

## “Weak Definite NP’s”

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Theories of the semantics and pragmatics of the definite article may be roughly classified as “familiarity” theories of definites (e.g. Heim, 1982) or as “uniqueness” theories of definites (Russell, 1905). Both approaches have their well-known successes, and challenges. Poesio (1994), Barker (in press) and Carlson and Sussman (in press) have investigated several types of apparent counterexamples to both sorts of approaches. This paper presents a series of tests which isolate a set of non-relational nouns which, when definitized and placed in an appropriate environment, yield NP interpretation which are apparently truth-conditionally equivalent to narrow-scope indefinite NP’s—the category of interpretations commonly opposed to definites. Some examples of these appear in (1), on one likely reading:

1. a. Mary went to *the store*.  
b. I’ll read *the newspaper* when I get home.  
c. Fred listened to the Red Sox on *the radio*.

While an informed person might well be able to guess which store, newspaper, or radio is involved in the event described, the truth or falsity of such examples does not depend on such an identification—we only need some store, newspaper, or radio in order for the sentences to be true. In Carlson and Sussman (in press) experimental evidence derived from judgment tasks and eye-movement studies show that there is in fact a distinction between weak definite NP’s and other, more “normal” definite NP’s. The studies also strongly suggested that there is a distinction between the weak definite NP’s and indefinites as well. In the paper, I present some further experimental evidence along these lines which further supports the conclusion that there is a class of weak definite NP’s with the expected interpretations vis-à-vis regular definites.

The question remains as to why, if the weak definites are truth-conditionally like indefinites, the definite article nevertheless makes its appearance. Part of the account lies in the observation that the weak definite NP’s behave both syntactically and semantically like English bare singulars (Stvan, 1998) of the type exemplified in (2):

2. a. They found him in *bed*.  
b. The ship is at *sea/at port*.  
c. He’s in *jail/in prison/in church*.

It is argued that the semantics of these and the weak definites are both instances of “semantic incorporation” (van Geenhoven, 1998; Farkas and de Swart, 2004), where only *type*-denoting expressions are combined. Evidence is presented then that the types, once appropriately defined, appear both familiar and unique, and thus consistent with existing accounts of definiteness.

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