

An Ambiguity View of Specificity*

Jae-Il Yeom
(Hongik University)

Yeom, Jae-Il. 2001. *An Ambiguity View of Specificity*. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics* 1-1, 81-100. In this paper I review previous analyses of specific indefinites, and propose a new analysis. The main claim is that a specific indefinite presupposes that an agent, a speaker in general, has in mind an individual which satisfies the descriptive content. I provide evidence for the ambiguity view of specificity. First, I show that a specific indefinite triggers a presupposition. Second, I show that a specific indefinite is a strong quantifier while a nonspecific is a weak one. Finally, I discuss different behaviors of specific and nonspecific indefinites in anaphora.

1. Introduction

Indefinites are used in three ways. One is a generic use.

(1) A dog is clever. (generic)

The indefinite does not refer to a specific individual. The sentence means that dogs in general are clever.¹⁾ Another use is a quantificational use.

(2) A: Does John have a dog? (quantificational/nonspecific)
B: Yes, he has one/?it.

A's question is about whether there is at least one dog John has.

*This paper is a modification of part of Yeom (1997). The basic idea is the same, but I tried to be less formal in explication.

¹There is an analysis in which this use comes from the quantificational use of an indefinite, which follows immediately, plus a generic operator. In this sense, the generic use of an indefinite is not really an independent use.

This does not exclude the possibility that John has more than one dog. This is illustrated in the following example.

- (3) A: Does John have a dog.
 B: Yes, two.

If A's question were whether John has *only one* dog, B would say no. This use of an indefinite is generally called quantificational or nonspecific. When an indefinite is used quantificationally, it normally does not allow a pronoun to refer to it. That is why B uses *one* instead of *it* in his reply in (2).

Finally, an indefinite can be used in the so-called "specific" way. In this use, the speaker has a specific friend in mind.

- (4) A friend of mine is going to graduate soon. He is very smart. (specific)

In this use, the pronoun *he* can refer to the indefinite *a friend of mine*. In this paper, we focus on the difference between (2) and (4). One difficulty in analyzing specific indefinites is that there is no difference in the forms between specific and nonspecific indefinites. To avoid this problem, I only deal with specific indefinites with the expression *a certain*. Indefinites without the expression are taken to be nonspecific.

2. Review of Previous Analysis

2.1 Referential view of specific indefinites

Fodor and Sag (1982) claim that an indefinite is semantically ambiguous and a specific indefinite behaves like proper names. They argue for this position by several pieces of evidence. In this section, I will briefly discuss their arguments.

First, they point out that quantifiers have clause-bounded

scope while indefinites do not.

- (5) This producer believes that every actor in our company is too fat to appear in public.

Here the universal quantifier does not seem to have scope over the scope of *believe*. This shows that the scope of a quantifier is clause-bounded. This is not due to syntactic constraints on scope-taking. This is contrasted with the scope of an indefinite.

- (6) John overheard the rumor that a student of mine had been called before the dean.

The indefinite can have scope over *overheard the rumor*. The scope of the indefinite is not subject to the complex NP constraint, if the scope of an indefinite is determined by its movement. It has wide scope over a minimal clause. If an indefinite is a quantifier, such a scope phenomenon can be a serious problem. But if an indefinite is like a proper noun, the scope phenomenon is quite natural.

Second, they claim that an indefinite has no intermediate scope. This implies that the scope of an indefinite is not determined by the quantifier movement.

- (7) Each teacher overheard the rumor that a student of mine had been called before the dean.

This sentence would have the following three readings, if an indefinite were like an ordinary quantifier.

- (8) i. (each teacher: x)[x overheard the rumor that [(a student of mine: y)[y had been called before the dean]]]
 ii. *(each teacher: x)[(a student of mine: y)[x overheard the

- rumor that [y had been called before the dean]]]
- iii. (a student of mine: y)[(each teacher: x)[x overheard the rumor that [y had been called before the dean]]]

Among the three readings, we do not get the second. They take this to be evidence for claiming that an indefinite is ambiguous. When an indefinite is nonspecific, it behaves like an ordinary quantifier, and has the clause-bounded scope, as in (8i). If an indefinite is like a proper noun, it is scopeless: it simply has the maximal scope, as shown in (8iii). There is no other reading.

