction of the domain of the existential operator in the (quantificational) indefinite to a singleton set.

Geurts (2000b): specific interpretations involve *backgrounding*. Emphasizes the parallel with definites:

- (13) Every teacher heard a rumor that the student had cheated.

Local satisfaction in context:

- (14) In our school, every teacher has a favorite student, one she thinks can do no wrong. Unfortunately, yesterday all these favorites were suddenly in the doghouse. Every teacher received reliable evidence that the student had cheated.

I.B. Epistemically Specific Indefinites and *certain*

- (15) I want to meet a (certain) woman who goes to my church.
- (16) Some man wants to meet every woman.  
Each man wants to meet a woman

Tensed complements as scope islands (May 1977):

- (17) a. Some politician will address every rally in John's district.  
b. Some politician thinks that he will address every rally in John's district.
- (18) Mary hopes that no friend of mine will win.  
*no friend of mine* has only narrow interpretations:  
a)  $\checkmark$  Mary hopes that nobody who happens to be a friend of mine will win

- b) √ Mary hopes that no one among those shaggy people over there (who I describe as my friends) will win [the partitive-like *none of those-friends-of-mine* reading, presumably by domain restriction]
  - c) # there's no friend of mine who Mary hopes will win
- (19) Mary hopes that a friend of mine will win.  
has all three readings:
- a) √ Mary hopes that somebody who happens to be a friend of mine will win
  - b) √ Mary hopes that someone among those shaggy people over there (who I describe as my friends) will win [the *one of those-friends-of-mine* reading, presumably by domain restriction]
  - c) √ there's a friend of mine who Mary hopes will win
- (20) John believes that a particularly provocative abstract from MIT will be accepted.
- (21) Each judge believes that an abstract addressing his own recent theory will be accepted. [*de re*, intermediate scope]
- (22) Each child wishes that a certain Ninja turtle was his playmate. [*de re*, intermediate scope]

Hintikka (1986): *certain* needn't always take widest scope:

- (7) Each husband had forgotten a certain date—his wife's birthday.
- (23) According to Freud, every man unconsciously wants to marry a certain woman—his mother.
- (24) A certain sum of money will be paid for each quantity of this commodity. [modified from the *OED*]
- (25) The bank makes a certain profit out of each business transaction. The profit is the greater the larger is the amount of money involved in the transaction. [modified from the *OED*]
- (26) Jerry said that a certain woman of his acquaintance is interested in meeting you. [can have either reading]
- (27) There was a story in *Spy* about Solange. According to the story, she has moved to a *certain remote island in the Pacific*. I don't know which one, it was some exotic-sounding place. (Abusch & Rooth 1997:15)

Geurts (2000b) : No “need to know”

- (27) Wilma hat vor, irgendeinen Schweden zu heiraten.  
W. intends some-or-other Swede to marry  
'Wilma intends to marry a certain Swede, though I don't know which one'
- (7') #Each husband had forgotten the certain date.
- (29) Each husband had forgotten the particular date (he was supposed to remember).
- (30) Each husband had forgotten the specific date (of his anniversary).
- (31) I want to develop certain ideas about adjectives.

- (32) I want to develop some ideas about adjectives.
- (33) (32) is compatible with a situation where I don't yet actually have specific/particular/#certain ideas, but only think it desirable to get some and develop them.
- (34) I want to explore (some) particular/specific/\*certain hypotheses.

Projection tests:

- (35) James doesn't want a certain student to come to his lecture.  
Doesn't seem possible to get:  $\neg\exists$
- (36) Did Steven order a certain kind of ice cream?  
Here, can get *certain* wide wrt Steven, anchored by speaker (or addressee?)
- (37) John might want a certain kind of ice cream.  
 $\diamond \exists_{\text{certain-ice-cream}}$   
But again, this has to do with a quasi-buletic *might*. Try:
- (38) John might see a certain kind of ice cream.  
 $\exists_{\text{certain-ice-cream}} \diamond$

Summing up, two semantic features distinguish *certain*:

- **the epistemic familiarity implication:** that a given epistemic agent is familiar with a function associated with that description, which picks out a unique entity, giving the existential a singleton domain.
- **the anti-familiarity<sub>CG</sub> implication:** that the addressee is *not* familiar with such a function

- (39) Conventional content of *certain*:  
*certain* is a function from sets (or properties) to sets (properties) s.t.  
for a given CN denotation  $\zeta$ , *certain* is defined only if :there is a salient,  
familiar<sub>CG</sub> epistemic agent  $a$ , and  
when defined, for any CN denotation  $\zeta$  ,  
 $f(\zeta) = \lambda x. \zeta(x) \ \& \ \exists f_{\langle e, \langle \langle e, t \rangle, e \rangle \rangle} [\text{familiar}_a(f) \ \& \ \neg \text{familiar}_{CG}(f) \ \& \ f(a, \zeta) = x]$

Because  $f$  is not a function of  $x$ , its value does not vary as a function of narrow scope.

