

DESCRIPTION AND/OR COMPARISON OF THE
TWO LANGUAGES
1 - 3 April, 1987

SCHOOL OF ENGLISH
DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL AND
APPLIED LINGUISTICS.
UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI

THESSALONIKI 1987

A COMMENT ON THE ARTICLE

Eliza Kitis

Department of English
Faculty of Philosophy
Aristotle University
Thessaloniki

Abstract

In an attempt to give a solution to the problem of definite descriptions, Grice treats them as a special subclass of referential expressions whose existential presuppositions can be "explained away" in terms of generalized conversational implicatures. To this end he employs the Russellian tripartite definition of definite descriptions, claiming that the first two clauses of it are regarded by the speaker as common ground, and therefore as not challengeable. He concludes that every use of the definite article implicates that the reference is to be taken "on trust" (my emphasis).

It is here argued that this is a reductionistic approach to the description of the use of the article because it does not address the problem in its right form as the parameters pertaining to the use of the article are, and should be, isolatable from speakers and their erratic or idiosyncratic implicatures and are rather affected by GENERAL principles governing their use.

The main concern of this investigation, however, is to emphasize the significance of stereotypic knowledge we, as speakers and hearers, bring to bear on our use of the definite article. It is concluded that, although treating 'definiteness' within a sound framework, workers on the topic have in a large measure overlooked this point.

To claim that what is involved in communication is strictly linguistic in the sense that just knowledge of language suffices to characterise a competent speaker of a language is counter-intuitive and not very commonsensical. A variety of kinds of knowledge and abilities interact to enable us to effectively communicate both as speakers at the production end of communication, and as hearers at the receiving end, i.e., as participants in conversation. Our linguistic knowledge is sustained by and embedded in pragmatic competence, and, although competent speakers might show some form of uniformity in linguistic matters, the variation they exhibit in pragmatic competence is wideranging.

A type of pragmatic competence must include knowledge of the mechanisms, or rather strategies, employed for referencing. Although we seem to master this highly complex system of strategies quite early in our lives, it is nevertheless rather difficult to provide a model of communication in which such strategies will be disentangled, clearly elucidated and adequately, let alone, exhaustively, described. All we can do at this stage is hint at some properties of these pragmatic strategies, which, however, affect both the forms and the understanding of linguistic productions.

The comment I wish to make with regard to referencing is pertinent to principles deployed for some types of use of the article and, more particularly, of the definite article.

It must be noted that referentiality and definiteness cannot be treated as two separate issues, one belonging to semantics, the other to pragmatics, because such a demarcation is arbitrary for reasons of an existing gradation scale between definites and generic *définites* (Givon, 1984).

However, there have been two approaches to the problem of referencing: the semantic and the pragmatic. What is significant in these two approaches is their distinct points of departure. In logico-semantic treatments of definite descriptions the main concern has always been with the preservation of a truth-conditional semantics at the expense of an understanding of what aspects of cognitive processes, mechanisms, knowledge systems, and such, very poorly understood, issues are involved. The other type of approach, favoured here, may be called pragmatic as its point of departure is not the "aesthetics" of linguistic description but, rather, aims to come to grips with an understanding of all the processes involved in the

use of definite descriptions.

The problems besetting definite reference are well-known. However, we will first turn our attention to the question of the solution Grice (1981) proposes for definite descriptions.¹

In his search for a formal counterpart for (1), abbreviated as K,

(1) The King of France is bald,

Grice proposes two candidates, (a) and (b):

(a) $(\exists x.Fx) Gx$

(b) $G (\exists x.Fx)$.

Depending on the method of formalisation of (1), its negation can be either (ai) or (aii) for (a), and (bi) for (b):

(ai) $\sim((\exists x.Fx) Gx)$

(aii) $(\exists x.Fx) \sim Gx$

(bi) $\sim G (\exists x.Fx)$.

