On certain / specific phenomena

The "Specific/non-specific" reading of indefinites has often been treated in terms of scopes of the indefinite operator. A scope-based approach has to face at least three problems: (I) why indefinites can apparently scope wider than other quantifiers; (II) why not all indefinites have the same wide-scope possibilities, and (III) what is the role of elements such as *certain* or *specific* in triggering wide scope.

Since Fodor and Sag (1982), the literature on specificity has mostly focused on question (I); recently, two important proposals have recently emerged: a *Choice Function* account and a *Singleton Indefinite* account. The goal of this work is to examine how well each fares with respect to questions (II) and (III).

BACKGROUND: CHOICE FUNCTIONS AND SINGLETON INDEFINITES

Suppose that the specific reading of (1-a) is (1-b), with the indefinite taking wide scope.

(1)   a.   John wants to marry a Norwegian.
       b. $\exists x[\text{Norwegian}(x) \wedge \text{want}(\text{John,marry}(\text{John},x))]$

There are various technical ways to obtain this effect. One is to assume that specific indefinites are directly referential (Fodor and Sag 1982,Kratzer 1998); another is to resorts to Choice Functions (CF; Reinhart 1997, Winter 1996) bound by existential closure at different scopal positions. The specific and non-specific readings for (1-a) would be as in (2).

(2)   a. $\exists f\,\text{CF}(f)\wedge[\text{want}(\text{John, marry}(\text{John},f(\text{Norwegian})))]$ *wide-scope/specific*
       b. $\text{want}(\text{John}, \exists f\,\text{CF}(f)\wedge[\text{marry}(\text{John}, f(\text{Norwegian}))))$ *narrow-scope/non-specific*

This latter view is probably the most popular at present. CFs model variable scope with means that are different from traditional quantifier raising (QR); therefore, it is conceivable that they might be insensitive to scope islands that block QR. Moreover, unlike *naive* referential approaches, they can easily obtain intermediate scopes.

In other respects, however, the linguistic status of CF is debatable. Traditional QR was modeled after the observable behavior of Wh-elements, but the CF mechanism doesn't seem to model any overt linguistic phenomenon (one example would be a language that systematically inserts scope markers in the various positions of the existential operator). A more serious problem is that the position of the existential operator turns out to be sensitive to the shape of the corresponding indefinite—in particular the absence and nature of its determiner. As well known, bare plurals never take wide scope, yet, with CF, nothing rules out the following wide scope representation.

(3)   John and Jack want to marry Norwegians.

       a. $\exists f\,\text{CF}(f)\wedge[\text{want}(\text{J\&J, marry}(\text{J\&J},f(\text{Norwegians})))]$
       b.   "there are Norwegians such that J&J want to marry them"   *impossible reading*

Vice-versa, determiners like *a certain/a specific* force wide scope (4). The general question then is: how can the shape of the indefinite nominal influence the position of a (far-away) existential quantifier?

(4)   John wants to marry a certain Norwegian.

   a. $\exists f\,\mathrm{CF}(f)\wedge[\mathrm{want}(\mathrm{John},\,\mathrm{marry}(\mathrm{John},f(\mathrm{Norwegian})))]$ *only possible reading*

There is however a different way to look at indefinites, based on the observation that their specific/non-specific status partly depends on how much material is present in their restrictive portion. For instance, the objects in (5) are roughly ordered according to how likely it is for them to be interpreted specifically.

(5)   Sue is looking for {a man / an old friend from school / a man she kissed yesterday at five o'clock}

Starting from this observation, Schwarzschild (2002) proposes that the apparent 'wide-scope' of indefinites is an illusion due to the fact that when an indefinite's restriction picks out a unique singular or plural individual, wide and narrow scope become equivalent. What we call "wide scope" could be more suitably termed "narrow scope which always ends up choosing the same individual".

Examples where the restrictor *must* be interpreted as a singleton property are rare; to make specificity work in the remaining cases, Schwarzschild has to make appeal to the presence of implicit material in the indefinite. In the intermediate reading, (6-a) is implicitly interpreted as (6-b).

(6)   a.   Most linguists have looked at every analysis which solves some problem.
       b.   [Most linguists]$_i$ have looked at every analysis which solves some *particular* problem *of theirs*$_i$.

<div align="center">MODIFIED NUMERAL</div>

Schwartzschild's approach predicts that a specific interpretation will be available only for those indefinites that (possibly, with the help of implicit additional restrictions) can be made to denote a singleton property. This idea can be extended to *plural* specific indefinites, but there is faces a problem. As noted by many, indefinites introduced by simple cardinals can receive a specific reading, but those introduced by modified cardinals (*exactly 3*, *more than 5*, etc.) cannot.

(7)   a.   If 3 colleagues of mine get fired, the firm would profit.   *specific/'wide-scope' OK*
       b.   If exactly 3 colleagues of mine get fired, the firm would profit.   *no 'wide-scope'/specific' reading*

Suppose that *colleagues* denotes the power set of the set of all my colleagues, and that *exactly 3* behaves as a quantifier in a high position inside DP (whence the impossibility of **the exactly 3 people*, where *exactly 3* would have to appear in a position below *the*). By hypothesis, to obtain sleeplessness we need the restriction *colleagues of mine* to yield a singular property (say, a set containing a single plural individual of cardinality 3); but we know from (8) that full-fledged quantifiers do not tolerate singular properties as restrictors (see Partee 1987, Winter 1998 and Schwarzschild 2002 for discussion).

(8)   ??Every current Pope is Polish.   *It should mean: JP2 is Polish*

Thus, the singleton property approach looks like a promising step toward the solution of this riddle.

<div align="center">"CERTAIN"</div>

In other cases, the problem of the singleton property approach is the opposite: how do we go from a

<div align="center">2</div>

property with an apparently large extension to one which denotes a single object. The word *certain, specific, particular* etc. must play a crucial role in this process.

(9)   John is looking for a {certain / specific / particular} piece of paper.

The intuition I want to pursue is that *certain* is a metalinguistic element which pledges *additional relevant properties*: by saying *a certain P* the speaker S (or the person S′ whose viewpoint is reported) informs the hearer that P doesn't exhaust the set of true properties which he/she could add to the description of the object under discussion. By adding more properties, S could thus bring the description to characterize a single (singular or plural) element.

Interestingly, a word with the exactly opposite function can be observed in Italian:

(10)   Gianni stà cercando   un qualsiasi pezzo di carta.
         Gianni is   looking for an any   piece of paper.
         "John is looking for a single piece of paper, it doesn't matter which one".

In this analysis, *qualsiasi* in a signal that there are no other properties relevant for the identifiability of the piece of paper at issue. Time permitting, I will discuss the differences between *certain* and *particular/specific*, which underlies the contrast in (11) (from Zamparelli 1995):

(11)   a.   A {certain / ??specific} James Bond came to see you.
         b.   There was {certain / ??specific} sadness in her voice.

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