Crosslinguistic Notions of (In)definiteness *

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Abstract

We argue that both Russellian and Heimian definites exist in natural languages. Our account captures both the commonality and difference between the two. Further, we suggest that the Russellian/Heimian distinction extends to indefinites too.

1 Introduction

One morning, Alice tells (1) to her husband, John, who doesn’t read newspapers. Her use of the president is dependent on the uniqueness of president in the fixed domain she is talking about (i.e. the U.S. politics situation). Let’s call it a Russellian domain (R-domain) and such a use of definite description Russellian definiteness (R-definiteness).

(1) Hey John, the president resigned!!

In the evening John describes a scene he saw in the afternoon with (2). Clearly, the described scene contains at least two dogs, thus the uniqueness of dogs on which his use of the dog is dependent is not w.r.t. the scene as a whole, but rather w.r.t. a domain dynamically constructed by his first sentence. Let’s call such a domain a Heimian domain (H-domain) and such a use of definite description Heimian definiteness (H-definiteness).

(2) I found a dog on the lawn. The dog was biting another dog........

An R-domain r is something out there, not necessarily within our comprehension in its totality. An H-domain h is the part of such an r which is known, or already familiar, to the conversation participants, which grows as the conversation proceeds. Then, assuming the lattice-theoretic ontology of [1], we say the denotation of a definite description is max(d, p), where max is a function that maps an R- or H-domain d and a property p to the maximal individual which has p in d; the uniqueness, then, follows from the singular morphology of the NP.

The Russellian/Heimian distinction (hereafter, the R/H distinction) is a result of the choice of the domain (cf. [2]). Regarding such domains as
resource situations in the situation semantic sense, we argue for the significance of the R/H distinction for English and other languages.

2 Inclusiveness
H-definiteness is named after [3], which reduces definiteness to familiarity. We formulate familiarity in terms of domains (situations), while [3] formulates it in terms of individuals (file cards). Here, [4]'s inclusiveness analysis is formulated as the maximality function max. For example, in (3), the boys refers to the three boys the speaker met.

(3) I met two boys at 10:00. I met another at 11:00. The boys were........

This is only natural, since the H-domain contains three boys when the boys is uttered.1

3 Accommodation
Cases like (1) could offer a problem for reduction of definiteness to familiarity, since the president wasn’t introduced explicitly in the discourse beforehand; hence [3]'s appeal to accommodation. However, we want to have some characterization of when accommodation is or isn’t possible.

In our view, “accommodated” definites are simply R-definites. (1) is a case in point; John knows that there is only one president in the U.S., so he only has to identify the R-domain (the U.S. politics situation). In contrast, in (2), it isn’t part of Alice’s knowledge that the H-domain (the witnessed scene), or some other R-domain, contains a unique dog, hence the oddity of starting with (2').

(2') I found the dog........

The two kinds of definiteness can interact (associative use). In (4), the first sentence constructs an H-domain, which contains a car x. It is part of common knowledge that a car has a unique fence, so it is known that x has a unique fence in its car situation, which is an R-domain (cf. [5]). This is why its fence is felicitous. In contrast, if x wasn’t initially introduced in the Heimian way, we wouldn’t have no clue as to which car’s car situation is used as resource; hence, starting the conversation with the second sentence of (4) is infelicitous.

(4) I saw a car. Its fence was........

4 Crosslinguistic ranges of definiteness
While that president can’t replace the president in (1), that dog can replace the dog in (2). Here we follow [6], [7] and [8] in treating both the P and that P (and proper names etc.) as definite descriptions. This means that, in explaining the replacement fact, we can’t appeal to something like
the description/direct-reference distinction; rather, we have to explain it as commonalities and differences between two kinds of descriptions.

My proposal here is that that \( P \) requires an H-domain while \( the \ P \) is compatible either with an H- or R-domain. The replacement fact about (1)–(2) follows from this proposal; \( the \) and that partially overlap in meaning (see also [9]).

