



Philosophische Fakultät



CCLS: Veneeta Dayal (Yale University)

The Cross-linguistic Expression of Definiteness: Demonstratives, Definites and Bare Nouns

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We can take the following statements as cross-linguistically valid:

- All languages have demonstratives
- Many languages have definite determiners
- Many languages have bare nouns.

The question that is of interest is whether bare nouns, especially in languages that do not have definite determiners, can be classified as definite. And complicating this question further is another question:

- Is there more than one type of definite determiner?
- And, if so, which kind of definite is a bare noun?

I take as my starting point, the idea forwarded in Schwarz (2009) that natural language has two types of definites, a strong definite and a weak definite and the application of this idea to Mandarin in Jenks (2018). There are two diagnostics separating weak and strong definites. One has to do with the ability to refer to entities that are globally unique, such as sun/moon etc – only weak definites have that potential. Another is the potential for anaphora: only strong definites have anaphoric potential. Jenks' claim is that Mandarin bare nouns are weak definites and Mandarin demonstratives are strong definites. Drawing on Dayal and Jiang (to appear), I show that the data regarding the anaphoric potential of Mandarin bare nouns is more nuanced than presented in Jenks' work and does not support a simple classification of Mandarin bare nouns as weak definites.

In order to understand how definiteness plays out cross-linguistically, I expand the discussion beyond weak and strong definites to include demonstratives. A language like German has a three-way morpho-syntactic distinction. How does this play out in (the majority of) languages that have only a two-way morpho-syntactic distinction, be it between a demonstrative and one definite determiner (English), or a demonstrative and a bare form (Mandarin)? While the main empirical focus will be on German, English and Mandarin, I will draw on some discoveries from ongoing work in seven typologically unrelated languages, all with bare nouns and demonstratives (Dayal forthcoming).

Warning: this is work in progress, so it lays out the problem but does not provide a solution, just what the solution should look like.