The talk first demonstrates that German Weak definites (WDs) (Max hat immer gerne die Zeitung gelesen [‘Max always liked to read the newspaper’]) show different syntactic properties compared to regular singular definite descriptions independent of whether the regular definites are interpreted with singular or with generic reference. This fact will be documented with data concerning extraposition, positioning relative to sentence negation and verb preposing. The main concern of the talk is to argue that the distributional properties of WDs are best captured by the assumption that they are syntactically incorporated into the verbal complex of the German clause.

There is growing evidence for different languages that maximal phrases can be part of a complex verb (e.g. Barrie & Mathieu 2016). Importantly, only non-specific phrases can be incorporated. Following Ihsane & Puskas (2001) we assume that specificity and definiteness of noun projections are encoded by different functional projections. Furthermore, we assume the semantics for WDs developed in Krifka & Modarresi (2016) according to which a WD denotes a function which applies to the verb’s event argument and yields the unique element of this event which satisfies the description of the WD. We argue that a WD has to occur inside the verbal complex because of the very fact that its interpretation is dependent on the verb.

Some further issues to be discussed are: (i) The thesis that WDs are syntactically incorporated into the verbal complex helps to understand why WDs and the verbs together always refer to an ‘institutionalized’ activity thereby getting an enriched meaning. The non-compositional meaning component is only possible because the WD and the verb constitute a close structural unit. (ii) The reduced possibility of anaphora to WDs does correspond to the WDs’ status as not being full DPs (and thus not being regular arguments, Longobardi 1994). (iii) The verbs that allow for WDs are stage level verbs. Individual level predicates, that do not have an event argument, do not allow incorporation. (iv) The German preposition-article contraction is not a sufficient condition for the presence of a WD but presupposes that the nominal projection does not encode specificity (cf. Schwarz 2009, Rehn 2016).