Weak Definites and Kinds of Events

This talk explores two possibilities for accounting for the properties of Weak Definites (WDs) in the sense of Carlson et al. (2006) based on the assumption that the semantic contribution of the definite is the same as in regular definites. First, I consider the option of seeing WDs in light of covarying definites more generally, and present arguments against such an account. Next, I lay out a formal proposal that analyzes WDs as regular definites that occur in verb phrases which involve reference to kinds of events. This accounts for the core properties of Weak Definites and furthermore sheds light on some hitherto unnoticed phenomena. Following much of the literature, it also relates Weak Definites closely to incorporation, while maintaining some differences between the two.

WDs vs. Covarying Definites

Given that one of the core properties of WDs is that they receive what one could broadly speaking call covarying interpretations (as illustrated by Carlson et al. 2006’s ellipsis examples), it is tempting to relate the analysis of WDs in general to covarying interpretations of regular definites, in particular with bridging cases (Schwarz 2009), and proposals along these lines have been made by Ašic and Corblin (2012) and Bosch and Cieschinger (2010). However, there are a number of differences between the two cases which I argue to speak against such an analysis. First, regular covarying definites (1) that are most similar seeming to WDs exhibit a dependence on contextual support that is not present for WDs (2) (‘#’ indicates unavailability of covarying interpretation):

(1)  a. Every race-car driver tightly gripped the steering wheel.
    b. i. The students were doing a car race. As the race was about to start, . . .
       ii. Every student tightly gripped the steering wheel. (# without context (i))

(2)  a. Every accident victim was taken to the hospital.
    b. Every student was taken to the hospital. (no context needed)

Secondly, regular covarying definites still display what we might call relativized uniqueness, as witnessed by the unavailability of a covarying interpretation in (3):

(3)  #(As the race was about to start,) every race-car driver checked the tire.

Finally, WDs do not support anaphora (4), but regular covarying definites do (5):

(4)  Every accident victim was taken to the hospital and discovered that it had a beautiful roof-top garden. (no WD/covarying interpretation)

(5)  Every race-car driver got into his car, checked out the steering wheel and discovered that despite the humid weather it felt nice and cool and allowed for a firm grip. (standard covarying interpretation)

These differences speak against assimilating WDs to regular covarying definites.

Kinds of Events

I propose an alternative analysis based on the idea that WDs are definites appearing in verb phrases denoting kinds of events, implemented in a Chierchia-style analysis of kind reference. This is in line with seeing them as essentially involving a type of semantic incorporation, as well as the notion that both incorporation and Weak Definites involve ‘typical activities’ (e.g., Carlson 2006, Axelrod 1990). In fact, my proposal adapts Dayal’s (2011) analysis of incorporation by proposing variants of verb denotations that take properties as their argument. Unlike Dayal, however, I propose
that the resulting denotation is a kind of event, which then combines with an external subject via ‘Derived Argument Saturation’ in (6c), as in the toy-example in (7):

(6) \[ \text{read}_{NC-V} = \lambda P_{e,s.t}.\lambda s.\iota^e \{ e \mid \text{read}(e) \land \exists x [P(x)(e) \land \text{Th}(e) = x] \land e \leq s \} \]

b. \[ Ag = \lambda p(s,t).\lambda x.\lambda e. \{ p(e) \land Ag(e) = x \} \]

c. If \( P \) is a function from predicates of events \((s,t)\) to properties \((e, st)\) and \( k \) denotes a kind of event, then \( P(k) = \lambda x.\lambda e. [P^{(\iota k)}(x)(e)] \)

(7) a. \[ k_{\text{book-read}} = \lambda s.\iota^e \{ e \mid \text{read}(e) \land \exists x [\text{book}(x)(e) \land \text{Th}(e) = x] \land e \leq s \} \]

b. \[ \cup k_{\text{book-read}} = \lambda e \exists e' [e' \leq k_{\text{book-read}}(s_e) \land e \leq e'] \]

c. \[ Ag \text{ book-read}_{kind} = \lambda x.\lambda e. [Ag(\cup k_{\text{book-read}})(x)(e)] = \lambda x.\lambda e. \lambda x'. \lambda e'' [e' \leq k_{\text{book-read}}(s_{e''}) \land e'' \leq e'] \] (\( x(e) \))

Assuming the availability of a type-shifter \( \text{ident} \) in (7) (Partee 1986), definites can occur as objects of incorporating verbs as well (8), with \( Ag \) added in as in (9):

(8) a. \[ \text{the newspaper} = \lambda s.\iota [P(s)] \]

b. \( \text{ident} = \lambda I(s,e).\lambda y.\lambda s. [y = I(s)] \)

c. \( \text{ident}([\text{the newspaper}]) = \lambda y.\lambda s. [y = \iota [\text{newspaper}(s)]] \)

(9) a. \[ \text{read}_{NC-V} \text{ ident}([\text{the newspaper}]) = k_{\text{read-the-newspaper}} = \lambda s.\iota^e \{ e \mid \text{read}(e) \land \exists x [x = \iota [\text{newspaper}(e)] \land \text{Th}(e) = x] \land e \leq s \} \]

b. \[ \lambda x.\lambda e \exists e' [e' \leq \iota^e \{ e'' \mid \text{read}(e'') \land \exists x [x = \iota [\text{newspaper}(e'')] \land \text{Th}(e'') = x] \land e'' \leq s_e \} \land e \leq e' \land Ag(e) = x \]

Crucially, the definite is evaluated relative to the event variable that forms the basis of characterizing the kind of event here. This kind consists of the plurality including every event which is an event in which the unique newspaper that is part of that event is being read. Because the definite is evaluated relative to the event argument of the verb, uniqueness is trivially satisfied at the level at which the definite is interpreted. But since the top level events in the predicate are part of pluralities, the account is also compatible with multiple objects meeting the description being involved, as in Carlson et al’s (2006) example of taking the train (allowing multiple trains). Embedding this analysis in an appropriate situation semantic analysis accounts for the covariation phenomena with WDs. The lack of support for anaphora also follows, because \( \exists \) and \( \iota \) occur deeply embedded in the verbal denotation. To the extent that kind reference requires the existence of an established kind, the account also has the potential to capture the semantic enrichment properties of WD. Finally, the distributional restrictions on WDs also tie in to restrictions on established kinds well-known from work on kind reference in the nominal domain.

**Conclusion and Outlook** This analysis captures the key properties of WDs and transparently relates them to incorporation, while assuming a unified meaning for definites. Many details remain to be explored, not the least with respect to the relation between issues concerning number marking (Dayal 2011) and hidden reflexes of uniqueness with WDs. One potential difference concerns the fact that the existence presupposition of definites seems to be present even with WDs, as witnessed by the fact that one cannot say *We have to take you to the hospital* when on a (hospital-less) Ocean liner in the middle of the Atlantic. This seems likely to contrast with incorporation cases like Dayal’s Hindi *girl-choosing* example, though that remains to be confirmed. Hopefully, the present proposal provides a fruitful basis for exploring these issues in greater depth.