It is immediately noticed that whereas (ai) does not entail the existence of the definite term (aii) does. On the other hand (bi) has an ambiguous formal structure as it is unspecified with regard to the existence of the definite term.

Therefore, since Grice claims that there is no semantic distinction between the two modes of negation of (1), abbreviated as \bar{K} , i.e., between (2) and (3),

(2) The King of France is not bald

(3) It is not the case that the King of France is bald,

he selects (b) as the formal counterpart of (1), i.e., the formal structure that treats the iota-operator as a term-forming device, thereby committing ourselves to the structural ambiguity of \bar{K} .

Thus, on one reading \bar{K} entails the existence of a unique King of France while on another it does not. "But, in fact, without waiting for disambiguation", Grice (1981:189) writes, "people understand an utterance of 'The King of France is not bald' as implying (in some fashion) the unique existence of a King of France". And he goes on to say that what is not entailed is conversationally implicated:

If one looks for some *prima facie* plausibility for the idea of regarding the definite description as carrying an implicature of a nonconventional and conversational kind,

we must seek recourse, Grice seems to think, to some form of a Russellian expansion

as being that for which such an expression as 'The King of France is bald' (or 'The King of France is not bald') is to be regarded as a definitional contraction.

(ibid.:189)

In actual fact, he claims that 'The King of France is bald' is a contraction of the following clauses:

- D { A. There is at least one King of France.
B. There is not more than one King of France.
C. Nothing which is the King of France is not bald.

D, 'The King of France is bald', is considered to be an abbreviation of ABC.

There is a Gricean maxim pertaining to MANNER that runs as follows:²

Frame whatever you say in the form most suitable for any reply that would be regarded as appropriate

or

Facilitate in your form of expression the appropriate reply.

Quite clearly, one of the appropriate replies to something that you have asserted is the denial of what you say. In default of an explicit statement of ABC, the assumption is that the subconjuncts of A and B are presented as if they had COMMON GROUND status, and what is singled out, or presented, for possible denial is merely C in D. A and B are regarded as not being controversial or likely to be challenged.

Grice calls this kind of implicature relating to referential expressions 'generalized conversational implicature'. For instance, he says, whenever you say

(4) My aunt's cousin went to the concert,

when you know that the hearer is not aware of the existence of your aunt,

let alone of her cousin, the supposition is not that their existence is common ground, but rather that "it is noncontroversial, in the sense that it is something that you would expect the hearer to take from you (if he does not already know)" (Grice, 1981:190).

However, Grice does not question the grounds of such a supposition on which an utterance such as (4) can be accepted unquestionably as regards its definite description my aunt's cousin; that is, on the assumption that the speaker has an auntie and the auntie has a cousin, on what grounds does the hearer take the speaker's word for it? (4) will not, as Grice rightly notes, invoke any clarificatory question, unless the hearer actually believed the opposite. But how can conversational implicature account for the definite description in (5), uttered during a discussion about peanuts?

(5) My snake likes peanuts, too.

Not only will (5) invoke a *wh-* or a *yes-no* question, if the hearer is not aware that I keep a snake as a pet, but it may also thereby effect a shift of the topic of conversation. Why is it that in (5) the existential condition of the definite description my snake cannot be taken as common ground, i.e., as implicated, neither can the hearer take the speaker's word for it, whilst in (6) he can?

(6) My dog likes peanuts, too.

These are facts that Grice does not address.

Leech (1983: 90) writes in this connection:

There is some X that can be uniquely identified as the same X by s and h.
(s= speaker, h= hearer)

Concurring with Grice on this issue, he attributes this element of definiteness or uniqueness of definite expressions to implicatures.

Leech also talks of cases of the implicating 'uniqueness' by *fiat*, as in public notices, such as,

Mind the step

or

Beware of the dog,

without specifying the conditions under which such first-mention uses³ of the article can appropriately and successfully implicate those aspects of 'uniqueness'.

