Definite Possessives and Discourse Novelty

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Most modern discourse representation theories begin with some version of the following assumption: in order for a use of a definite description to be felicitous, the entity referred to by that description must be familiar from previous discourse. Usually, familiarity amounts to salience due to a previous mention or to non-linguistic context. There is some doubt that the familiarity condition as stated is empirically secure (see, e.g., Fraurud (1990)), and there have been a number of attempts to search for a more adequate version (e.g., Löbner (1985), Condoravdi (1992)). In fact, it has been known at least since Prince's (1979) CLS paper that many types of definite description are more or less systematically capable of defying the familiarity condition, since they are often used as descriptions of novel discourse entities. This paper will concentrate entirely on one such type, namely, definite possessives such as *that man's daughter*. First I will sharpen Prince's empirical observations by exhibiting a subclass of definite possessives for which the ability to serve as a first mention is utterly reliable, namely, those possessives headed by a semantically relational noun. The existence of a grammatically-defined class of expressions which behave in this way argues against a pragmatic approach based on accommodation. Then I go on to suggest a revision of the notion of familiarity which distinguishes it from the notion of discourse salience. Roughly, I propose that a possessive construction as a whole will count as familiar whenever the possessor phrase counts as familiar, whether the referent of the possessive as a whole is salient or not. This can give rise to a paradoxical situation in which a listener will routinely accept as familiar a description which refers to an object that the listener never suspected even existed.

0. Introduction

I will adopt as a starting point the following general attitude towards discourse novelty, which I take to be in the spirit of most work on the discourse function of definiteness, e.g., Heim (1982).

(1) a. The FAMILIARITY condition on definite descriptions:
         [The referent of] a definite description must be familiar.

     b. The NOVELTY condition on indefinite descriptions:
         The referent of an INdefinite description must NOT be familiar.

Note that the familiarity condition and the novelty condition are duals of each other. In one sense, the point of this paper will be to argue for the removal of the material in brackets in (1a). That is, I will argue that of these two, the familiarity condition at least is better stated without reference to referents. But for now it will be helpful to accept these rules as stated and see where they lead.

These rules should be interpreted as conditions on the felicitous use of a referring expression. For example, consider a discourse consisting of tokens of the following two sentences when uttered in the absence of any special context:

(2) a. A man walked in.
   b. He sat down.

The description *a man* is indefinite, and the referent of this noun phrase is indeed not familiar (in the absence of any preceding context), in accord with the novelty requirement stated in (1b). The pronoun in (2b), by way of contrast, is intrinsically definite, and obeys the familiarity requirement stated in (1a). This is easy to see, since it refers to the same entity introduced into the discourse by the indefinite in (1a) (at least, on the most natural reading, which is the reading intended here).

If the order of the sentences is reversed, however, the effect is quite different:

(3) a. He sat down.
   b. A man walked in.

Given a neutral context, and in the absence of an act of pointing, (3a) is an odd way to begin a discourse. This is because the definite pronoun does not have a familiar referent, in violation of the familiarity condition. Similarly, (3b) cannot have an interpretation parallel to the discourse in (2), that is, the indefinite description cannot be interpreted as referring to the same man as the pronoun in (3a), thanks to the novelty requirement on indefinite descriptions.

So the basic pattern is that definites must be familiar from the context.

Definite possessives, however, do not fit into this neat pattern.

(4) a. A man came in.
   b. His daughter was with him.

As expected, in (4a) the indefinite description introduces a novel discourse referent which then counts as familiar for the purposes of later definite descriptions, such as the possessive pronoun *his* in (4b). But consider the possessive noun phrase *his daughter*. According to the familiarity condition, the referent of this phrase must be familiar from previous context. But (4b)

is perfectly felicitous, even if it constitutes the first mention of any female participant in the discourse action. What is going on?

Well, perhaps the possessive in (4b) does not count as a definite description. Since there is no reliable non-stipulative definition of what it means for a noun phrase to be definite, it is difficult to rule out this possibility altogether. However, I am not willing to consider this alternative for the following two reasons. First, the phrase *his daughter* has uniqueness presuppositions, one of the hallmarks of definite descriptions. Second, it cannot appear in post-copular position in an existential *there* construction, one of the standard tests for definiteness.

(5) a. There is a man's daughter in the garden.
   b. *There is his daughter in the garden.

In view of the contrast in (5), I will assume the diagnostic for determining the definiteness or indefiniteness of possessive noun phrases given in (6).

(6) A noun phrase containing a possessor phrase is definite (indefinite) just in case the possessor phrase is definite (indefinite).