Third, they discuss VP Deletion. They claim that a verb phrase cannot be deleted if its antecedent contains a quantifier phrase which has wide scope over the verb phrase.

- (9) Someone loves everyone. Chris knows that someone does.

In this example, the first sentence can be ambiguous before we read the second sentence. But when we come across the second sentence, we get only the reading in which *everyone* has narrower scope than *someone*. The universal quantifier cannot have wide scope over the deleted VP since the VP includes it.

Now we can compare the following two examples.

- (10) Sandy thinks that someone loves everyone. Chris
 { does
 { thinks that someone does } }, too.
- (11) Sandy thinks that every student in our class plays chess
 better than a guy I beat this morning. Chris
 { does
 { thinks that every student does } }, too.

In the first example, the universal quantifier in the first sentence is within the embedded VP, and it can interact with *someone*

with regard to scopes. The second sentence has two VPs. The higher one can be deleted when the universal quantifier has narrow scope, but the same reading does not obtain when the low NP deletes. This is contrasted with the second example, in which an indefinite is within the embedded VP. Even in the case where it has wide scope over the universal quantifier *every student in my class*, the lower VP can delete, not to mention the higher VP. This is what we observe with referential expressions, as shown below:

- (12) Sandy thinks that everyone loves John/that woman. Chris
 { does
 { thinks that every student does} }, too.

Based on the observations so far, Fodor and Sag claim that indefinites are semantically ambiguous and that specific indefinites have referential interpretations.

Besides the arguments above, they give further evidence that makes indefinites more like proper names. Among other things, an indefinite can be used as a topic, or modified by a nonrestrictive relative clause. The referent of topic or a head noun of a nonrestrictive modifier in general tends to be established for the appropriate use of the topic or the nonrestrictive modifier. I will not discuss these because they are taken to be minor arguments.

Much of what Fodor and Sag suggest as evidence for the ambiguity of indefinites is problematic, however. Many observations they thought to be crucial turn out not quite right. First, indefinites can have intermediate scope.

- (13) Every professor rewarded every student who read a book
 that he had recommended. (Abusch 1994)
 'For every professor x , there is a book y such that x

recommended *y* and *x* rewarded every student who read *y*.' In this example, the indefinite *a book that he had recommended* can have intermediate scope between the two universal quantifiers. This implies that when an indefinite has widest scope, it may not be because the indefinite is referential. It may be because the indefinite happens to get wider scope than the other operators.

Second, a quantifier can have wide scope over a deleted VP to which it belongs.

- (14) An American flag flew over every house and (Sal knows that) a Canadian one did; too. (Hirschbühler 1982)

This sentence is natural only when the universal quantifier has wide scope. The fact that a VP with a quantifier can be deleted allowing the quantifier to have wide scope over the VP undermines Fodor and Sag's ambiguity view. An indefinite may not have to be a referential expression when it has wide scope over the elided VP.

In this paper, I try to claim that indefinites are ambiguous. When specific indefinites have certain characteristics, I need to explain why they show such characteristics. But at this point what Fodor and Sag claim is quite dubious. This implies that if indefinites are ambiguous, they should be so in a different way than the one in which Fodor and Sag think they are.

2.2 Quantificational view of specific indefinites

Ludlow and Neale (1991) claim that indefinites are not ambiguous. They try to show this by introducing three notions: speaker's ground (SG), proposition meant (PM), and proposition expressed (PE). When a speaker utters a sentence, the SG is what the speaker knows when he makes the utterance. The PM is what the speaker has intended by uttering the sentence. The PE is what is actually expressed by the utterance. Ludlow and

Neale defines the referential and specific uses of indefinites in terms of the notions.