The question that one might immediately pose would be whether "uniqueness by fiat" is still implicated if another noun, for instance 'lion', or 'snake', is substituted for 'dog' in 'Beware of the dog' (notice on house gate). If no conditions are delineated determining the use of the article "implicating uniqueness by fiat", then it is not too presumptuous to assume that a notice attached to a house gate reading 'Beware of the lion' must be as successful as the notice reading 'Beware of the dog'.⁴

In an attempt to explain the successful first-mention use of the definite description the dog in (7)

(7) Last night I took the dog out for a walk,

"which can begin a narrative", Thorne (1972:564) writes

that this too can be explained in terms of the re-identifying function of the definite article. In this case the speaker assumes that the hearer already possesses the information he needs to be able to identify the individual in question. He acts as if he is taking for granted previous discourse concerning the individual in question on the basis of which the hearer can re-identify him.

However, this point, too, can be contested on much the same grounds: Since there is no specification of the conditions on which the speaker can act as if he is taking for granted previous discourse concerning the individual in question, the same argument levelled out against Leech and Grice can carry over to Thorne, i.e., (8)

(8) Last night I took the lion out for a walk

should be as successful as (7). The obvious fact is that (7) can be successful as far as its noun phrase the dog is concerned, even if the hearer is not aware that the speaker has a dog. Not so with (8).

Hawkins (1978) encounters a similar problem in his otherwise insightful work on the article when he lumps together such cases of the use of the as those in (9) and (10)

(9) Don't go in there, chum. The dog will bite you

(10) Pass me the bucket, please,

and wrongly regards both of them as instances of the immediate situation use of the article.

However, quite apart from the fact that Hawkins' work is a most insightful and comprehensive study of the article, its main contribution could be said to be its orientation; i.e., Hawkins moves away from the speaker's omnipotence, characterising Grice's and Leech's approaches, and focuses his attention on the underlying principles governing the speaker's use of the article.

At this juncture, I would like to claim that such approaches as those adopted by Grice and Leech are ill-founded and reductionistic, because, motivated by their concern - at least as far as Grice is concerned - to preserve a model-theoretic semantics, they merely scratch the surface of the problem. Instead, we should address such questions as the following:

What parameters pertain to the use of singular definite noun phrases, and how are they invoked?

What is meant by 'uniqueness' and how is it defined?

What is meant by identifiability and how is it determined?

What type of shared knowledge is needed for the use of the article, and in what terms is it described, or, to be more realistic, can we even lay hands on such pragmatic sets?

And, if we do, how are such sets activated and interrelated?

As has been said, Hawkins (1978) adopts the right approach to the problem. He recognizes the importance of the questions raised above, and attempts to elucidate the principles involved. However, although he is aware of the generality of specific and general knowledge since referents are to be located

within one of a number of sets of objects which are pragmatically defined on the basis of different types of shared speaker-hearer knowledge and the situation of utterance (ibid.:17),

he does not, nevertheless, seem to fully appreciate the power of knowledge stereotypes.⁵

In the remaining part of this investigation the focus will be on the significance of this issue as a considerable number of the uses of the can be satisfactorily accounted for with reference to our stereotypic knowledge.

For example, failing to capture the stereotype underlying the utterance of (9), Hawkins classifies it together with (10), as regards the use of the underlined expressions, and accounts for both of them in identical terms. As a result, he differentiates between immediate situation uses and larger situation uses acknowledging the presence of general knowledge or specific knowledge constraints of references in the latter category only. In relation to (9) he writes:

when reference is being made using the to an object within the immediate situation of utterance there need be no prior knowledge on the hearer's part of the existence of that object. This is the case in (9). Not only does the dog in (9) not have to be visible, but the hearer need have no prior knowledge about it either (my numbering, 1978:108).

