A note on definiteness and reality

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In the last issue of TfS Jan Rijkhoff and Johanna Seibt (RS) present a comparison of definiteness and modality, to the effect that there are essential parallels, including an anti-symmetry, between the distinctions definite-indefinite and realis-irrealis, and, more generally between the NP and the clause.

My first query is concerned with the pragmatic status of the two distinctions. I grant RS that both ±realis and ±definite "have to do with the pragmatic status of the referent (thing, event)" (section 4.2), in that both indicate the speaker's view of the referent, but they belong in different dimensions or subfields of pragmatics. Where ±definite basically has to do with textual coherence (and hence "the world of discourse"), ±realis has to do with the actual world 'fit' (Searle's term), and has nothing to do with the world of discourse. Imagine RS's Amele realis example (12), section 4.1, as part of an exchange:

(A)   *They killed the pig as it ran out.*

(B)   *Did they really?*

(B)'s response (whose English form admittedly may not be similar in Amele) clearly shows that neither the killing or the running was already part of the world of discourse between (A) and (B). Moreover the interrogative form of the response seems to question the reality of (A)'s statement – though we know that this kind of response (in English and in several other languages) ususally indicates a willingness to listen, not doubt.

On the other hand, in the following exchange (A) makes *life on Mars* part of the world of discourse, but (B) converts it to irrealis:

(A)   *There's life on Mars.*

(B)   *No, there <u>may</u> be life on Mars – we don't know yet.*

In other words ±realis would seem to have nothing to do with grounding (RS section 7). And I don't see how an irrealis can instruct the adressee "to construe a new entity" (section 5).

My second query has to do with the analysis of definiteness; in particular, the difference between expression and content does not always emerge clearly. In fact there seem to be three pairs of distinctions in play, not just two, in that ±specific also has a "crucial role".

Specificity may be defined as the content that helps determine the use of ±definite expressions. A specific NP is one that refers to an entity that the speaker can identify. However, in order to understand the basic use of ±definite expressions (in English and several other European languages) we need a three-term (or double-binary) system:

<u>Content</u>		<u>Expression</u>
NON-SPECIFIC (or GENERIC)		Indefinite (or definite)
SPECIFIC	SPECIFYING (or GROUNDING) (identifiable only by speaker)	Indefinite
	SPECIFIED (or GROUNDED) (identifiable by both speaker and addressee)	Definite

To illustrate the difference between generic and specific, take the following two examples:

<u>SPECIFIC</u>

(1)   *Once upon the time there was the king and the queen, who lived in the castle surrounded by the large garden. A king wanted very much to have the male heir, but a queen gave birth to the princess.*

<u>NON-SPECIFIC (or GENERIC)</u>

(2)   *The lion is a dangerous animal, much more dangerous than the domestic cat, simply because a lion is bigger than a cat.*

In (1) I have switched the definite and indefinite articles, with the result that the text is wellnigh illegible. In (2) there is no problem, even though the distribution of articles is the same: definite at first reference, indefinite at the second. It seems that the definite-indefinite expression system fits specific reference best – in the generic (2) I can switch them round in whichever way.

However that is not the whole story. Where RS maintain that there is only one reason for an NP to be indefinite (section 6), I would maintain that there are several reasons for an NP to be indefinite. By this I mean that there are several different types of context or content (one specifying and three non-specific) that may trigger the indefinite form:

(a)   it refers to a specific entity which is not (yet) part of a shared "world of discourse" (i.e. not yet identifiable by the adressee, though it must be identifiable (specifiable) by the speaker), but which will be at the next reference to it. This is the prototypical use of indefinite reference: the grounding or specifying use. Note that with plural or uncountable nouns this use is marked by the quantifier *some*, or a similar quantifier (*Once upon a time some musicians decided that…*). In the three following non-specific types indefiniteness is unmarked in plural and uncountable NPs.

(b)   it predicates (non-specifically) class membership for a specific entity (*He is a teacher*), or for a (generic) class (*A/the lion is a carnivore*), in other words it allocates that entity (or class) to a (more comprehensive) class.

