Inclusion-based definiteness in Mansi

Overview. Schwarz (2009) proposes a split between definite determiners: weak definites encode uniqueness, while strong definites encode both uniqueness and familiarity. In German, NPs with a weak article refer to contextually unique entities and occur in part–whole bridging contexts. Strong articles are used anaphorically, including in relational anaphora ("producer–product" bridging).

Cross-linguistically, strong definiteness may be the only marked option, with weak definites remaining morphologically unmarked. This pattern is found in Akan (Arkoh and Matthewson 2013) and Mandarin (Jenks 2018). I argue that Northern Mansi matches neither German, nor Akan/Mandarin systems. In Mansi, marked direct objects encode familiarity and do not require the uniqueness presupposition. I show that the behavior of marked objects can be derived from an inclusion relation that underlies partitive-specificity.

Mansi is a Uralic articleless language spoken in Western Siberia, Russia. The data presented in this paper are novel and come from my own fieldwork.

DOM in Mansi. Mansi exhibits Differential Object Marking (DOM; Rombandeeva (1973)). Across languages, DOM tends to mark "prominent" direct objects (DOs; Moravcsik (1978), Bossong (2011)). Mansi marks DOs with special Subject-Object (SO) verb conjugation (1). DO marking is expressed only on verbs via a number agreement morpheme.

(1) joti owil-t **pasport** politsija-n ta tot-is-**#(l)**-um
after end-LOC passport police-LAT ADD take-PST-SG.O-1SG.S
[I recently found a passport on the street. I was thinking for a long time whom should I give it to.] 'In the end, I took the passport to the police'.
Consultants' comment: *"[With SO conjugation] it is implied that we're talking about the passport that I found."*

Semantics of marked objects. In (1), "passport" is an anaphoric referent and it triggers the SO agreement. This aligns with expectations for strong definites. However, DOs are also obligatorily marked in part–whole contexts, even when the part is not unique (cf. (2) and (3)):

(2) sāt min-am jujpālt vaśa **rul** sakwata-s-**#(t-e)**
week go-RES later V. steering.wheel break-PST-SG.O-3SG.SUBJ
[Vasya bought a new car.] 'A week later, Vasya broke the steering wheel'.

(3) sāt at jalas-is apśi-te **tel'aki** pasat-apt-is-**#(t-e)**
week NEG go-PST[3SG] brother-POSS.3SG wheel puncture-ASP-PST-SG.O-3SG.S
[Vasya bought a new car.] 'Not even a week passed before his brother punctured a wheel'.

(2) is unexpected under Schwarz (2009)'s analysis, since part–whole bridging is predicted to be expressed via a weak definite or remain unmarked. (3) violates uniqueness, so it should not bear a definiteness marker at all (Clark (1975)).

The same holds for partitive-specific DOs, which denote non-unique (non-maximal) entities

but nevertheless require SO conjugation:

(4) taw **japloka** te-s-$^{\#}$**(t-e)** / **japloka-t** te-s-$^{\#}$**(an-e)**
she apple eat-PST-SG.O-3SG.S / apple-PL eat-PST-PL.O-3SG.S
[Masha bought apples and bananas.] 'She ate an apple / some apples [and gave the remaining fruit to her brother]'.

Cross-linguistically, partitive-specific NPs are typically treated as indefinites, since their semantics is incompatible with the uniqueness presupposition of definites (Farkas 2002).

In comparison, SO agreement is banned with unfamiliar, newly introduced referents:

(5) tot Pet'a amp titt-i-**(**$^{\#}$**t-e)**
there P. dog feed-NPST-SG.O-3SG.S
[What's going on on the street?] 'Petya is feeding (some) dog out there'.
Consultants' comment: *"If you use '-te', then it means it's Petya's dog."*

Analysis. Marked DOs above are familiar but do not presuppose uniqueness. In (1), familiarity follows from anaphoricity. In (4), the referents are subsets of a familiar superset-referent. Examples (2)-(3) involve part-whole relations, but unlike canonical bridging, the relevant parts are not required to be unique.

Schwarz (2009) treats part–whole bridging as weak definiteness, with a parthood property encoded in the NP's denotation. However, weak definites still presuppose uniqueness. Strong definites, on the other hand, introduce an anaphoric index enforcing familiarity. For Mansi, I propose that all marked DOs introduce indices linked by a parthood relation:

$$[\mathrm{NP}]_{\langle i,j\rangle} \text{ triggers SO agreement iff } \exists x_i\, \exists y_j \left(x_i \sqsubseteq y_j\right).$$

Crucially, this relation does not require proper parthood, allowing the part and the whole to coincide. This explains (1), where $i{=}j$ and the marked object is simply an anaphoric NP.

Note that the parthood relation in this case ranges over both individuals and pluralities. It represents contextually licensed inclusion, whether mereological (part-whole relation) or set-theoretic (subset of a salient superset relation).

Discussion. DOM in Northern Mansi targets referents whose familiarity arises from their inclusion in a previously established discourse set or entity, irrespective of uniqueness. This class includes anaphoric NPs (where part and whole coincide), part-whole bridging NPs, and partitive-specific NPs in the sense of Farkas (2002). These expressions have not previously been recognized as forming a natural semantic class. Traditional analyses distribute them across strong definites, weak definites, and indefinites. In contrast, Mansi unifies them under a single semantic condition: familiarity encoded via a parthood relation, independent of uniqueness. It is also worth mentioning that in Mansi, NPs remain bare, and only definiteness of DOs can be expressed via verb indexing. Therefore, Mansi provides evidence for a previously unattested type of definiteness system.

References

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