

Indefinite Reference: Problems and Prospects

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Noun phrases may occur in different syntactic forms and functions. To categorize such expressions uniformly by labelling them as NPs it is necessary that they share – at least in their prototypical function – a common linguistic property. This is all the more true if one wants to establish a cross-linguistically applicable category of noun phrase. In functional typology, the usual strategy is to tie the notion of a noun phrase to the semantic-pragmatic one of reference (cf. Hengeveld 1992): Cross-linguistically, noun phrases are conceived of as potentially referential expressions, filling argument positions of predicative expressions and forming propositions with them. In formal semantics, on the other hand, the concept of reference is handled much more restrictively: Here, the view prevails that only definite noun phrases qualify as referential expressions, and the discussion most often confines itself to singular ones. (A notable exception – among others – is von Heusinger 1997, see below). Indefinite (singular and plural) noun phrases, on the other hand, are often set apart as quantificational from referential expressions. Nevertheless, the methodological principle still applies that expressions which are identical in terms of syntactic category and structure should be provided a uniform semantics. This, for example, has been accomplished by analyzing all NPs as generalized quantifiers, thereby however throwing the notion of reference completely overboard. An alternative, reference-semantic approach, which essentially builds on the concept of choice function, is presented in von Heusinger (1997) and other works of the author.

Following a widely adopted approach in typology, I defend the view that reference is to be conceived of as the fundamental semantic-pragmatic property of noun phrases: To refer is what noun phrases – definite and indefinite, singular and plural – are canonically used for when occurring in speech acts. The aim is thus to ascribe a uniform pragmatic function to a semantically larger range of noun phrases, thereby focusing chiefly on indefinite, singular and plural noun phrases. Two notions, whose relevance in logic and plural semantics has been argued for in recent works, are going to play a central role in the analysis: *arbitrary reference* and *plural reference*. Arbitrary reference means that speakers can intentionally refer to arbitrary individuals (cf. Breckenridge 2012). Plural reference, in turn, means that they can refer individually to different individuals at the same time (cf. Moltmann 2016). The argument proceeds in two steps, thereby discussing selected current theories on reference. In the first step, specific (singular and plural) indefinite noun phrases are considered, in the second non-specific ones.

References

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