- (15) If an indefinite is used referentially, the speaker's SG and PM must be a singular proposition.
- (16) An indefinite is used specifically if the SG is a singular proposition, and the PM is a general proposition.

According to the first definition, an indefinite cannot be used as referential. Suppose the following situation: seeing Jones, who I think is known as a convicted embezzler, seducing your sister, I say to you:

- (17) A convicted embezzler is seducing your sister.

In this case the SG is that Jones is seducing the addressee's sister, which is a singular proposition. On the other hand, the PM is that there is an individual who is a convicted embezzler and is seducing the addressee's sister. This is a general proposition. Therefore we can conclude that an indefinite cannot be used referentially. The situation, however, shows that the indefinite is used as specifically.

They also claim that a specific use of an indefinite is not a semantically distinguished one. In other words, the distinction of the specific/nonspecific indefinites is claimed to be pragmatic. Consider the following situation:

- (18) Situation: I saw a convicted embezzler flirting with your sister. I informed you of this fact by (19). After several minutes when we came back, a different convicted embezzler is flirting with your sister.
- (19) A convicted embezzler is flirting with your sister.

They claim that despite the new convicted embezzler, the sentence is accidentally true, and that what the speaker has in mind does not make any truth-conditional/semantic difference.

That a sentence is accidentally true, however, does not mean alternative meanings are pragmatic. It is well-known that A's statement below is semantically (and syntactically) ambiguous.

(20) A: Everyone in this room speaks two languages.

B: Yes, but the same ones.

Suppose that A intended to convey the meaning that everyone speaks two languages, but not necessarily the same ones, contrary to the fact, and that B knows all this. Even in this case, A's statement is accidentally true and B cannot dispute A's statement. B cannot say no because B cannot show what A intended. This will be true of all ambiguous sentences.

Ludlow and Neale do not give crucial evidence for the quantificational view of specific indefinites. A quantificational view also must account for how the scope of an indefinite is determined. Various attempts have been made to account for the peculiar scope-taking of indefinites, but they are problematic in some aspect or other. I will not go into this here.

3. Ambiguity View of Specificity

In this section, I will propose an ambiguity view of specific indefinites. In doing so, I assume that *a certain* is a marker of specificity. This does not mean that the analysis I propose applies only to the indefinites with the expression. The analysis here applies to all indefinites which are interpreted as specific. I propose the following:

(21) An NP 'a certain *a*' presupposes

$$\exists x[\alpha'(x) \wedge \text{have_in_mind}(y, x)].$$

This shows that specific indefinites are different from non-specifics in two aspects. First, the descriptive content is not asserted, but presupposed. Second, specific indefinites have the additional meaning that the speaker or someone has in mind some entity that satisfies the descriptive content. In what follows, I will give evidence for this analysis, and also show that this analysis accounts for the various properties of specific indefinites.

3.1 Presupposition of existence

Whether an expression presupposes something can be tested in various ways. There are several tests that are generally accepted. Among these, the negation is the most typical test, and the others are similar in essence. Consider the following example.

- (22) John met the king of France
 John did not meet the king of France.
 >> France has a king.

The definite description *the king of France* triggers a presupposition that there is a king of France. This can be confirmed by the fact that even if the sentence is negated, the presupposition seems to hold.

We can apply the same test to an example with a specific indefinite.

- (23) John met a certain woman.
 John did not meet a certain woman.
 >> There is a woman.

In this example, regardless of whether the sentence is negated or

not, we assume that there is a woman the speaker has in mind. When an indefinite is nonspecific, the existence of an entity that satisfies the descriptive content is negated, as shown below.

(24) John did not meet a woman. (= John met no woman.)

What happens if a specific indefinite is forced to be negated? A specific indefinite is not generally negated, as shown below.

(25) There is a certain man at the door who claims to be your cousin from Albania.

(26) ??There isn't a certain man willing to take on this mission.

