The semantics of (in)definite articles and languages without (in)definite articles

Veneeta Dayal

Veneeta Dayal is Dorothy R. Diebold Professor of Linguistics, and Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Linguistics, Yale University USA. She is one of the leading figures in South Asian Linguistics especially with regard to Hindi studies. She has served at Rutgers University, Harvard University and many other institutions in various capacities over the last few decades. Her research interests include Semantic Theory, Syntax-Semantics Interface, Hindi/South Asian Linguistics, and Cognitive Science. She has several noteworthy publications such as Questions by Oxford University Press (2016).

There is a lot of work on the semantics of definite articles like the and indefinite articles like a/an. It is generally accepted that definite articles have evolved from demonstratives like this/that/these/those and indefinite articles from the numeral one. There is substantive work on the semantics of demonstratives and on the numeral one. How do the insights from these studies apply to languages that do not have definite or indefinite determiners?

All languages have demonstratives and numerals but many languages do not have definite or indefinite articles, including most of South Asian languages. We begin by providing clear diagnostics for determining whether a particular lexical item is a definite determiner or a demonstrative, and whether a particular lexical item is an indefinite determiner or a numeral. We then focus on the definite determiner and consequences for its absence in languages. The question we probe is whether in the absence of such determiners, bare nouns (nouns unaccompanied by any quantifier etc) are ambiguous between definite and indefinite interpretation. We argue against this position and suggest an account for when a bare noun is perceived as having a definite interpretation and when it is perceived as having an indefinite interpretation.

The primary language used in the above is Hindi/Hindi-Urdu but in the last part of the talk I will discuss some observations made in an ongoing study of (in)definiteness in seven unrelated languages (Cabo Verdean Creole, Cuzco Quechua, Hiaki, Indonesian, Korean, Russian, Xhosa) that generally allow the use of bare nouns as arguments. We will conclude by suggesting that studies of overt definite articles are indeed relevant to languages without definite determiners, but so are insights from the available readings of bare arguments in languages without definite determiners to an understanding of definite and indefinite determiners.

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