However, a simple consideration of similar examples to (9) in which the dog is replaced by other expressions denoting other animals, will prove his argument ill-founded:

- (11) Don't go in there, chum. ? The wolf/ mouse/ lion/ snake will bite you.

Clearly, unless there is a 'visibility condition', as in (10), or prior local contextual assumptions - i.e., the hearer already knows that such an animal is kept at this specific household - a clarificatory wh-question, or a yes-no question, is in line here, a characteristic of unsuccessful reference,⁶ whilst, as argued by Hawkins, this is not the case in (9). Yet, both (9) and (11) share the characteristic that the hearer does not know which specific entity is being referred to by the underlined expressions, nor are these entities to be seen. In view of the fact that no prior knowledge is possessed by the hearer of the existence of the referents in (11), (9) and (12),

- (12) Don't go in there, chum. The butler will throw you out,

why are only (9) and (12) successful in their references, whereas (11) will prompt clarificatory questions if the referent is not visible? (9) and (12) are readily understood because we have prior stereotypic knowledge of households keeping dogs to keep off strangers and households with butlers to receive callers. Although we do not possess specific prior know-

ledge in these cases regarding the specific dog and butler referred to in (9) and (12), yet, they can both be channelled into the relevant stereotypes of which we do have prior knowledge - a point Hawkins fails to grasp. We possess no such stereotypes in relation to (11) or (10), and that is why either a visibility condition, or prior knowledge of the existence of the referents (i.e., special context) is needed for the reference to be successful.

At this point it can be noted that Kintsch's (1974) programme will equally founder on the same issue, as, disregarding underlying stereotypic knowledge governing the use of definite expressions, he thinks that first-mention definite noun phrases are not possible unless there are visibility conditions attaching to their occurrence. He writes:

The repeated term becomes definite, i.e., specified with respect to another term in the text base. In the surface structure the definite article the can be used for a repeated noun. The function of this article is to point to the previous appearance of the noun or to its presence in the non linguistic context. The may therefore be regarded as the reduced form of that, as was already expressed by Thorne (1972). (p.48)

Stereotypes, scripts or frames,⁷ (Minsky, 1979, Schank and Abelson, 1977), can be likened to knowledge trees having a variety of nodes with dummies at their ends, which, however, are filled in in linguistic situations with items from admissible categories (see Kitis, 1987). Thus, we cannot say, or understand (13),

- (13) They climbed up the tree and rang the bell,

whereas we can (14), or (15),

- (14) They walked up the stairs and rang the bell
(15) They climbed up the tree and ate the fruit.

We have prior knowledge stereotypes that will receive (14) and (15), but not (13).

His failure to capture such knowledge stereotypes leads Hawkins to wonder what "the parameters defining the set of possible associates" are in (16):

- (16) The man drove past our house in a car. The dog was barking furiously,

Understandably, he is unable to find any associative links between a car and the dog. The expression a car can trigger off a number of associated objects, for example, the steering wheels, the gears, the hood, the boot, the clutch, etc., but certainly not the dog, although, he notes, we are familiar with situations where dogs travel in cars. Thus, he fails to pick up the expression our house which actually triggers an associative relation between the concepts the house and the dog (see Kitis, 1987). Consider

- (17) The man drove past the tree. The dog was barking furiously,

on the other hand, in which immediate situative contextual assumptions are needed to provide special context as in (10) and (11).⁸

Commenting on Hawkins' (1978) work, Lyons (1980) attributes the success of the definite reference in such examples as the following,

- (18) I'm coming to Copenhagen tomorrow; I suggest we meet at the Little Mermaid at six o'clock,
 (19) Meet me at the horse-trough tonight,
 (20) When you arrive in Mexico City, make your way to the zócalo,
 (21) Beware of the spotted bubal,

to "the hearer's willingness and ability to co-operate in the conversation by using his imagination or powers of reasoning" (p.87) in the ways indicated therein. In making such a claim he may succeed in merely transferring the omnipotence (in the guise of conversational implicatures) of the speaker to the hearer. In both approaches we clearly fail to emphasize the significance of the general principles governing the use of definite expressions to which both speakers and hearers must adhere if conversation is to be felicitous. For example, with reference to (22)