According to this rule, since pronouns are unquestionably definite, the possessive noun phrase *his daughter* is also definite, as supported by the facts in (5). It will be important later to compare this rule to the characterization of familiarity proposed below in (19), which will resemble (6) in that it will assert that the properties of a possessive as a whole depends on the properties of the possessor specifier.

Incidentally, we would not be any better off declaring *his daughter* to be INdefinite, since this same noun phrase type is also capable of violating the novelty condition. That is, it is perfectly felicitous to continue the discourse in (3) with a second token of the possessive in question used to refer to the same daughter entity, even after she has been rendered unquestionably salient. For instance, we could continue the story by saying, *And then the man turned to his daughter, and said* ... A possessive with a definite possessor, then, seems to be able to refer to an entity which is either familiar or novel.

So, assuming that *his daughter* is definite, the ability of this noun phrase to serve as a first mention in (4) is indeed a real problem for the familiarity condition.

Perhaps, then, possessives as a class are simply exempt from the familiarity condition. But not all definite possessives are equally able to introduce a novel discourse entity.

(7) a. A man walked in.
   b. #His giraffe was with him.

Here the definite possessive does seem to obey the familiarity condition. That is, the use of the possessive in (7b) seems infelicitous in the absence of any previous context which would render the referent of the noun phrase— i.e., the giraffe—salient.

So before we can turn to the question of why some definite possessives seem to be immune from the familiarity condition, we must first untangle the question of which possessives are in fact felicitous as first mentions. I will suggest that the reason that the definite possessive *his daughter* can always serve as a first mention, but *his giraffe* cannot (in the absence of a suitable context), is that the predicate denoted by the noun *child* is semantically relational and the predicate denoted by *giraffe* is not.

1. Relational nouns

What does it mean for a noun meaning to be relational? The basic idea is that non-relational nouns (in parallel with intransitive verbs) denote predicates which are simple properties of individuals, but relational nouns (in parallel with transitive verbs) denote (the sense of) relations over pairs of individuals. For instance, the noun *day* has for its extension the set of days of the year. But it is an essential part of the meaning of the noun *birthday* that a day is in fact a birthday only by virtue of the existence of a particular person whose birthday it is. That is, the (extensional) denotation of *birthday* is best represented as a set of pairs of individuals $\langle x, y \rangle$ such that x is a person and y is a day and x was born on y.

(8) $[\![birthday]\!]$ $= \textbf{birthday-of}(x, y)$
  $= \{ \langle x, y \rangle | \textbf{person}(x), \textbf{day}(y), \textbf{born-on}(x, y) \}$

In view of minimal pairs such as *day* and *birthday*, as well as near-minimal pairs such as *animal* and *pet*, there can be little doubt that relations are an important part of nominal semantics. Some work in which nouns are assumed to be relational, either implicitly or explicitly, includes (on my view, at least), Chomsky (1970), Rappaport (1983), Dowty (1989), Napoli (1989), and many others. In view of this rapidly growing body of work, I will assume that the relational status of some nouns can be motivated from linguistic considerations independent of the facts under investigation here.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the relational status of a particular noun is an idiosyncratic fact about the lexical item in question, and cannot be predicted from the concept named by that noun. For instance, both *enemy* and *stranger* name relational concepts; that is, one person's enemy might be another person's friend, and someone who is a stranger to me might be well known to you. Nevertheless, *enemy* but not *stranger* denotes a two-place relation. To see this, note the contrast between *John's enemy* and *the enemy of John* on the one hand versus **John's*

stranger (ungrammatical on a reading which entails that the described entity is unknown to John) and **the stranger of John* on the other. On my view, this contrast follows from the assumption that while *enemy* denotes a two-place relation, *stranger* denotes a one-place property on individuals (albeit a higher-order property, one which entails the existence of the person the stranger is a stranger to).

In any case, what is most important at the moment is that the relational nature of head nominals plays a crucial role in the the semantics of the possessive construction.

2. Possession relations

Obviously, possessive noun phrases are essentially concerned with relations. That is, the use of a possessive presupposes the existence of a relation holding between the possessor and the possessee. For any instance of a possessive, let us call the relation established between the possessor and the possessee the POSSESSION RELATION expressed by that possessive. We shall see that the possession relation expressed by an instance of a possessive sometimes is determined solely by the compositional semantics of the possessive, and sometimes by pragmatic and discourse-specific factors. For example, consider the descriptive content of the possessives in (9).

(9) a. John's birthday is tomorrow.

     b. [Whose turn is it to do the dishes?]
         Well, Saturday is usually John's day.

