Lack of Agreement as Indicating Specificity

Betul Erbasi – University of Southern California
erbasi@usc.edu

1 Introduction

Interpretation in the nominal domain is complicated due to heavily-influential discourse factors. It is a challenge to disentangle the syntactic-semantic properties from discourse properties. This is a challenge due to many reasons including the overt-marking of various interpretational properties of nominals, indicating syntactic relevance, while still being heavily discourse-oriented. The main contribution of this paper is to present novel data from Turkish that show that specificity, an interpretation-related concept in main focus here, can be marked with dropping of the agreement marker in the nominal domain, a novel way of marking of this concept. These data have been discussed in the literature before (e.g. Öztürk & Taylan 2016, Erbasi 2019), but not in relation to specificity marking per se. The second part of the challenge is that not only are there many different concepts used to account for the complications in the interpretation in the nominal domain, but there are also many ways to interpret a single concept. This paper addresses the latter issue with a focus on the concept of *specificity* while following the definition in von Heusinger 2002.

Definiteness and specificity are closely related concepts, so a brief discussion of the two together is in order. Traditionally, definiteness requires both existence and uniqueness (Heim 1991, Ko, Ionin & Wexler 2010). Heim (1991) defines definiteness as in (1a) and it can be translated for nominals as in (1b) (see von Heusinger 2002 for a definition of definiteness as more related to familiarity).

(1) a. Definiteness (Sentence)

   A sentence of the form [def α] ζ *presupposes* that there exists at least one individual which is αand that there exists at most one individual which is α, and it *asserts* that the unique individual which is α is also ζ.

   b. Definiteness (Nominals with two Nouns)

   A nominal of the form [ζ-Genitive α] *presupposes* that there exists at least one individual which is αand that there exists at most one individual which is α, and it asserts that the unique individual which is α is related to ζ.

Specificity was originally argued to be the counterpart of 'referentiality in definite NPs' in indefinite NPs (Quine 1960), NPs that assert that there is at least one individual that matches the description in the NP (so, existence requirement with no uniqueness requirement). However, it has proved to be a more complicated concept due to a few reasons. One reason is that it is difficult to define what it exactly means. Some proposals so far have been that it reflects the 'certainty of the speaker about the identity of the referent'; it means that 'the referent is fixed' or that it can be 'paraphrased by 'a certain' (von Heusinger 2002: 2). Another reason is that, as opposed to existing definite articles, Indo-European languages do not have specificity articles (von Heusinger 2002). Rather, languages mark specificity in other, more various ways. For example, Turkish accusative (2) and genitive (3) indicate specificity (von Heusinger 2002 and references therein; von Heusinger & Kornfilt 2005) (*bir* marks indefiniteness):

(2) a. (Ben)   kitap   oku-du-m
         I   book   read-PST-1S
         'I did book-reading'
     b. (Ben)   kitab-ı   oku-du-m
         I   book-ACC   read-PST-1S
         'I read the book'
     c. (Ben)   **bir** kitap oku-du-m
         I   a   book   read-PST-1S
         'I read a book'
     d. (Ben)   **bir** kitab-ı   oku-du-m
         I   a   book-ACC   read-PST-1S
         'I read a certain book'

(3) a. Köy-ü   haydut   bas-tığ-ın-ı   duy-du-m
         village-ACC   robber raid-NMLZ-3S-ACC   hear-PST-1S
         'I heard that robbers raided the village'
     b. Köy-ü   **bir** haydut-un   bas-tığ-ın-ı   duy-du-m
         village-ACC   a   robber-3GEN   raid-NMLZ-3S-ACC   hear-PST-1S
         'I heard that a certain robber raided the village'

As stated before, the main goal of this paper is to highlight another way languages can mark specificity, a way which has not been discussed before. While doing that, I will follow the definition of specificity in von Heusinger (2002) such that it is the referential property of NPs, which means that the expression in the NP is referentially anchored to an object in the discourse. This definition cuts across definite and indefinite NPs, challenging the traditional assumptions about the concept. This definition makes the specific NP independent from the matrix predicate or other operators such as modal verbs and also accounts for the discourserelated properties of such NPs in a neat way. By following this definition and showing that it is applicable to Turkish data, I support it that specificity cuts across definite and indefinite NPs.

