

Zum Geburtstag viel Glück – weak and not so weak definites in German

Elisabeth Stark and David Paul Gerards
University of Zurich and University of Leipzig
estark@rom.uzh.ch and david.gerards@uni-leipzig.de

1 Introduction

Even if the occasion to write this paper is a specific, definite birthday we are happy to celebrate, the German formula *Zum Geburtstag viel Glück!* (a popular equivalent of *Happy Birthday!*) contains the contracted element *zum* (‘to.the’), which appears frequently in so-called short weak definites (henceforth SWD). In German *Ich muss immer zum Zug rennen* (‘I always have to run to the train’), the DP-complement of the preposition *zu* ‘to’, *dem Zug* (‘the train’),¹ comes with semantic properties typical of indefinites, i.e., among others, narrow scope, lack of uniqueness / maximality, familiarity / identifiability, and of specificity. Additionally, SWDs display semantic enrichment and a restriction to certain lexical combinations which refer to stereotyped situations or actions (*go to the doctor*, *take the bus* etc.; Carlson et al. 2006; Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts 2013; Gerards 2020; Brocher et al. 2020). As shown by Klaus von Heusinger and colleagues (see Brocher et al. 2020; contra Carlson et al. 2006; Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts 2013), SWDs seem to be able to establish discourse referents at the textual level, though less prominent ones than those established by indefinite or strongly definite nominals. SWDs are found in many languages (Klein et al. 2013; Leonetti 2019) and represent the best described case of ‘indefinite definites’ or ‘non-maximal definites’. Next to SWDs, there exist at least three other types of ‘non-maximal definites’:

- (1) The hand of the baby grasped *the finger of the surgeon*.
[**long weak definite**, relational noun + possessor PP]
- (2) Fr. Jean a levé *la main*. [**expletive definite**, inalienable possession]
lit. ‘John raised *the hand*.’
- (3) In Alaska, we filmed *the grizzly*. [**representative object definite**]
(1) & (2): Espinal & Cyrino (2017); (3): Krifka et al. (1995)

2 Some new data and observations: ROI or SWD?

In what follows, we focus on type (3), i.e. on definite nominals with so-called representative object interpretations (ROIs), and present some descriptive observations which might help to identify their syntactic and discourse-related properties. As for their semantics, we assume that they denote inherently non-specific, regular object exemplars exclusively relevant as instantiations of their corresponding kind (Gerards 2020; see also Krifka et al. 1995: 85ff.). Still, it needs to be underscored that ROI-nominals are **not** kind-denoting, given that they (also) occur with stage-level predicates. The following German examples evince the relative flexibility of ROI-nominals as for their syntactic distribution (subject (4) and object position (5), (7), and complement of P° (6)); additionally, we see a wide variety of tense, mood or aspect options of the respective predicate:

¹ As noted by Schwarz (2013), SWDs in PPs are only available in German with the contracted form of the definite article (here: *zum* ‘to.the’), but not with the full form (here: *zu dem* ‘to the’); see also Krifka & Modarresi (2016).

- (4) Massaker an der Schwarzen Elster – Was ist hier passiert? Im Internet kursieren Bilder von einem Schaf-Massaker in Saathain. *Der Wolf* soll hier zugeschlagen haben, heißt es. [www.nordkurier.de]
 ‘Massacre at the Schwarze Elster [a river] – What happened here? Pictures of a sheep massacre in Saathain are circulating on the Internet. *The wolf* is said to have struck here.’
- (5) Ich hätte hier noch *die Coburger Brie-Torte*. [overheard, grocery store in Leipzig]
 ‘I’d also have *the Coburg Brie-Cake* here.’
- (6) Der große hat 77cm und 1.1 kg und der kleine 60 cm und knapp 500 gr. Ich bin zurück. und beide wieder *auf den klassischen Wurm*, endlich ... [Facebook group *Aal-Angler*]
 ‘The big one is 77cm and 1.1 kg and the small one 60 cm and just under 500 gr. I’m back. and both caught *with the classic worm*, finally ...’
- (7) Ich habe *den neuen Burger mit Mozzarella* bestellt und habe nach dem ersten Bissen feststellen müssen, dass dieser mit Hühnchen ist! [reklamation24.de]
 ‘I ordered *the new burger with mozzarella* and after the first bite found out that it is with chicken!’