What are the requirements placed on the referent of *John's birthday* in (9a)? Well, it must be a day of the year; and since it is a birthday, there must be someone whose birthday it is; and since the phrase in questions is a possessive, there must be some connection between John and the described entity. This much is summarized in the first line of (10a).

(10) a. $[\![John's\ birthday]\!] = \iota y[\mathbf{day}(y) \wedge \mathbf{birthday\text{-}of}(x, y) \wedge R(\mathbf{J}, y)]$
         $R = \mathbf{birthday\text{-}of}, x = \mathbf{J}$

     b. $[\![John's\ day]\!] = \iota y[\mathbf{day}(y) \wedge R(\mathbf{J}, y)]$
         $R =$ the relation that holds between a person
         and the day of the week on which they do the dishes

Here R stands for the possession relation expressed by a use of the possessive in (9a). By far the most natural reading of (9a) resolves the identity of R as the birthday relation, the exact relation which we hypothesize is part of the lexical meaning of the head noun.

In (9b), however, the head noun is not relational, since (by hypothesis) *day* denotes simply a one-place predicate on entities. Thus in the midst

of a discussion about doing the dishes, the most likely candidate for the possession relation holding between John and John's day might be the relation that holds between people and the day of the week on which they contract to do the dishes.

In (9a), then (on the intended interpretation), the lexical meaning of the relational head noun directly provides the possession relation expressed by the possessive that contains it. Therefore we can call this sort of possessive interpretation a LEXICAL possessive. In (9b), the head noun is not relational, and there is no choice but to resort to the context to find an appropriate possession relation. Since the resulting possession relation is independent of the lexical entailments of the head noun, we can call this an EXTRINSIC possessive interpretation.

(11)   LEXICAL possessive interpretation:
        A relational head noun provides the possession relation

        EXTRINSIC possessive interpretation:
        The possession relation is determined by context

It is important to realize that whether an instance of a possessive is lexical or extrinsic depends on context. Of course, a possessive can be lexical only if it contains a relational head noun. But even relational possessive can be lexical on one occasion of use and extrinsic on another. For instance, if John works in a day-care center, the phrase *John's child* can refer to the young person that John is tutoring at the moment, even if John does not have any of his own children.

I have given only a sketch of a semantic interpretation of possessive descriptions here, omitting many important details. However, there is a complete and fully explicit compositional semantic analysis along these lines in my dissertation (Barker (1991)).

3. Familiarity versus salience

Before we can attempt to revise the standard conception of familiarity, we must say more about what that standard conception is like. By standard, I am thinking of the typical practice in most varieties of Discourse Representation Theory, where this term should be construed to include not only the original theory of that name as proposed by Kamp (1981), but also related theories, whether either of those proposed by Heim (1982), or the so-called dynamic tradition exemplified by Barwise (1986) and Groenendijk and Stokhof (1991), or even the earlier concept of a 'discourse referent' as proposed by Karttunen (1976). The basic idea is that in order for a discourse to proceed in an orderly fashion, the discourse participants must keep track not only of a set of propositions to which they both subscribe

(the common ground), but also a list of objects which are assumed to be relevant to the discourse at hand. Let us call the items on this list the set of 'salient entities'.

(12)   At any point in the progression of a discourse, the discourse
       participants hold in common a list of salient entities.

Normally, familiarity is considered to be exactly equivalent to salience: an entity which is enrolled on the list of salient entities is familiar, and an entity which does not appear on the list is not. The crucial revision in the notion of familiarity that I will propose is that although familiarity does reduce to salience in the basic case, there are situations—including some uses of definite possessives—in which familiarity does not coincide with salience.

How objects become salient is a difficult question, and I will not pretend to answer it here. Whatever the complete theory of discourse update for the list of salient entities, I will assume that we can detect what is or is not on that list at any given point in a discourse by seeing whether a pronoun (more specifically, a discourse anaphor) can be felicitously used to refer to that object. Put another way, I assume that for deictic pronouns and discourse anaphors at least, familiarity is exactly equivalent to salience.

(13)   A (use of a) pronoun (excepting bound pronouns) is familiar iff
       its referent is already enrolled on the list of salient entities.

One important aspect of the way in which the assumption in (13) is formulated is that it ascribes the property of familiarity to a (token of a) linguistic expression, rather than conceiving of familiarity as a property of entities directly. In the case of pronouns, this does not make a tremendous amount of difference, but we shall see that it will be crucially important for the revised notion of familiarity as applied to definite possessives proposed in section 5.