2 Data

I will focus on two types of possession structures in Turkish: The one in (4a) is the regular genitive phrase, which both has a genitive marker and an agreement marker on the head (i.e. the rightmost) noun. The second in (4b) lacks the agreement marker:

(4) a. çocuğ-un   kitab-ı
         child-3GEN   book-3S
         'the book of the child'
     b. çocuğ-un   kitap
         child-3GEN   book
         'the book of the child'

It turns out that only the first of these accept indefinite marking, so the one without agreement has to be definite, i.e. it must refer to a unique entity that must also be familiar to the speaker and the hearer:

(5) a. Çocuğ-un   **bir**   kitab-ı-nı   bul-du-m
         child-3SGEN   a   book-3S-ACC   find-PST-1S
         'I found a book of the child'

     b. *Çocuğ-un   **bir**   kitab-ı   bul-du-m
          child-3SGEN   a   book-ACC   find-PST-1S
         'Intended: I found a book of the child'

Not only that, the possession structure without the agreement marker must be specific too, as it is incompatible with a context that indicates the knowledge on the exact identity of the referent of the NP (6b):

(6) a. Bu   yazar-ın   son   kitab-ı   oku-muş-tu-m.
         this   author-3GEN   last   book-ACC   read-INDPST-PST-1S
         Adı 'Yolda'ydı
         Its title was 'On the Road'
         'I had read the last book by this author. Its title was 'On the Road''
     b. *Bu   yazar-ın   son   kitab-ı   oku-muş-tu-m.
         this   author-3GEN   last   book-ACC   read-INDPST-PST-1S
         Ama adını hatırlamıyorum
         But I do not remember its title
         'I had read the last book by this author. But I do not remember its title.'

This contrasts with regular possession structures, which are acceptable in non-specific contexts:

(7) a. Bu   yazar-ın   son   kitab-ı-nı   oku-muş-tu-m.
         this   author-3GEN   last   book-3S-ACC   read-INDPST-PST-1S
         Adı 'Yolda'ydı
         Its title was 'On the Road'
         'I had read the last book by this author. Its title was 'On the Road''
     b. Bu   yazar-ın   son   kitab-ı-nı   oku-muş-tu-m.
         this   author-3GEN   last   book-3S-ACC   read-INDPST-PST-1S
         Ama adını hatırlamıyorum
         But I do not remember its title
         'I had read the last book by this author. But I do not remember its title.'

Given that both regular and agreementless possession structures occur in definite contexts but only the latter must occur in specific contexts, I suggest that agreement drop indicates specificity in Turkish possession structures, where specificity means the expression in the NP is referentially anchored to an object in the discourse (von Heusinger 2002).

3 Discussion and conclusion

We can conclude from the data in the previous section that possession structures without the agreement marker indicate specificity, where specificity is defined as the referential property of NPs (von Heusinger 2002). I suggested therefore that agreement-drop in Turkish is an indicator of specificity in possession structures. This is novel data as an example of grammatical indicators of specificity, the major contribution of this paper. This paper also supports the given definition of specificity and shows that it is not a property of indefinite NPs

only (contra Quine 1960), supporting von Heusinger (2002) in that it suggests that specificity is not a sub-class of indefinite NPs. Further research is needed to unravel other syntactico-semantic properties of agreement-drop and specificity such as the restriction of specificity to sentence domain in von Heusinger (2002), which has not been observed here.

References

Quine, Willard Van Orman. 1960. *Word and object*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Erbasi, Betul. 2019. Definiteness, structure and agreement in Turkish possessives. In Paloma Jeretič & Yağmur Sağ (eds.), *Proceedings of the Workshop on Turkic and Languages in Contact with Turkic*, vol. 4, 41–52.

Heim, Irene. 1991. Articles and definiteness. In Arnim von Stechow & Dieter Wunderlich (eds.), *Semantics: An international handbook of contemporary research*, 487–535. Berlin: De Gruyter.

von Heusinger, Klaus. 2002. Specificity and definiteness in sentence and discourse structure. *Journal of Semantics* 19(3). 245–274.

von Heusinger, Klaus & Jaklin Kornfilt. 2005. The case of the direct object in Turkish: Semantics, syntax and morphology. *Turkic Languages* 9. 3–44.

Ko, Heejeong, Tania Ionin & Ken Wexler. 2010. The role of presuppositionality in the second language acquisition of English articles. *Linguistic Inquiry* 41(2). 213–254.

Öztürk, Balkız & Eser Erguvanlı Taylan. 2016. Possessive constructions in Turkish. *Lingua* 182. 88–108.