ROI-nominals are also attested in older stages of German (and Spanish and Portuguese; see Gerards 2020).

- (8) Die Galla sind ohne Unterschied Jäger [...]. Sie jagen *den Büffel*, um Schilde aus seinem Fell und prächtige Trinkgefäße aus seinen Hörnern zu machen, *den Elefanten* seiner Zähne wegen, die einen ruhmreichen Namen dem Lande geben [...] sie stellen *dem Leoparden* und *Löwen* Schlingen [...]. [Fünf Jahre in Ostafrika, A. Cecchi & M. von Siegroth, 1888]
 ‘The Galla are all hunters [...]. They hunt *the buffalo* to make shields from its hide and magnificent drinking vessels from its horns, *the elephant* for its teeth, which give a glorious name to the country [...] they make snares for *the leopard* and lion [...].’

Examples of ROI-nominals can especially be found in what could qualify as ‘expert discourse’, e.g., recipes, medical treatises (see Gerards 2020 for Old Spanish and Old Portuguese), or online discussion fora on different kinds of biological species (mushrooms, animals, plants, etc.). Most strikingly, ROI-nominals seem to most easily occur with taxonomic subkinds and show number neutrality (cf. (9) and (10) for the distributive reading triggered by the temporal/local adjunct; see also (12) and (13) below for anaphorical uptake), a property they share with kind-denoting definite descriptions:

- (9) Häufigste Art war heute *das Tagpfauenauge* (6 Ex.), gefolgt vom *Kleinen Fuchs* (4 Ex.) und zwei Zitronenfaltern. Außerdem beobachtete ich 2 Weißlinge [schmetterling-raupe.de]
 ‘The most frequent species today was *the peacock butterfly* (6 exemplars), followed by *the small tortoiseshell* (4 exemplars) and two brimstones. I also observed 2 pieridae.’

- (10) In Deutschland kann man *den Europäischen Luchs* in insgesamt 55 öffentlichen Haltungen sehen. [facebook.com/TobisTierfotos/posts/348912430171114/]
 ‘In Germany, one can observe *the European lynx* in a total of 55 public enclosures.’

As for their capacity to introduce discourse referents, ROI-nominals seem to at first glance behave like SWDs. They are able to function as antecedents to coreferential indefinite nominals in the subsequent discourse:

- (11) *Der Wolf* ist in der Stadt [Überschrift]. Vechta (Niedersachsen) – *Ein Wolf* jagt über die Straßen von Lohne im Landkreis Vechta. Kommt näher und näher [...]. [bild.de]
 ‘*The wolf* is in town [headline]. Vechta (Lower Saxony) – *A wolf* is running on the streets of Lohne in the district of Vechta. Comes closer and closer [...].’

Coreference in (11) seems to be an indirect or partial one, possibly similar to what happens in associative anaphors. Contrary to SWDs, however, we also find examples with personal pronouns in the subsequent discourse, attesting again the number neutrality of ROI-nominals:

- (12) Häufig kann man *den Admiral_i* auf Schmetterlingsflieder (*Buddleja davidii*), Brombeeren (*Rubus fruticosus*), Prächtige Fetthenne (*Hylotelephium spectabile*) oder Wasserdost (*Eupatorium cannabinum*) beobachten, im Herbst saugen *sie_i* auch gerne auf am Boden aufgeplatzttem Fallobst und an Efeublüten (*Hedera helix*). [wikipedia.de]
 ‘One can frequently observe *the red admiral_i* on summer lilac (*Buddleja davidii*), blackberries (*Rubus fruticosus*), showy stonecrop (*Hylotelephium spectabile*), or hemp-agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum*), in autumn *they_i* also like to suck on fallen fruit bursting on the ground and on ivy flowers (*Hedera helix*).’
- (13) Habichtspilz [...]. Unter Kiefern gibt es [...] *den seltenen, nicht essbaren Finnischen Braunsporstachling_j*, die_j bitter schmecken.[PL] [...]. Im Laubwald findet man *den seltenen, nicht essbaren Gallen-Stachling_j*, der_j ebenfalls bitter schmeckt.[SG] [Android app *Meine Pilze*]
 ‘Shingled hedgehog [...]. Under pines there is [...] *the rare, inedible Finnish sarcodon_j*, which_j taste.[PL] bitter [...]. In the deciduous forest you can find *the rare, inedible bitter tooth_j*, which_j also tastes.[SG] bitter.’