Notice that the specific indefinite can occur in *There*-construction. When the *There*-construction is negated, the subject is forced to have narrower scope than the negation. But the sentence becomes awkward.²⁾

So far I have shown that specific indefinites presuppose the existence of entities satisfying the descriptive content. The presuppositional analysis of specific indefinites has one great advantage. We know that specific indefinites can have any scope without being subject to island constraints. Presuppositions have such a property. Consider the following example.

(27) Himmel rewarded every student who read the book he had recommended.

>> There was a book which Himmel had recommended.

The definite description triggers a presupposition with the

²There is a reading in which the negation of a specific indefinite is natural. In this case the negation is merely a metalinguistic one.

(i) John does not have a preference for a CERTAIN job; rather he will take ANY job.

complex NP. But the presupposition is projected despite the complex NP constraint. This shows that presupposition projection is not subject to syntactic constraints. The same can be observed with a specific indefinite.

- (28) Himmel rewarded every student who read a certain book.
 >> There is a book.

The specific indefinite occurs within a complex NP, but we get the reading in which it has wide scope over *every student*.

3.2 Presupposition of 'having_in_mind'

The use of a specific indefinite also presupposes that someone has an individual in mind. This means that the agent of having-in-mind knows who the individual is. This can be observed in the following discourse.

- (29) A: A certain student of mine was called before the dean.
 B: Who was it?
 A: John/??I don't know.

The specific indefinite presupposes that the speaker has a student in mind, which means that A knows who the student was. So it is awkward to say that A does not know who the student was. This can be compared with the following discourse.

- (30) A: A student of mine was called before the dean.
 B: Who was it?
 A: John/I don't know.

When A uses a nonspecific, it is still possible for A to know who the student was. But it is also possible not to know who.

If the agent of having-in-mind is not the speaker, the speaker

may not be committed to the existence of an individual.

- (31) ??A certain gentleman does not exist.
 (32) A certain particle that many physicists took for granted turned out not to exist after all.

In (31), the speaker is the one who has a gentleman in mind. So it is awkward for him to negate the existence of the gentleman he has in mind. In (32), the agent who has a particle in mind is a group of physicists. This makes it possible for the speaker to negate the existence of the particle. This is indirect evidence for the presupposition of an agent having some individual in mind.

3.3 Specific indefinites are strong NPs

I have shown that specific indefinites trigger a presupposition that an agent has an individual in mind. As Ludlow and Neale pointed out, they are not referential. But to the agent, specific indefinites are just like proper names. From this, it is expected that specific indefinites are strong NPs, like proper names. Let's look at the definition of strong NPs.

- (33) A determiner D is positive strong (or negative strong, resp.) if for every model $M = \langle E, \|\cdot\| \rangle$ and every $A \subseteq E$, if the quantifier $\|D\|(A)$ is defined then $A \in \|D\|(A)$. (Or $A \notin \|D\|(A)$, resp.). If D is not (positive or negative) strong, then D is weak. [Barwise and Cooper 1981: 182]

The definition says that if a D is positive strong, a sentence of the form 'D N be (a) N' is a tautology. This is illustrated below.

- (34) a. Every student is a student.
 b. Most students are students.
 c. The student is a student.

In (34c), the definite NP triggers a presupposition that there is a student. When the presupposition is satisfied, the sentence becomes a tautology. Consider the following sentences.

- (35) a. A student is a student.
 b. Two students are students.
 c. No students are students.

(35a) and (35b) become false if there is no student. (35c) becomes false if there is at least one student. So the subjects are weak NPs. Notice that (35a) contains a nonspecific indefinite.

Now look at the following sentence.

- (36) A certain student is a student.

The specific indefinite presupposes that there is a student who the speaker has in mind. If this presupposition is satisfied, the sentence is always true. So a specific indefinite is a strong NP.

There is another test of whether a NP is strong or weak. A weak NP fits in the blank in (37), but not a strong NP.