### I.C. Specific Indefinite *this*

From Prince (1981):

- (40a) “It’s hard to take pride in a bridge you’re never gonna cross, in a door you’re never gonna open. You’re mass-producing things and you never see the end result of it. [muses] I worked for a trucker one time. And I got *this tiny satisfaction* when I loaded a truck. At least I could see the truck depart loaded.”  
(Steelworker, Terkel, 1974, pp.1-2)
- b) \*...I got *the tiny satisfaction*...
- c) ...I got *a tiny satisfaction*...

indefinite *this* NPs can occur in existential *there* sentences:

- (41b) “One time I went to the roof of this project and *there*’s this big black guy about six seven on top of the stairs. He had his back to me...” (Fireman; Terkel, 1974, p.756)

they do not trigger a uniqueness implication:

- (42a) “*This fella we had working here*, he tried to hide the fact that he was feminine.” (Hair stylist; Terkely, 1974, p.320)

b) *The fella we had working here*, he...

- (43a) “I got drunk one Friday night and while I was careening around town I ran into *this guy I knew from the past*.” (Hockey player; Terkel, 1974, p.504)

b) ...I ran into *the guy I knew from the past*.

- (44) I want *this red car*, not that one.

From Maclaran (1982):

- (45a) He put on a/#this 31 cent stamp on the envelope, so he must want it to go airmail.

b) He put on a/this 31 cent stamp on the envelope, and only realized later that it was worth a fortune because it was unperforated.

Ionin (2006):

- (46a) Sarah wants to/must read a/this book about butterflies, but she can’t find it.

b) Sarah wants to read/must a/#this book about butterflies, but she can’t find one.

- (47a) Lorraine didn’t read a/this book about butterflies because she couldn’t read it.

b) Lorraine didn’t read a/#this book about butterflies because she couldn’t find one.

- (48b) A sentence of the form [*this<sub>ref</sub>* α] ζ expresses a proposition only in those utterance contexts *c* where the following felicity condition is fulfilled: the speaker of *c* intends to refer to exactly one individual  $x_c$  in *c*, and there exists a property φ which the speaker considers noteworthy in *c*, and  $x_c$  is both α and φ in *c*. When this condition is fulfilled, [*this<sub>ref</sub>* α] ζ expresses that proposition which is true at an index *I* if  $x_c$  is ζ at *I* and false otherwise. [Ionin ’06, my emphasis]

- (49a) John dreamt that he was in this Eskimo restaurant

b) Poor old delusional John wanted to eat in this Eskimo restaurant. (Prince)

- (50a) Sarah said that she found this unicorn in her garden. Unicorns don’t exist, so she is either lying or crazy!

b) #Sarah found this unicorn in her garden. But unicorns don’t exist!

Roberts (2002) on demonstratives:

- (51) **Informational Existence and Uniqueness of Definite NPs** (informal):

Given a context *C*, use of a definite description NP<sub>*i*</sub> presupposes that there is a discourse referent *i* in the Domain of *C* which is the unique familiar discourse

referent contextually entailed to satisfy the (possibly liberalized) descriptive content of NP<sub>i</sub>.

- (52) **Presuppositions of Demonstrative Definite NPs** (informal):  
 Use of a (non-)proximal demonstrative NP<sub>i</sub> presupposes (a) that there is an accompanying demonstration  $\delta$  whose unique demonstratum, correlated with a weakly familiar discourse referent by virtue of being demonstrated, lies in the direction indicated by the speaker at a (non-)proximal distance to the speaker, and (b) that the weakly familiar discourse referent for the demonstratum is that which satisfies the familiarity presupposition of NP<sub>i</sub>.