- (22) Beware of the dog (notice attached to house gate),

Lyons writes that, if the hearer does not know of the dog referred to, (22) "can be rejected with a wh-question, if the hearer chooses not to be co-operative (though wisdom would probably encourage co-operation in this case!), or if he is sceptical of the truth of the notice" (p.89). Moreover, he claims with regard to 'the immediate situation use' of the in (22) that

it informs the hearer of the existence of a dog in the appropriate shared set (the immediate situation), rather than appealing to knowledge of this set membership" (p.87).

Thus, Lyons fails to draw a distinction between a first-mention use of the definite description in (22) and those in (11), the former only being successful (the latter not). However, think of two prospective burglars, in the comfort of their own home, working out a plan of how to break into a house twenty miles away from where they are (what immediate situation use?). Neither of them knows whether the owner keeps a dog on the premises, and, yet, during the course of their deliberations one of them might utter (22), and rest assured that its definite reference would be successful. Not so with (11). The utterance of (11) demands prior knowledge of the existence of the referents.

Besides, with regard to examples (18) - (21), it is reasonable to assume that the definite descriptions therein made need, and will be followed by, some explanatory descriptions (unless they constitute the content of a telegram), if the speaker/author realizes that the hearer/reader is not familiar with the referents of the definite descriptions. For example, if you encounter (20) in a guide to Mexico City, you are not going to be left wondering what the zócalo is. A full description of it will most definitely follow. And this kind of the use of the definite article Leech might want to call 'uniqueness by fiat'.

Furthermore, with regard to a couple of similar examples,

- (23) The new maid is frightfully careless

- (24) I'll get the butler to show you out,

Lyons writes that if the hearer, a visitor in his new neighbour's house,

is not aware that his host, the speaker, has a maid and a butler, he has the choice of accepting the definites of (23) and (24), treating them as concealed informative speech acts, or rejecting them; the former would normally be expected by conversational convention. (p.89)

It must be emphasized that in all cases, by disregarding the underlying stereotypes constituting the underpinnings of coherent conversation, Lyons fails to notice the extent to which they can constrain the use of the de-

finite article. These constraints stem from both the speaker's and the hearer's membership in shared sets. Instead, he claims, that the felicitous, or not, reference depends on such idiosyncratic, indeterminate, and un-specifiable notions as the hearer's good will to co-operate, or his wisdom, thus ignoring the fact that conversation is not a haphazard enterprise dependent on the participants' whims, but rather a well-structured game constrained by its own rules.

Furthermore, if stereotypic knowledge is taken into account the size of the inventory of the types of uses of the article offered by Hawkins will be considerably reduced. The classification is done at the wrong end. Immediate situation, larger situation, general knowledge, and associative anaphora uses of the definite article can all be collapsed to just one use, provided we put in order our background knowledge. The supposedly many uses of the article are reflected by the types of our knowledge in most cases. For instance, Lyons talks of the general knowledge use and the associative anaphora use, but there is hardly any distinction between the two other than that in the former case the use of the article is activated via the situative context, while in what they call associative use it is activated by virtue of the linguistic context.

Recognition of the existence of stereotypic knowledge governing certain uses of the article will also account for such facts as the interconnection of referring expressions. For example, why do we understand 'the Mummy' in (25)

- (25) The baby cried. The Mummy picked it up.
(Sacks, 1972)

as referring to the baby's mummy? Conversational implicatures cannot account for this understanding. How can we account for the fact that, not only is the definite noun phrase 'the captain' in (26) a felicitous definite reference, but we also come to understand this expression as referring to the particular captain of the cruise mentioned in the first clause?

- (26) Last summer we went on a cruise. The captain was
a very amiable man.

