

In search of the genuine articles: a minimal theory of  
(in)definiteness

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According to Russell's theory, as for almost any contemporary theory of the definite/indefinite distinction, the absence of explicit marking of that distinction in some languages, e.g. Russian, Korean, would appear to be a serious lacuna. How come the absence doesn't hamper the ability of speakers of those languages to express and distinguish singular and existential propositions? I argue for a minimal theory of the meanings of indefinite and definite articles, and their differences. Specifically, neither article makes any non-trivial at-issue contribution at all, although definites make a non-at-issue contribution. The non-at-issue content of definites is itself more minimal than e.g. Strawson assumed, since it is not existential, but only involves a restricted version of uniqueness. For example, "the king" presupposes that if there's any king, then exactly one can be identified. Further effects, including both predicative and non-predicative interpretations of NPs, are derived using a combination of pragmatic reasoning and derivational rules, essentially the type shifting operations introduced by Partee. These rules are exactly the same as those independently motivated for languages like Russian and Korean.

Quite apart from making the existence of languages like Russian seem unsurprising, the resulting theory explains a range of new data that no previous theory of definites captures. This data involves interactions between definites and superlatives, and between definites and exclusives like "only". On natural assumptions about exclusives, both Russellian and Strawsonian analyses of definites fail to predict any difference between (1) and (2) or between (2) and (3) as regards the number of colloquia that will be held this year, while the minimal theory I will describe correctly predicts that (1) and (3) imply one colloquium, whereas (2) implies more than one.

- 1) Chomsky won't give the colloquium this year. (--> exactly one colloquium)
- 2) Chomsky won't give the only colloquium this year. (---> more than one colloquium)
- 3) Chomsky won't attend the only colloquium this year. (---> exactly one colloquium)

(Joint work with Elizabeth Coppock)