More abstract demonstrations:

- (43) George ran a fever one evening last week.  
That time he ignored it.  
 But it happened again last night, and this time he called the doctor.
- (54) This sentence is short.
- (55) This is an ugly word: *hippopotamus*.
- (56) Do you know these new rose hybrids, Meidiland and Peace?
- (57) **Specific Indefinite *this*** (informal):  
 Given a context C, use of a description *this* CN presupposes that there is a salient epistemic agent who is familiar with a means of uniquely identifying a particular entity which is entailed by the agent's epistemic ground to satisfy the descriptive content CN. However, this entity is novel with respect to the CG.

The proximal form of the demonstrative is used to indicate that the demonstratum is (typically) close to the speaker's epistemic ground, and to draw attention to it. The conversational implicatures attending such a demonstratum is that there is a Relevant purpose in so drawing the addressee's attention, so that one expects to hear more about the referent.

A demonstration draws the attention of the interlocutors to the intended referent, so it's Retrievable. But why bother to draw attention if there is nothing of interest there: It would be irRelevant! This is the Topicality that Prince alluded to, Ionin's *noteworthiness*. Nothing needs to be stipulated.

Compare this to (39), the conventional content of *certain*:

- (39) Conventional content of *certain*:  
*certain* is a function from sets (or properties) to sets (properties) s.t.  
 for a given CN denotation  $\zeta$ , *certain* is defined only if :there is a salient,  
 familiar<sub>CG</sub> epistemic agent *a*, and  
 when defined, for any CN denotation  $\zeta$  ,  
 $f(\zeta) = \lambda x. \zeta(x) \ \& \ \exists f_{\langle e, \langle \langle e, t \rangle, e \rangle \rangle} [\text{familiar}_a(f) \ \& \ \neg \text{familiar}_{CG}(f) \ \& \ f(a, \zeta) = x]$

## I.D. Specificity Phenomena: A unified account

Crucial: Relational interpretations of CNs are pervasive, across DP type:

(58) Every car had a statue on the dashboard.

(59) Most of the cars had a puncture in every tire.

Sometimes they are conventionally triggered: with complements or possessives, with *certain*, etc. Other times, they are implicated.

It's not that the Determiner is ambiguous, but that you may or may not have a relational interpretation of the explicit restrictor, the CN.

Presuppositionality, Diesing: Specific/determinate domains.

These may be conventionally given (partitives) or conversationally implied (speakers' presuppositions).

Von Stechow (1998):

(60) I'm not sure yet whether there are any mistakes at all in this book manuscript, but we can definitely not publish it...

a. if there turn out to be some major mistakes in there

b. #if some mistakes are major

Now notice the close resemblance between these three closely related phenomena:

- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| a) definite:                      | [+fam <sub>CG</sub> , +unique <sub>CG</sub> ]                       |
| b) partitive indefinite:          | [+fam <sub>CG</sub> , -unique <sub>CG</sub> ] (definite complement) |
| c) epistemic specific indefinite: | [+fam <sub>x</sub> , +unique <sub>x</sub> ] x ≠ CG                  |

## II. Incomplete Descriptions and the Retrieval of Intended Domains

### RETRIEVABILITY:

A simple story about how we retrieve the intended content of anaphoric and elliptical expressions, however they are signaled and licensed:

- A speaker can only be reasonably assured that anaphora or ellipsis will be successful if she can assume that at the time of utterance her interlocutors will be attending to the intended referent, or to something very much like it.
- At any given time, what we intend is the central factor in determining what we attend to. Our goals and commitments thus direct our attention.
- The exchange of information in a discourse is organized around questions for discussion. The goal of conversation at any given point is to address the question currently under discussion, and there are rational constraints on which questions can be felicitously raised, given what previous questions remain unresolved (Roberts 1996). The upshot of this is that in making an utterance the speaker can reasonably expect that a competent, cooperative addressee who is engaged in the

discussion will be attending to the resolution of the question under discussion (a semantic entity—a set of alternatives).

- (d) Hence, in a rational interchange the retrieval of what has been omitted is necessarily dependent either on the question under discussion or, if the addressee's attention is elsewhere, on whatever her evident immediate goals lead her to attend to in that extra-linguistic sphere.
- (1') Margaret: How do you like your Compaq?  
Tim: It's not bad, but it's getting kind of old. Anyway, let's get back to business. What do you think of this budget?  
Margaret: [gesturing with her thumb toward the middle of the room]  
Could we add some money to replace that?

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