

The semantics of indefinite proper names

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Abstract

The talk presents a new analysis of a certain type of use of proper names that appears particularly widespread in German (as well as in French or Spanish, but not in English). While proper names are generally regarded as being inherently definite, in German one frequently finds proper names preceded by the *indefinite* article. This construction is most popular when human beings of great public interest are referred to. This type of sentences forms minimal pairs with others in which the *definite* article appears, or else simply the bare proper name (the latter difference being basically a matter of dialectal variation). Our analysis of indefinite proper names will assume that they involve generic quantification over “manifestations” of individuals. The role of the indefinite article is then to introduce a variable over such manifestations.

Proper Names are semantically definite and primarily used without articles or with the definite article depending on the particular language, as in (1) and (2), respectively. However, there are secondary uses of proper names with the indefinite article. (3) shows one reading in which we generically quantify over individuals with the name George Bush. However, it also shows a second meaning according to which we assert that George Bush *in all his relevant manifestations, aspects or roles* does not lie. I account for this reading by assuming that the indefinite article introduces a variable over “manifestations”, “roles” or “aspects” of the single most salient bearer of the name (here: President George Bush). The (hidden) generic operator can then bind this variable yielding the correct reconstruction of the intuitive meaning, which is easily available in Spanish and German, but only marginally acceptable in English – see however (4) from a google-search.

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|-----|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| (1) | a | <i>George Bush</i> does not lie. | b | <i>George Bush</i> ne ment pas. |
| | c | <i>George Bush</i> no miente. | d | <i>George Bush</i> lügt nicht. |
| (2) | a | (*The) <i>George Bush</i> does not lie. | b | (*Le) <i>George Bush</i> ne ment pas |
| | c | (*El) <i>George Bush</i> no miente. | d | Der <i>George Bush</i> lügt nicht. |
| (3) | a | ?A <i>George Bush</i> does not lie. | b | ?Un <i>George Bush</i> ne ment pas. |
| | c | Un <i>George Bush</i> no miente. | d | Ein <i>George Bush</i> lügt nicht. |
| (4) | | Thus, a <i>George Bush</i> is particularly despised on his far Right as a <i>Tony Blair</i> is on his far Left. | | |

(http://www.brothersjudd.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/reviews.detail/book_id/1529/)

Besides the primary use of proper names without articles, as in (1), or with the definite article, as in (2), I assume (at least) four different classes of secondary uses: (i) In the denominative use, the proper name is used as common noun, as in (5). (ii) In the metaphorical use, as in (6), the proper name refers to a set of objects that have the (contextually) salient properties of the bearer of the name. A metaphorical use strongly depends on the prototypicality of the properties and the prominence of the bearer of the name. Therefore it is preferably used with personalities of the public life. (iii) In the stage-use, as in (7), the PN “cuts” out a certain stage from the “whole” individual. The stage x_s is closely related to the whole individual by a realization relation (Carlson 1977). (iv) In the manifestation-use the actual bearer of the name instantiated by a manifestation. This can be illustrated by example (8), which has (at least)

two readings or uses. According to the metaphorical use, we need another person called Roosevelt. According to the manifestation use, we need Roosevelt in another manifestation, i.e. with different properties.

- (5) I would rather talk to *a Carmen* than to *a Gertrudis*. x is called PN
 (6) He is *a James Joyce* (of the 21st century). x has salient properties of PN
 (7) *The young Isaac Newton* did not show any sign of genius. x_s is a stage of PN
 (8) We need *another Roosevelt*
 (a) We need another individual *called* Roosevelt. (= (6))
 (b) We need another *manifestation* of Roosevelt. x_m is a manifestation of PN

Manifestations differ from stages in that several manifestations can hold of one individual at the same time. So we can say (Chomsky 1972, 67) “I am not against MY FATHER, only against THE LABOR MINISTER” referring to different manifestations of the same individual at the same time without contradiction. The idea of manifestations, “social roles”, “aspects”, etc. is often employed for cases of more fine-grained referential contexts, as in (9) (Brown & Yule 1983). I therefore suggest that predicates are lexically ambiguous so that they either take a simple individual or a manifestation of an individual as arguments.

- (9) a As a colleague you’re deficient but as a neighbor you’re marvelous
 b As his neighbor I see quite a lot of him, as his colleague I hardly ever see him.

I analyze the generic sentences (1) and (3) according to Krifka et al. (1995) with a hidden generic quantifier binding free variables. In (1), repeated as (10), the operator binds just the situational variable s . In (3), repeated as (11), the indefinite article introduces a variable – either of the simple individual type, of the stage-type, or of the manifestation-type. I focus on the latter case. This variable over manifestations first stands in some realization relation R to the bearer of the name George Bush and the realization relation R is contextually restricted in order to give us only the salient or prominent manifestations of George Bush (such as *president, republican, christian* etc.). Non-salient manifestations (such as *milk-drinker, long-sleeper* etc.) are not under discussion here. The variable over manifestations can be bound by the generic operator yielding the logical form (11b) and its paraphrase (11c).

- (10) a George Bush does not lie.
 b Gen(s) [gb say something in s] [gb does not lie in s]
 (11) a *Un George Bush ne ment pas. / Un George Bush no miente. / Ein George Bush lügt nicht.*
 b Gen(x_m, s) $\exists R$ [$R(x_m, gb)$ & $C(R, gb)$] [x_m does not lie in s]
 c For every contextually salient manifestation of George Bush and every relevant

While the truth-conditions of the two sentences are the same, the subtle meaning difference is caused by the different logical forms. (10b) makes an assertion about the individual George Bush, while (11b) makes an assertion of different manifestations of George Bush.

Summarizing the analysis of generic sentences with indefinite proper names, I assume that (i) manifestations are sub-individual objects that stand in a realization relation to an individual; (ii) the indefinite article introduces a variable that can range over such manifestations (in

certain circumstances), and (iii) the (hidden) generic operator quantifies over such manifestations.

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