Maximize Presupposition and Two Types of Definite Competitors

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As noted by Hawkins (1991), an indefinite phrase of the form 'a NP' can only be felicitously uttered when there are two or more (contextually salient) individuals in the extension of the NP: the sentence in (1) is not acceptable because there can only be one mountain that is the tallest in Massachusetts. This fact has been attributed to a M(aximize) P(resupposition) constraint, which blocks the use of the indefinite determiner when the uniqueness presupposition of the definite determiner is satisfied. At first sight, German and Spanish challenge this line of reasoning: while the examples in (3) are as odd as (1) (if we assume monogamy), the simple variations in (4), where the relevant restriction is expressed in a R(elative) C(lause), are fine. The behavior of (4) is unexpected: given that the extension of the NP is a singleton set, MP should favor (6) over (4). This paper argues that MP *can* in fact capture the contrast between (3) and (4) once we pay a closer look at the interpretation of their definite counterparts.

Background. Heim (1991) suggests that speakers try to make their contributions presuppose as much as possible ("Maximize Presupposition.") On her view, the oddity of (1) is explained as follows: i) the sentence in (1) asserts that there's at least one tallest mountain in Massachusetts that I climbed; ii) (1) competes with the alternative in (2), which makes the same assertion, but also *presupposes* that there's exactly one tallest mountain in Mass; iii) (2) is preferred whenever its uniqueness presupposition is satisfied; and iv) since it is common ground that there's exactly one mountain that is the tallest in Mass, the definite in (2) blocks the use of the indefinite in (1) (see also Percus 2006 and Sauerland 2008 for further implementations of this idea.)

A challenge for MP? Spanish and German RCs. The unacceptability of the examples in (3) follows from the competition with their definite counterparts in (5), as predicted by MP. Surprisingly, when we replace 'of Juan' with the RC 'that is married to Juan', as in (4), the oddity disappears. Yet, given MP, the examples in (4) should be blocked by the availability of the definite description in (6). Note that we cannot resort to arguing that the RCs in (4) are non-restrictive (which would make the domain of quantification of the indefinite a non-singleton set). The RCs in (4) do not require the comma intonation associated with non-restrictive RCs and they are not necessarily speaker-oriented (see Potts 2003), as illustrated by (7).

A solution: Two types of definite determiners (Schwarz 2008). We contend that the contrast between (3) and (4) can be accounted by MP once we pay a closer look at the interpretation of their definite counterparts.

As discussed by Schwarz (2008), German has two definite articles: the weak article (which contracts with prepositions) is used to express uniqueness, as shown in (8). The strong article (which doesn't contract) is reserved for anaphoric (familiarity) uses, as in (9). Crucially, only the strong article can combine with restrictive relative clauses, as shown in (10). The difference between (3) and (4) can then be explained as follows: the indefinite description in (4)b competes with the strong article, which presupposes familiarity. Thus, MP predicts that (4)b will be felicitous as long as the woman in question is not familiar in the discourse. In contrast, the indefinite in (3)b competes both with the weak and the strong article ((11). Since (11)b carries a uniqueness presupposition that is contextually supported, (3)b is blocked.

What about Spanish? We would like to suggest that the contrast between a familiarity-based and a uniqueness-based article, morphologically overt in German, is present covertly in Spanish. As in the German case, the RC forces a familiarity interpretation of the article: it is much easier to accept (12) than (13) in a context where there has been no previous mention of the woman in question.

Our analysis of the contrast between (3) and (4) provides further support for the analysis of definite descriptions proposed in Schwarz (2008) and for an analysis of the non-uniqueness component of indefinites in terms of Maximize Presupposition. Additionally, this research raises the question of why only the strong definite article (signaling familiarity) is compatible with restrictive RCs. This, in turn, will

be crucial for a deeper understanding of the semantic and syntactic differences between clausal and non-clausal modifiers.

(1)   #Yesterday, I climbed a tallest mountain in Massachusetts.
(2)   Yesterday, I climbed the tallest mountain in Massachusetts.

(3)   a)   #Ayer hablé con una mujer de Juan.
       b)   #Gestern habe ich mit einer Frau von Hans gesprochen.
             Yesterday I talked to a wife of John's

(4)   a)   Ayer hablé con una mujer que está casada con Juan.
       b)   Gestern habe ich mit einer Frau gesprochen, die mit Hans verheiratet ist.
             Yesterday I talked to a woman that is married to Juan.
(5)   a)   Ayer hablé con la mujer de Juan.
       b)   Gestern habe ich mit der Frau von Hans gesprochen.
             Yesterday I talked to John's wife.
(6)   a)   Ayer hablé con la mujer que está casada con Juan.
       b)   Gestern habe ich mit der Frau gesprochen, die mit Hans verheiratet ist.
             Yesterday I talked to the woman that is married to Juan.

(7)   a)   Pedro piensa que María habló con una mujer que está casada con Juan (pero en realidad, la mujer está casada con Marcos).
       b)   Peter glaubt, dass Maria mit einer Frau gesprochen hat, die mit Hans verheiratet ist (dabei ist die Frau tatsächlich mit Marco verheiratet.
             Pedro thinks that María talked to a woman that is married to Juan (but the woman is actually married to Marcos).

(8)   In der Kabinettsitzung heute wird ein neuer Vorschlag vom {√Kanzler / #Minister} erwartet.
       In today's cabinet meeting, a new proposaly by-the$_{weak}$ {chancellor / minister} is expected.

(9)   Hans hat einen antiken Tisch und einen Schrank gekauft. Angeblich hat Goethe an dem (#am) Tisch ein Gedicht geschrieben.
       Hans bought an antique table and a cabinet. Supposedly Goethe wrote a poem sitting at the$_{strong}$ (#at-the$_{weak}$) table.

(10)   Ich habe gestern bei dem / *beim Mann angerufen, der mit Maria verheiratet ist.
       Yesterday, I called the$_{strong}$ / to-the$_{weak}$ man, that is married to Maria.

(11)   a) Gestern habe ich beim Mann von Maria angerufen.
       b) Gestern habe ich bei dem Mann von Maria angerufen.
       Yesterday have I (a)by-the$_{weak}$ / (b)by the$_{strong}$ husband of Maria called
       ('Yesterday, I called Maria's husband')

(12)   Ayer hablé con la novia de Juan.
       Yesterday, I talked to Juan's girlfriend.

(13)   Ayer hablé con la chica que sale con Juan.
       Yesterday, I talked to the girl that is dating Juan.

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