

Metadefinite Possessives

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Most formal theories of definiteness say that a use of the definite article *the* in English presupposes either familiarity (e.g., Heim 1982) or uniqueness (e.g., Russell 1905; Abbott, SALT 1999; Roberts, *L&P* to appear). But Poesio (SALT 1994) identifies a productive, common, and utterly natural class of possessive NPs which need not be either familiar or unique:

- (1) The cafe is located on **the corner of a busy intersection**. (Poesio 1994)
- (2) That's the one where Superman crashes spectacularly into **the side of a Marlboro-embazoned truck**. (Google)

On the most natural reading, there is no presupposition of familiarity, nor of uniqueness. After all, intersections typically have 4 corners, and trucks have at least two sides.

McNally (*L&P* 1998) suggests that these possessive weak definites denote properties, correctly predicting that unlike most definites they ought to occur in the existential *there* construction:

- (3) ...and in the right side of the photo there is **the corner of a building**. (Google)
- (4) There was **the side of a bear** attached to a wooden spit over a fire. (Google)

Although I will argue that weak definites do indeed denote properties, the only means McNally provides for arriving at a property denotation is Partee's (1987) type-shifting operator BE. But any type-shifting account that takes the meaning of the definite NP as input will have difficulty explaining why the presuppositions normally associated with the definite article seem to be missing. Poesio likewise provides a property analysis, but at the cost of allowing presuppositions to be 'canceled' in certain LF configurations; it is far from clear how to translate this approach into a theory on which presuppositions can be understood as constraints on context rather than on logical form.

Intriguingly, Nunberg (WCCFL 1984) argues that models should contain only those individuals that can be distinguished by properties that are relevant for conversational purposes. That is supposed to be why we can say *I drive a Ford Falcon and Enzo drives the same car*—for Nunberg, the relevant model contains only one Ford Falcon! If we could get away with having only one corner per intersection in the model, or only one side per truck, that would explain (1) and (2). I will argue against adopting Nunberg's proposal, at least in its simplest form, adapting arguments from Lasnik (SALT 2000) and adding a few of my own. Ultimately, however, I will suggest that Nunberg's idea does contain an essential insight: there is some level of analysis at which the type named by the relational noun (*corner*, *side*, etc.) counts as an individual independent from its tokens (the multiple physical corners or sides). If so, even in the possessive weak definites in (1) and (2) there is uniqueness after all: uniqueness over the semantic field consisting of the set of relevant possible possessive relations. The possessive weak definite, then, has some of the flavor of a focus construction: the cafe is located on the *corner* of the intersection, not the middle; Superman crashes into the *side* of the truck, not the top. Among the presuppositions that emerge due to the definite, then, is the presupposition that intersections have corners in the first place, and that trucks have sides.

The resulting analysis defends the claim that *the* uniformly presupposes uniqueness in all of its (productive) uses, though the uniqueness may be relative to different semantic domains: either uniqueness relative to a set of individuals (*The man arrived*); uniqueness relative to a set of kinds (*The cat is a noble beast*, see, e.g., Dayal, SALT 2000; Krifka, ms.); or uniqueness relative to a set of possession relations, as proposed here for possessive weak definites.