- (37) John died ___ later.
 (38) a. a week, a few weeks, three weeks, many weeks. (Weak)
 b. the month, that month, most weeks, every week,
 January, ... (Strong)

A specific indefinite cannot go into the blank, as shown below.

- (39) *John died a certain week later.

So we can conclude that a specific indefinite is a strong NP. Note that the strong/weak distinction is a semantic difference.

This supports that indefinites are (semantically) ambiguous. Someone might think that specific indefinites are weak since they are allowed in *There*-construction.

- (40) There is a certain monster Mary thinks broke into her house yesterday.

The indefinite does not make the sentence ungrammatical. If my analysis is on the right track, it implies that the condition on the subject of *There*-construction should be something other than being a weak NP. I suppose that the condition on the subject in *There*-construction is that it introduce a new discourse referent.

- (41) A: Did you correct yesterday's exams? (Comorovski 1994)
 B: No, there are *most/*all/five/several (of them) left to correct.

In (41), strong determiners *most* and *all* cannot occur in *There*-construction. Notice that *yesterday's exams* is mentioned by A, and that they do not introduce a new discourse referent. On the other hand, the weak NPs introduce a new discourse referent independently of the discourse referent of *yesterday's exams*.

Consider the following sentence.

- (42) There are all/most/several of yesterday's exams left to correct.

The subject introduces a new discourse referent through the NP *yesterday's exams*. In this case, strong determiners, as well as weak ones, are allowed. So one condition on the subject in *There*-construction is that it introduce a new discourse referent.

This can be confirmed by the following pair of sentences.

- (43) There are the following counterexamples to Streck's theory.

??There are the above counterexamples

The word *following* implies that the referent is mentioned for the first time. But *above* implies that the NP is already introduced in the previous discourse. So the sentence becomes odd.

3.4 Anaphora

A specific indefinite is like a proper name to the agent of having-in-mind. This gives rise to a different consequence in anaphora than nonspecific indefinites. Before I show this, I need to point out that anaphora is influenced by pragmatic factors. First, consider an example in which an indefinite is used as nonspecific. I repeated (3) below for convenience.

- (3) A: Does John have a dog.
B: Yes, two.

B's answer implies that a singular indefinite does not really mean singularity. But the following examples show that anaphora seems to require uniqueness.

- (44) a. Only one student is going to present a paper.
b. A student is going to present a paper.
c. At least one student is going to present a paper.
(45) He is well aware of the problems with the paper.

Here (44a) and (44b) can be followed by (45), but (44c) cannot. In (44a) uniqueness is guaranteed by the expression *only one*. Sentences (44b) and (44c) have the same truth condition. Semantically uniqueness is not guaranteed by the NPs. Then why are they different in anaphora? A difference of (44b) from (44c) is that unless the discourse does go to the contrary, the indefinite causes a conversational implicature that there is only

one student who is going to present a paper. This shows that uniqueness can be established pragmatically.³⁾ Pragmatically induced uniqueness in (44b) makes the pronoun in (45) felicitous.

In order to show that specifics are different from nonspecifics with respect to anaphora, I need to discuss examples in which pragmatic factors do not come in. Such examples are found in sentences which involve belief or desire contexts. Consider an example involving a belief context first.

- (46) John believes that he saw only one unicorn, but that he couldn't touch it.

The quantifier *only one unicorn* normally does not have scope over the verb *believe* since a quantifier is clause-bounded. Even though the belief is about the uniqueness of a unicorn, the unicorn is not unique in some sense. In terms of possible world semantics, a person's belief context is a set of possible worlds which are compatible with what he/she believes. These possible worlds are called doxastic alternatives. When someone believes that there is a unique unicorn he/she saw, it means that in each doxastic alternative, there is a unique unicorn he/she saw. A unicorn in a doxastic alternative may be different from a unicorn in another doxastic alternative. The uniqueness condition on anaphora can be defined with respect to each possible world in the context in which the pronoun occurs. In the example above, the pronoun is used in the same belief context as the one in which the antecedent occurs. In each doxastic alternative, there is a unique unicorn and it is felicitous to use a pronoun to refer to the unique unicorn.