4. An independent felicity condition on the use of a possessive

At this point, I would like to observe what I consider to be a self-evident fact concerning the use of possessives which is intimately connected with the problems addressed by this paper.

(14)   Possession relations must be sufficiently salient.

This statement is unfortunately vague. The reason, in part, is that there is no standard terminology for discussing the salience of relations, the way that there is for discussing the salience of entities. It is clear that such terminology needs to be invented or adapted, not only for discussing the discourse function of possessives, as in this paper, but also for topics such as E-type pronoun interpretations and paycheck sentences. Current approaches to

each of these phenomena crucially involve the capture of salient relations from the discourse context (see, e.g., Heim (1990) or Jacobson (1991)). For now, I will use the term 'salient', so that it applies both to entities and to relations.

Intuitively, then, (14) should be interpreted as a condition on the felicitous use of any possessive description, whether definite or indefinite.

(15)   a.   Yesterday I saw a man's tree.
        b.   John's day is Monday.

For instance, in (15a) we have an indefinite possessive expressing an extrinsic possession relation (the reason we know that the possession relation must be extrinsic is that *tree* is not semantically relational). According to the rule in (14), this sentence will only be felicitous when uttered in a context in which the possession relation expressed by the possessive is sufficiently obvious. If the intended possession relation is unclear, the felicity-minded listener will object or request clarification. A more accommodating listener will perhaps resolve the uncertainty in favor of some reasonably likely alternative, such as the ownership relation, or may simply suspend the felicity condition on the assumption that the speaker could, upon demand, furnish more details as soon as the exact nature of the relation between the man and his tree becomes more important. But forgiveness and accommodation notwithstanding, it seems clear to me at least that cooperative use of a possessive presupposes that the speaker and the listener have the same possession relation in mind.

For instance, one way of rendering the definite possessive in (15b) felicitous would be to provide a context in which there is an obvious correspondence between the members of a cooperative household and the day of the week on which they are obligated to do the dishes, as described in section 2 above. And in fact, if an extrinsic relation is sufficiently salient, an extrinsic possessive can serve as a first mention even if it has a relational head noun.

(16)   a.   We all paired off, the tutors and the children.
        b.   My child was very shy.

In this example, on the most natural reading, the relation between the speaker and the described child is extemporaneous rather than biological; that is, for this use, the possessive is extrinsic. Nevertheless, the description is felicitous despite the fact that the described child is not salient from previous context.

Just as for the mysterious rules which govern which entities qualify as salient objects, which relations count as salient is a difficult question.

For our purposes, it will suffice to note the observation given in (17), along with its corollary in (18).

(17)   Given a possessive with a semantically relational head noun, the relation denoted by that noun is guaranteed to be salient.

(18)   A lexical possessive necessarily expresses a possession relation which is sufficiently salient (with respect to (14)).

Recall that a lexical possessive, by definition, is a possessive which expresses the relation denoted by its head noun. Since it is hard to imagine a more palpable way to render a specific relation salient than to name it by using a relational noun, it is natural to assume that if any use of a possessive is to automatically satisfy the salience condition on possession relations, it will be the class of lexical possessives.

This, then, leads to an explanation for the contrast between the discourses in (4) and (7). The definite possessive in (4b) (on the intended reading) expresses the relation denoted by the head noun, namely, the **daughter-of** relation, and is therefore a lexical possessive. This means that it is predicted to be felicitous, at least, as far as the salience condition on possession relations is concerned. The definite possessive in (7b), on the other hand, has a non-relational noun for its head, so that it is incapable of being a lexical possessive. In the absence of any reason to suppose that there is a salient relation associating people and their giraffes, (7b) is correctly predicted infelicitous according to (14) on the grounds that the possessive expresses a possession relation which is not sufficiently salient.

5. A revised notion of familiarity

Now finally we are ready to consider a revised notion of familiarity which is capable of describing the use of definite possessives as first mentions.

(19)   Familiarity for possessive descriptions:

A use of a possessive counts as familiar just in case the use of its possessor is familiar.

As promised, this rule resembles the rule governing the definiteness of possessives given in (6), in that a property of possessive as a whole (definiteness/familiarity) depends on the status of the possessor phrase with respect to that same property. Thus I am proposing that familiarity is another member of the set of properties for which the possessor controls the whole possessive, which in addition to definiteness also includes at least the ability to bind pronouns (*Every woman$_i$'s father believes she$_i$ is intelligent*) and the ability to license negative polarity items (*No/*any man's dog has ever let him down*; see Barker (1991) for details).

