

Specificity as Speaker Identifiability

The concept of specificity is often referred to in the linguistic literature. However, the precise definition of the term is unclear. Different researchers argue for different definitions of specificity. The specific-nonspecific contrast is sometimes claimed to be semantic in nature, and sometimes, pragmatic. Under the semantics approach, specificity is often essentially treated as scope (Karttunen (1976), Farkas (2002), among others). Thus, specific NPs are often analyzed as NPs that take widest scope possible, whereas NPs are treated as nonspecific if they are interpreted within the scope of some operator. Alternatively, specificity is provided an account within the framework of choice functions, functions that choose a member of a non-empty set (Reinhart (1997), Winter (1997)). The function variable is, in turn, bound by an existential quantifier, which can be inserted at any compositional level. This accounts for wide scope readings that are, sometimes unexpectedly, available to specific NPs. These semantic analyses face certain problems, however. For instance, they fail to account for the specificity contrast in sentences like (1). Intuitively, this sentence exhibits the specific-nonspecific contrast. Under the specific reading, the speaker knows exactly which picture is missing but for some reason chooses not to name it. Under the non-specific reading, the speaker merely knows that (at least) one picture is absent, without being able to identify it, say, because she has just heard the electronic device go off in the gallery signaling an empty frame on the wall. This contrast cannot be accounted for within the scope approach, as the sentence contains no operator relative to which the NP or the function variable could take wide or narrow scope. Under an alternative pragmatic approach (Groenendijk and Stokhof (1980)), the crucial component of specificity is identifiability to the speaker. Thus, the referent of a specific NP is identifiable to the speaker, whereas the referent of a non-specific NP is not. Specificity is analyzed as a pragmatic concept, which affects the way a sentence is interpreted, but does not contribute to its truth conditions.

In this talk, I will argue in favor of the pragmatic approach. I propose that the notion of speaker identifiability is linguistically relevant and should be reflected in an adequate representation of the context. I will bring new evidence in favor of this approach, coming from the interpretational properties of certain lexical items in Russian. In particular, I will discuss the semantic and pragmatic behavior of the so-called *-to* items, lexical items that contain the suffix *-to*, such as *kakoj-to* (some), *kto-to* (someone), etc. Pereltsvaig (2000) states that *-to* items can only have wide scope readings. I will demonstrate that NPs containing these items can in certain cases get narrow scope readings as well (2), although in the majority of environments, they do obligatorily take wide scope (3,4). Thus, (3) can only mean that there is a student whom Dima failed to notice, and, according to (4), three teachers called the same student. However, despite their strong preference for wide scope interpretation, *-to* items consistently have a referent that is not identifiable to the speaker, as noted in Haspelmath (1997). Hence the strangeness of such sentences as (5). This sentence suggests that the speaker wants to marry a particular Swede (the narrow scope reading, which could be translated as *any Swede*, is ruled out, as it is not allowed by the *-to* item), without knowing who that Swede is. The properties of *-to* items thus demonstrate that speaker identifiability is not merely an extra linguistic factor having to do with knowledge of the world. Rather, language encodes this property, as there exist lexical items that are inherently marked as not speaker identifiable. Crucially, this property is present independently from scope marking.

I will propose a formal representation of specificity based in part on the analysis developed in Groenendijk and Stokhof (1980). Groenendijk and Stokhof define specificity within the framework of a theory they refer to as epistemic pragmatics. Importantly, the formalism they develop allows to distinguish information possessed by different individuals. Specificity of indefinite NPs is claimed to be dependent on the speaker's knowledge of the denotation of two predicates: the one contributed by the NP in question and the one that corresponds to the predicative part of the sentence. An indefinite NP is specific iff the speaker knows the denotation of the set that constitutes the intersection of these two predicates. For instance, (1) gets a specific reading in a model if the intersection of the set of pictures and the set of objects that are missing from the gallery is a singleton set (since the sentence contains a singular NP), and the speaker knows its denotation. The sentence gets a non-specific reading if different options are available for the denotation of this set, as far as the speaker's knowledge is concerned.

Finally, I provide an account of the properties of *-to* items. I propose that *-to* items are inherently non-specific. In other words, they are only appropriate in a context in which the speaker does not know the denotation of the intersection of the two predicates in question: the one contributed by the NP and the one that corresponds to the predicative part of the clause.

1. A picture is missing from the gallery.
2. Lena dumajet, što kakoj-to edinorog s'jel ejo cvety.
Lena thinks that some unicorn ate her flowers
3. Dima ne zametil kakogo-to studenta.
Dima NEG noticed some student
There is a student that Dima didn't notice.
4. Tri učitelja vyzvali kakogo-to studenta.
Three teachers called some student
5. #Ja xoću vyjti zamuž za kakogo-to šveda.
I want marry(inf) to some Swede
I want to marry some Swede.

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