Indefinite Articles in Daakaka – specificity and negative polarity

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Triple A III

The Oceanic language Daakaka (Vanuatu) has two indefinite articles, *swa* and *tuswa*. *Tuswa* resembles Epistemic Indefinites (EIs) from other languages in that it is licensed in negative environments, questions, conditionals and imperatives, and embedded under volitional and directive verbs, but not in most assertions about the past (cf. Giannakidou, 2011). The following examples illustrate the contrast between *swa* and *tuswa* in some of these environments.

Conditional clauses:

(1)   a.   *ka   vyanten **tuswa** te   me   te   saka   ko=n   sóró   myane*
            SUBCONJ person TUSWA DIST come CONJ NEG.MOD 2S=NEC speak with
            'if anyone comes, don't talk to them'
    b.   *ka   vyanten **swa** te   me   te   saka   ko=n   sóró   myane*
            SUBCONJ person SWA DIST come CONJ NEG.MOD 2S=NEC speak with
            'if someone comes, don't speak to him/her' (I have someone specific in mind)

Negative assertions/ questions:

(2)   a.   *Wotop   **swa** to   pwer.*
            breadfruit SWA REAL;NEG stay
            'One breadfruit is missing.'
    b.   *Wotop   **tuswa** to   pwer./?*
            breadfruit TUSWA REAL;NEG stay
            (i)   'There is no breadfruit.'
            (ii)   'Is there no breadfruit?'

Assertions/ Questions with past reference:

(3)   a.   *Wotop* **swa** *mwe pwer.*
        breadfruit SWA REAL stay
        'One breadfruit remains.'

      b.   *Wotop* **tuswa** *mwe*   *pwer?*
        breadfruit TUSWA/ a.bit(NPSUP) REAL   stay
        'Is there a breadfruit (left)?'

      c. #*Wotop*   **tuswa** *mwe*   *pwer.*
        breadfruit TUSWA/ a.bit(NPSUP) REAL stay
        intended: 'there is one breadfruit left'

The question is whether the distribution and interpretation of these elements is goverened by their respective requirements concerning identifability by speakers and listeners, or whether they are existentials which differ in the modal or discoursive scope of their existential assertion. Some of its properties suggest that *tuswa* is a non-specific indefinite article that signals that the speaker is not able to identify a referent.

Thus, in assertions about the future, *tuswa* is often the default choice, while *swa* has a more marked reading. This is illustrated by the following example: the natural choice here would be *tuswa*, while the choice of *swa* would indicate that the speaker is certain about the exact day of God's return. This difference in interpretation suggests that *swa* presupposes familiarity with the discourse referent on the side of the speaker, while *tuswa* does not.

(4)   *webung* **tuswa/ ?swa** *yaapu* *ka*   *we* *kueli* *me*
     day   SWA/   SWA big.man MOD.REL POT return come
     'one day/ ?on a certain day, God will return'

However, this approach does not sit well with the fact that both *swa* and *tuswa* can be used without apparent differences in generic temporal and conditional clauses. In my talk, I will discuss the implications of different approaches and sketch out an analysis based on differences in discoursive scope of the existential assertion.

References

Giannakidou, Anastasia. 2011. Negative and positive polarity items. *In:* Maienborn, Claudia, von Heusinger, Klaus, & Portner, Paul (eds), *Semantics: An international handbook of natural language meaning.* Mouton De Gruyter.