(c)   it predicates (non-specifically) a description of a specific entity (*He is an idiot*).

(d)   it refers generically (non-specifically), i.e. to a class (*A lion is dangerous*).

(a) is the prototypical (original?) specifying use of the indefinite form (described by RS in section 4.2). The non-specific (b) and (c) are not distinguished in English, but they are in Danish – and I believe in German, cf *han er lærer* vs *han er en idiot* – both are indefinite, but only (c) is signalled by an indefinite article. (Whether this should give rise to one or two more terms in the content system, is an open question – it does not basically affect the expression system, though it does suggest at least a third term: indefinite NP without indefinite article marker. The main point is that (b) and (c) are predicative, not referential.)

(d) is the odd man out, because it does not require an indefinite NP (cf (2)), but would work as well with a definite one (though in that case ambiguously between a specific – already grounded – lion, and lions generically). In the other

instances (a), (b), (c) the use of a definite article is either impossible (as in (a), cf (1)), or changes the meaning radically (as in (b) and (c), from generic to specific).

On the other hand there is basically only one reason for an NP to be definite: that it refers to a specific entity which is already (presumed to be) part of a shared "world of discourse" (i.e. identifiable by the adressee as well as by the speaker) – even though there are several ways by which it can be "identifiable" in the shared "world of discourse" (textually, as for instance by indefinite form (a) above, or situationally, culturally, or universally).

If we are to distinguish different types, we might distinguish between what is anaphorically (or situationally) and what is cataphorically specified (i.e. identifiable by addressee by means of a postmodifier). The following is an example of cataphorical identifiability (note that *the salmon* does not presuppose anaphoric identifiability by the receiver):

(3)   *Are you feeling queasy?*
        Yes. It may be <u>the salmon I had for dinner</u>.

It is arguable, though, that this use of the definite article is not specified, but specifying. The use of definite articles in headings (*Today I am going to read you The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) may be similarly explicable, but there may be other, cultural, reasons for this use.

The identifiablity of specific reference may spill over into generic reference. Thus the initial definite NP in (2) presupposes that *the lion* is part of the shared world of discourse (presumably culturally or situationally). This may even be found in predicative generic use, as in the following exchange:

(4)   *Does the lion have stripes?*
        No, that is <u>the tiger</u>. The lion does not have stripes.

But the general picture is that non-specific reference is fairly free to use either definite or indefinite reference (cf (2)). There are exceptions from this, such as predicative uses – not only in classification or description, but also in examples such as *I have never seen a tiger*, where indefinite form is required. On the other

hand there are cases where generic reference requires the definite article (*Today I am going to tell you about the lion*).

This may seem rather heavy-handed, but if specificity has a "crucial role" to play, we have to be clear how it works. I admit that saying that there is only one reason for an NP to be definite, is an analyst's choice. But to say that there is only one reason for an NP to be indefinite, is (I find) a misrepresentation – my suggestion of four reasons may seem an overkill, but they are certainly different in meaning, as well as in their relation to definite expression. Anyway, the point is that the assertion of a one-many (and many-one) difference (RS section 6) is too easy to disagree with (analyst's choice).

My final point, then, is that a comparison between ±realis and ±definite has to take into account content as well expression. For one thing, when RS distinguish (in section 7) between non-specific-indefinite and specific-indefinite, I miss a reference to non-specific and specific definte. Also the term tense is used as if the content is a simple reflection of the expression, cf section 7: "When tense is used for a non-actual event, it specifies <u>when</u> an event was non-actual." But what about *If only I had a million!* – clearly the preterite is here the irrealis marker.

For another, ±realis seems to be much more variedly marked than specificity (apart from a few languages such as Amele). In fact ±realis is, in English and several other well known languages, basically a content distinction, marked by modal verbs, preterite tense, or whatever. It may even be marked by an adjective participle, as in the specific irrealis NP *The alleged murderer*.

The alleged similarities between ±definite and ±realis may be real. They may even be based on diachrony or metaphor (RS section 3.2-3). The explanations I have presented here, do not provide evidence either way. But I do claim to have presented evidence for a reconsideration of the comparison.