Brocher et al. (2020) interpret their experimental findings for SWDs as an indicator of their rather low discourse prominence. This should result in a generally lower probability to be uptaken by a subsequent anaphor and, in particular, to have as subsequent coreferential expressions full nominals (indefinite or strongly definite ones) rather than referentially weak expressions like pronouns (Brocher et al. 2020: 2834). If this turns out to be correct, our examples (12) and (13) point to a crucial difference between ROI-nominals and SWDs: the former can introduce more prominent discourse referents than the latter.

3 Conclusion

Like SWDs, ROI-nominals can be considered “dependent definites” (Krifka & Modarresi 2016), albeit possibly via familiarity/identifiability rather than via uniqueness. Krifka & Modarresi (2016) assume that SWDs come with an existential presupposition and with the uniqueness condition being fulfilled in the most local, derivationally deeply nested context. In cases of ROI-nominals, in turn, it appears to us that the familiarity/identifiability condition

is fulfilled by addressing an expert public.² If this hypothesis is on the right track, then we would, for instance, not expect ROI-nominals to frequently appear at the beginning of science fiction texts or fairy tales, where phantastic beings are introduced:

- (14) Die Tür glitt lautlos zur Seite, und *der formale Semantiker_j* stand vor mir – ich machte sogleich ein Photo. Endlich war es mir gelungen, *ihre_j* Existenz zu belegen. Nun musste ich der Welt nur noch beweisen, wie wertvoll *er_j* für die Forschung war.
'The door slid silently to the side, and *the formal semanticist_j* stood before me – I immediately took a photo. At last I had succeeded in proving *their_j* existence. Now I only had to prove to the world how valuable *he_j* was for research.'

References

- Aguilar-Guevara, Ana & Joost Zwarts. 2013. Weak Definites Refer to Kinds. *Recherches Linguistiques de Vincennes* 42: 33–60.
- Brocher, Andreas, Frederike Weeber, Jet Hoek & Klaus von Heusinger. 2020. Referent Management in Discourse: The Accessibility of Weak Definites. In Stephanie Denison, Michael Mack, Yang Xu & Blair C. Armstrong (eds.), *Proceedings of the 42nd Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*, 2829–2835. Toronto: Cognitive Science Society.
- Carlson, Greg, Rachel Sussman, Natalie Klein & Michael Tanenhaus. 2006. Weak Definite Noun Phrases. In Christopher Davis, Amy Rose Deal & Youri Zabbal (eds.), *Proceedings of NELS 36*, 179–196. Amherst, MA: GLSA.
- Espinal, M. Teresa & Sonia Cyrino. 2017. The Definite Article in Romance Expletives and Long Weak Definites. *Glossa* 2 (1): 23. 1–26.
- Gerards, David Paul. 2020. *Bare Partitives in Old Spanish and Old Portuguese*, PhD dissertation, University of Zurich.
- Klein, Natalie, Greg Carlson, Whitney Gegg-Harrison & Michael Tanenhaus. 2013. Experimental Investigations of Weak Definite and Weak Indefinite Noun Phrases. *Cognition* 128(2). 187–213.
- Krifka, Manfred, Francis J. Pelletier, Greg Carlson, Alice ter Meulen, Gennaro Chierchia & Godehard Link. 1995. Genericity: An Introduction. In Greg Carlson & Francis J. Pelletier (eds.), *The Generic Book*, 1–124. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Krifka, Manfred & Fereshteh Modarresi. 2016. Number Neutrality and Anaphoric Update of Pseudo-incorporated Nominals in Persian (and weak definites in English). *Proceedings of SALT 26*. 874–891.
- Leonetti, Manuel 2019. On Weak Readings of Definite DPs. In Natascha Pomino (ed.), *Proceedings of the IX Nereus International Workshop "Morphosyntactic and Semantic Aspects of the DP in Romance and beyond"*, 1–26. Konstanz: Universität Konstanz.
- Schwarz, Florian. 2013. Two Kinds of Definites Cross-Linguistically. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 7/10. 534–559.

² With some (possible) exceptions, as, for instance, the newspaper articles on wolves (cf. (4) and (11)). Note, however, that over the past years the species CANIS LUPUS has been gaining considerable salience in public discourse – and thus in the general knowledge of readers – given the vivid discussions on the return of this species all across Europe.