

Conditions for weak readings in German

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We discuss the referential properties and discourse behavior of weak definite noun phrases in German, such as *zum Arzt gehen* 'go to the doctor'. On the basis of two production studies, we argue that weak definites are less discourse prominent than regular indefinite and definite descriptions and that this is mirrored in a weaker anaphoric potential for them. Furthermore, we investigate the exact conditions that allow for weak readings in German.

Weak definites are definite noun phrases (NPs) that differ in their referential properties from regular definites: They do not imply global uniqueness of their referent, always take narrow scope, and allow for sloppy readings. Also, unlike regular definites and indefinites, weak definites express enriched meanings and have a limited ability to establish discourse referents (Aguilar Guevara & Zwarts 2010; Carlson et al. 2006).

- (1) a. Peter went to the doctor.
- b. Peter complained to the doctor.

The contexts that trigger weak readings typically express a stereotypical situation which is lexically restricted. If this condition is not met, the weak reading is disfavored (cf. 1a vs. 1b). Now, German has two types of definite articles, a full and a reduced form, and only the reduced form always merges with various preceding prepositions (Nübling 2005; Schwarz 2009). For the full form, merging is optional. Importantly, if a speaker uses the full definite or indefinite article (cf. 2b-c), the weak reading seems to disappear.

- (2) a. Peter ging zum Arzt. *Peter went to _{the_{reduced}} doctor.*
- b. Peter ging zu dem Arzt. *Peter went to _{the_{full}} doctor.*
- c. Peter ging zu einem Arzt. *Peter went to a doctor.*

- (3) The cough has gotten worse and worse. Peter went to the doctor.

To further investigate the exact conditions that trigger weak readings in German we conducted two production experiments. These experiments suggest that weak readings are affected by (i) the (non-)stereotypicality of the described situation, (ii) the morphological marking of the noun phrase, and (iii) an explicit sentence that sets a frame (cf. 3).

References: • Aguilar Guevara, A. & J. Zwarts. 2010. Weak definites and reference to kinds. *Proceedings of SALT 20*. 179–196. • Carlson, G., R. Sussman, N. Klein & M. Tanenhaus. 2006. Weak definite noun phrases. *Proceedings of NELS 36*. 179–196. • Nübling, D. 2005. Von in *die* über *in'n* und *ins* bis *im*: Die Klitisierung von Präposition und Artikel als „Grammatikalisierungsbaustelle“. In T. Leuschner, T. Mortelmans & S. De Groot (eds.), *Grammatikalisierung im Deutschen*, 105–131. Berlin: de Gruyter. • Schwarz, F. 2009. *Two types of definites in natural language*. University of Massachusetts Amherst dissertation.