

(In)Definiteness without Articles

Veneeta Dayal
Rutgers University

(In)definiteness is a universal semantic concept but there is language variation with respect to its expression. Most notably, there is a divide between languages that have articles to mark noun phrases as definite or indefinite and languages that do not. How is (in)definiteness marked in languages that do not have articles?

Contrary to the view that bare nominals in such languages are ambiguous between definite and indefinite, I argue that they are never indefinite. There are (at least) two sources of apparent indefinite readings – indefinite readings are derivative on kind-level meanings or on specific constructional meanings. Bare nominals in languages without articles are, however, argued to be bona fide definites

Genericity is also a universal semantic concept but, once again, there is language variation in the way it is expressed. Kind terms vary between bare and definite (rather than indefinite) forms across languages. We consider the role of number marking in determining whether the bare or the definite nominal can be used as a kind term and whether it can participate in all the readings that are potentially associated with kind terms.

We discuss the implications of these cross-linguistic empirical generalizations for views on null versus pleonastic/expletive determiners and draw out the implications for a theory of (in)definiteness and genericity in natural language.