We have seen that Grice's account cannot furnish the answer to the problem of definite reference; moreover, it has been claimed that it is reductionistic for reasons given above. What it succeeds in doing is preserving a

model-theoretic semantics by reducing the most intriguing aspects of communicated linguistic facts to a waste-basket of pragmatic implicatures (for such a critique see Kitis, 1982). Furthermore, neither do the other researchers on the topic reviewed here provide an adequate account of these facts, as they seem to be inclined to either an undiscerning and indiscriminating grouping or an overclassification of types of uses of the article.

This results from lack of careful consideration of the types of background knowledge that ~~are~~ brought to bear on our linguistic acts.

NOTES

1. Definite descriptions in his account are treated as a special subclass of referential expressions.
2. Familiarity with Grice's (1975) 'Logic of Conversation' and the Cooperative Principle is here assumed.
3. 'First-mention use' is meant to refer to uses of definite descriptions which cannot be identified or reidentified with reference to either previous linguistic context or local contextual assumptions.
4. One must bear in mind that successful referencing does not arouse curiosity or prompt any clarificatory questions.
5. But see his later work (Hawkins, 1984).
6. It is interesting to note that workers in the field are not much troubled by the question of defining what constitutes (un)succesful reference.
7. It must be noted, though, that there is a distinction between the notions of 'script' and 'frame'.
8. An example suggested by Hawkins (personal communication) was the following,

The man drove past in a car. ?The dog was barking furiously,

in which there is no mention of 'our house'. Hawkins' main point here is that dogs do not belong in the car frame, hence his question-mark. It could be objected, though, that in cases in which there is no clear indication of an association of the definite description with an explicitly invoked frame, the hearer is free to extrapolate any permissible associations within the linguistic context. However, as is clear, utterances do not occur in limbo, and, more often than not, local mutual contextual assumptions (see Kitis, 1982:ch.7) will suffice to clarify the locatability and associative relations of the definite description in question.

REFERENCES

- Givon, T., (1984). Syntax: A functional-typological introduction. Vol.1. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Grice, Paul, (1975). 'Logic and conversation'. In P. Cole and J.L. Morgan, eds., Syntax and semantics, Vol. 3: Speech acts. N.Y.:Academic Press. pp. 41-58.
- Grice, Paul, (1981). 'Presupposition and conversational implicature'. In P. Cole, ed., Radical Pragmatics. N.Y.: Academic Press. pp.183-198.
- Hawkins, John A., (1978). Definiteness and indefiniteness: A study in reference and grammaticality prediction. London:Croom Helm, and Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press.
- Hawkins, John A. (1984). 'A note on referent identifiability and co-presence'. Journal of Pragmatics 8: 649-659.
- Kintsch, Walter, (1974). The representation of meaning in memory. N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum
- ~~Koutoupi~~ Kitis, Eliza, (1982). Problems connected with the notion of implicature. Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick.
- Kitis, Eliza, (1987). 'A comment on John Hawkins' "A note on referent identifiability and co-presence"'. Journal of Pragmatics 11: 93-95.
- Leech, Geoffrey N., (1983). Principles of Pragmatics. London: Longman
- Lyons, Christopher G., (1980). 'The meaning of the English definite article'. In J. van der Auwera, ed., The semantics of determiners. London: Croom Helm. pp.81-95.
- Minsky, M. (1979). 'A framework for representing knowledge'. In D. Metzing, ed. (1980). Frame conceptions and text understanding. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. pp.1-25.
- Sacks, Harvey, (1972). 'On the analyzability of stories by children'. In J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, eds. Directions in sociolinguistics. The ethnography of communication. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. pp.325-345.

Schank, Roger and Robert Abelson, (1977). Scripts, plans, goals and understanding. An inquiry into human knowledge structures. N.H.: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Thorne, James P., (1972). 'On the notion definite'. Foundations of Language 8: 562-568.