Against the Universality of the Strong-Weak Distinction in Article Systems

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Schwarz (2009) put the distinction between a strong article definite and a weak article definite center stage by giving distinct formal semantic analyses for two types of definite articles in German (and Fering). Simply put, weak article definites go with nouns that are known to be uniquely instantiated, while strong article definites go with nouns that are anaphoric. Similar distinctions have been claimed for other languages since then.

In this talk, I argue that the kind of distinction seen in German (and Fering) is not as common as we have come to believe. I show that English *the* does not have the properties of a strong determiner of the German kind, that Mandarin does not split the strong-weak article definite between demonstratives and bare NPs (following Jiang and Dayal 2021), that Akan does not have a strong definite article *–no* and a weak definite article bare NP (partly following Owusu 2022). There are several questions raised by this revised cross-linguistic picture: What are the semantic/pragmatic ingredients that make up a definite article? How do lexicalization options impact on available readings? This talk provides some answers based on the facts in English, Mandarin and Akan.

The analysis of definiteness sketched for English, Mandarin and Akan leads to a new question: What is the difference between the German strong article definite and the German demonstrative? The answer, it turns out, is not obvious. However, time permitting, I will try to probe some semantic properties of demonstratives and definites that may suggest possible lines of inquiry into a question that earlier literature on weak-strong articles did not anticipate.