This is compared with the following sentence.

³It is still controversial whether uniqueness is really the condition on anaphora. I do not want to discuss it here. I just assume it following Kadmon (1990).

(47) ??John believes that he saw only one unicorn, but it does not exist.

The first conjunct claims that John believes that there is a unique unicorn he saw. But the pronoun occurs in the main context. The reason why the pronoun is not felicitous is that there is a one-to-many relation between a possible world in the main context and the doxastic alternatives from that possible world. Seen from a possible world in the main context, there are many unicorns in John's belief: there is no unique unicorn that the pronoun can refer to from the main context.

Now consider the following example.

(48) John believes that he saw a certain unicorn, but it does not exist.

A specific indefinite occurs in a belief context, and a pronoun which refers to it occurs in the main context. We cannot regard the specific indefinite as having wide scope over the verb *believe*. The speaker does not believe a unicorn actually exists. Despite the one-to-many relation of possible worlds between the main context and a belief context the use of the pronoun is felicitous. The only way in which uniqueness is established is to have a unique unicorn across John's doxastic alternatives. This is guaranteed by a proper name. Felicitous use of a proper name presupposes that the user has some individual in mind. Having-in-mind makes the name a rigid designator. Recall that a specific indefinite conveys the meaning of having-in-mind. So a specific indefinite behaves like a proper name in the belief context of the agent who has some individual in mind.

A similar observation can be made in a desire context.

(49) ??My son wants to catch a fish, but there is no fish

biting. It looks like a red fish.

The indefinite *a fish* has narrower scope than the verb *want*. In this reading, the pronoun *it* cannot refer to the indefinite. When a fish exists in someone's desire context, it may or may not exist in the main context. The pronoun in the main context cannot refer to what may not exist in the main context.

Then we could not expect a pronoun in the main context to refer to an indefinite in a desire context, whether or not it is specific or nonspecific. This is not the case, however.

(50) My son wants to catch a certain monster, but it is a figment of his imagination.

The pronoun *it* refers to the indefinite *a certain monster*, even though no one believes a monster actually exists. This is where the presupposition of having-in-mind comes in. Having-in-mind is an epistemic matter. It makes the referent a rigid designator in the agent's belief/knowledge state. In (50), the speaker's son has some monster in mind.⁴ This means that the indefinite is a rigid designator in the belief state of the speaker's son. According to Heim (1992), a desire statement is about preference order between doxastic alternatives. Once a specific indefinite in a desire statement establishes the uniqueness of an individual in the belief context, the individual is unique from a possible world in the main context, regardless of what is asserted in the desire statement. A specific indefinite in a desire statement is just like one in a belief statement.

4. Conclusion

⁴There is another reading in which the speaker has some monster in mind. But I ignore this reading because in this case the sentence means that there is actually a monster.

A specific indefinite presupposes an individual which an agent has in mind. I showed this with various linguistic facts. I have focused on one aspect of a specific indefinite: a specific indefinite is like a proper name. As Ludlow and Neale pointed out, specific indefinites are not referential. This implies that there is another aspect of specific indefinites, that is, that specifics are just like nonspecifics to others than the agent of having-in-mind. A specific indefinite yields two different propositions depending on who is the agent of having-in-mind. I have not dealt with this much because I wanted to show that specifics and nonspecifics are different. A second reason is that we cannot deal with both aspects in the traditional truth-conditional semantics. Finally, I want to mention that the agent of having-in-mind is pragmatically determined. I suppose that this is why some people believe that the specific/nonspecific distinction is merely a matter of pragmatics. To them, the phenomena I dealt with in this paper would be mysterious.

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염재일

서울시 마포구 상수동 72-1

홍익대학교 영어영문과

우편번호: 121-791

전화: 02)320-1770

E-mail: jiyecom@wow.hongik.ac.kr

접수일자: 2000. 12. 1.

게재일자: 2001. 1. 15.