Seen from this perspective, some languages appear to mark the R/H distinction overtly. For example, in Japanese, \( inu \) can appear either with or without an article, depending on the context (\( inu \) roughly means \( dog \)). The article \( sono \) can attach to \( inu \) only when it is used as an H-definite. Thus, \( sono \) can’t attach to the translation of \( the \ president \) in (1), while \( the \ dog \) in (2) can be translated into \( sono \ inu \). Thus, \( sono \) corresponds to both that and the Heimian \( the \).²

Further, I suggest that Japanese is not the only such language. For example, consider the examples (5)–(8) of Bavarian ([10], p. 69; originally from a paper by Hannes Scheutz) of Bavarian; \( da \) is Russellian and \( dea \) is Heimian (we assume that names are R-definites).³

(5) Da/*Dea Kare is kema.
   ‘Karl has arrived.’

(6) Da/*Dea Kini is gschtoabm.
   ‘The King has died.’

(7) Da/*Dea Schnaps is daia.
   ‘Schnaps is expensive.’

(8) I hab a Bia un Schnaps bschdait. Dea/*Da Schnaps war daia.
    ‘I have ordered a beer and a schnaps. The schnaps was expensive.’

5 Extension to indefinite descriptions
If indefinite descriptions are to be analyzed in terms of existential claims on a given domain (i.e. \( resource \ situation \)), then we will expect the R/H distinction is applicable to indefinites too. When an R-domain is chosen, a \( boy \) is to refer to an arbitrary boy. In contrast, if an H-domain is chosen, it is to refer to one of the boys already introduced in the discourse.⁴

The distinction overtly marked in Turkish noted in [12] can be viewed as such a case. [12] attempts to capture this distinction by stipulating two kinds of \( discourse \ referents \). In contrast, with the R/H distinction, we need no such new stipulation.⁵

6 Conclusion
In our analysis, H-definiteness is regarded as familiarity of H-domains, instead of familiarity of individuals; the latter is derivative from the former (also note that R-definites are also “familiar” in a sense; it is only that
Heimian familiarity, but not Russellian familiarity, is sensitive to discourse dynamics. Our move from individuals to domains is in line with [14]'s situation semantic arguments for the notion of resource situation (although not necessarily with his generalized-quantifier analysis of (in)definites).

From the considerations in the previous sections, we conclude that the Russellian/Heimian distinction is something too significant to miss.

Notes
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1In principle, a single conversation can involve two or more H-domains; each H-domain is part of some or other R-domain. However, the hearer can't finely distinguish them without a good clue, in which case she only assumes one big H-domain subsuming all these small H-domains, as in (3).

2Here we are only saying that H-definites are explicitly so marked in the grammar by sono; we don't intend here to analyze bare nominals in Japanese, which can mean not only R-definites but also indefinites and generics, and further, for some speakers, H-definites in addition.

In a more extensive study we will have to say that this in English and kono and ano in Japanese are also overt markers of H-definiteness (in fact, some Heimian uses of the translate to kono rather than sono).

3[10] cites a paper by Karen Ebert and says that Frisian also follows this pattern (p. 69). On the other hand, [11]'s data, also cited in [10], of Indonesian could also be interpreted as exhibiting a similar contrast (bare nominals vs. those with itu or -nya, the former of which is a demonstrative corresponding to that according to [11]).

Both [10] and [11] view the distinctions in terms of genericity. I can't examine their positions in this paper (cf. n. 2).

4Put in [7]'s terms, the R/H distinction for an indefinite then resides in whether its role should be assumed in an R-domain or an H-domain.

5[13] observes that similar contrasts are overtly marked in German and Dutch etc. in terms of linear order. I have nothing interesting to say about this here.

6Due to lack of space I can't discuss [15] or the technical details of the present analysis (quantification over situations, novelty of indefinites, etc.).

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