A COMMENT ON JOHN HAWKINS' 'A NOTE ON REFERENT IDENTIFIABILITY AND CO-PRESENCE'

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With reference to John Hawkins' article 'A note on referent identifiability and co-presence' in the *Journal of Pragmatics* 8: 649-659 (1984), I would like to point out that the main point therein made by the author, which–although not clearly stated–was basically an improvement on his 1978 thesis, had been previously made in Kitis (1982), although my point of departure there (to criticize Grice's notion of generalized conversational implicature) was quite different; namely Hawkins draws on results from work in the field of Artificial Intelligence in order to explain reference facts which resisted the analysis proposed in his 1978 book.

However, Hawkins still overlooks the fact that in (2) (his numbering)

(2) The man drove past our house in a car. ?The dog was barking furiously.

the definite reference 'the dog' will be associated not with the 'car frame', as Hawkins thinks he is forced to assume (hence the question-mark), but with the 'household frame' triggered by the expression 'house', i.e., what you have here is the concurrent activation of two scripts, a fact which Hawkins totally overlooks. It is worth noting that most jokes depend on such a concurrent activation of two conflicting frames or scripts within the same talk exchange.

Moreover, Hawkins applies the frame idea far too broadly. Arguing against Clark and Marshall's (1981) condition of indirect identifiability, he claims instead that "what is both necessary and sufficient [for the appropriate use of 'the'] is recognition of the appropriate uniqueness set or frame" (p. 653). As a result he wants to group together as far as successful/appropriate reference is concerned such cases of definite reference as those in (14), (16) and (17) (Kitis (1982)):

(14) Don't go in there, chum. *The dog* will bite you.
(16) Don't go in there, chum. *?The wolf/mouse/lion/snake* will bite you.

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

as well as those in the following notices attached to a house gate:

Beware of the dog.
Beware of the lion.   (Hawkins: 653)

Hawkins renders the frame idea far too powerful with regard to the appropriate use of 'the' when he claims that "finding the pragmatic set or frame is all that the hearer can do, and everything else he must take *on trust* from the speaker" (p. 656, my emphasis). And although his 'ulnar nerve' example seems to be convincing in this respect, as do his Duden *Bild-wörterbuch* examples, one should not conclude from that that "even the weakest definition of identifiability or co-presence can be shown to be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the appropriate use of 'the'" (Hawkins: 653). For the condition of identifiability must be understood, in a more relaxed sense, as a determining factor for what items might potentially fill in the 'slots' of the lower-level terminals of a frame, as defined by Minsky (1975). The criterion of identifiability must be seen as pertaining, not to each specific datum, but to the potential set of data that might be successful candidates for bearing definite referencing within the broader set of the frame in question. Not all members of the former set need to be known or readily identifiable to both speakers, but, surely, what must be readily identifiable are the conditions attaching to the form or identity of the set; and it is these conditions which make this set a subset of the larger set, i.e., the frame.

It goes without saying that the less familiar we are with the detailed structure of a specific frame, the fuzzier the specifications of its subsets would be (take, for example, a ritual like a wedding ceremony in a Western culture and the corresponding ritual in a remote African tribal culture); and this must adequately explain why Hawkins' 'ulnar nerve' and Duden *Bildwörterbuch* examples are convincing, while his 'Beware of the lion' notice, attached to a house gate, is not. (Also see example (24) in Kitis (1982: 262)).

In sum, although I would agree with Hawkins that even the weakest definition of identifiability or co-presence is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the appropriate use of 'the', on the other hand, I would argue against his suggestion that recognition of the appropriate uniqueness set or frame is a sufficient condition. Instead, I would suggest that some form of identifiability conditions attaching to a set of data must be mutually recognized as enabling (or not) the subset to fall within a specific, broader set or frame. Such a condition would take care of Hawkins' examples (Duden *Bildwörter-buch*, etc.) but, on the other hand, it would exclude cases like the following,

(1) Beware of the eagle/snake/sheep/pig/rabbit/pigeon etc., (notice attached to house gate).

(2) I bought a house yesterday but the carburator needs fixing.

which, however, are not excluded by Hawkins' condition, since once identification of a frame is established ('house') everything else can be taken on trust (carburators supposedly being somehow connected with the 'house frame').

References

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