Once again, this rule assumes that familiarity is a property of phrase tokens, not of the entities referred to by those expressions. Unlike the rule given above in (13) for pronouns, however, this distinction really makes a difference here. Recall that a pronoun can be familiar only if its referent is salient. But it is possible given the rule in (19) for (a use of) a possessive to be familiar without the referent of that possessive being salient.

To see why this is so, consider a possessive with a pronominal possessor phrase, such as *his daughter*. As long as we assume that the use of the pronoun satisfies the familiarity condition, then the rule in (19) predicts that the possessive as a whole is also familiar. But nothing we have said so far entails that the referent of the possessive as a whole must be salient. And indeed, this is exactly the observed problem we set out to explore. Consider again the discourse in (4), repeated here as (20):

(20)   a.   A man came in.
       b.   His daughter was with him.

Thanks to the indefinite in (20a), we can assume that the intended referent of the possessor pronoun *his* in (20b) is salient, and that the use of that pronoun is therefore familiar. This is sufficient (according to the proposed rule in (19)) to render the possessive as a whole is familiar. This means that we should expect the use of the possessive *his daughter* to be felicitous, at least with respect to the familiarity condition, and indeed it is impeccable. This is true even though there is no reason to suppose that the daughter entity is salient.

So at this point, given the assumptions listed so far, we have solved the puzzle of how a definite possessive can obey a general familiarity condition and still be capable of describing an entity which is not salient from previous discourse. I now turn to comments and comparisons with other work.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that the notion of familiarity developed here is not related to specificity, another discourse property which cross-classifies descriptions. To see this, note that although indefinite descriptions cannot be familiar, they can be specific (*I saw a man yesterday*); and furthermore, a definite description can be infelicitous by reason of violating the familiarity condition at the same time that it is specific (*I saw a man yesterday. #His giraffe seemed shy.*).

A word of caution is needed here. Familiarity alone is not sufficient to guarantee that a definite possessive will be felicitous. For instance, as explained in section 4, not only must the possessor phrase be familiar, the possession relation expressed by a possessive must also be sufficiently salient before that use of the possessive will be successful as a felicitous description. In addition, note that a use of a definite possessive, even if it does not

presuppose that the entity it refers to is familiar, at least presupposes that that entity exists and has the properties that the description entails for it.

(21)   a.   A childless man walked in.
           b.   #His daughter was with him.

Thus the possessive in (21b) is infelicitous, presumably not because it violates the familiarity condition, but because it presupposes the existence of an entity whose properties are inconsistent with the common ground. In particular, it is inconsistent with an entailment due to the statement in (21a): if a man is childless, he cannot also have a daughter. This sort of presupposition is not a special property of definite possessives, but is part of what it means to be a referring expression, whether that expression is a pronoun, a specific indefinite, a definite possessive, or any other expression capable of serving as a referring expression.

At this point we should compare our analysis with Prince's (1979) proposal. Prince suggests that there are (at least) three levels of salience. An entity could fail utterly to be salient, for which an indefinite description would be appropriate; or an entity could be manifestly salient, in which case a definite description would be appropriate; or (and here is her innovation) an entity could have some sort of provisional salience, depending on its relations with manifestly salient objects. The basic idea is that as soon as an object become salient (i.e., as soon as it is enrolled on the list of salient objects), everything associated with that object becomes provisionally salient. So if a man entity becomes salient, then a large number of other closely related objects becomes provisionally salient: that man's daughter, his car, his face, his giraffe (if he has one), and so on. These provisionally salient objects can subsequently be referred to by a definite description—provided, of course, that the definite is a possessive construction in which the possessor phrase refers to the manifestly salient object (what Prince calls the ANCHOR). One way of thinking of this view is to imagine that each manifestly salient object is surrounded by a ghostly cloud of objects of intermediate salience, which need only be conjured by means of a possessive in order to become full-fledged members of the discourse model. (It is interesting to compare Prince's theory with the relational networks discussed by Löbner (1985).)

According to the analysis advocated here, the main problem with Prince's analysis is that it attempts to explain the behavior of possessives in terms of the objects that those possessives refer to. But there is no indication that the objects potentially possessed by a salient entity are any more salient than anything else. To sharpen this point, consider the two discourses given here.

(22) a. A man walked into a crowded room.
      b. #She was there.

The pronoun in (22b) is infelicitous (ignoring the possibility of melodramatic stress on *she*), even though it is reasonable to suppose that there is a woman in the room. The reason is that there is no such woman who is sufficiently salient (given a neutral context) to render the use of the pronoun familiar, thus resulting in a violation of the familiarity condition on definite descriptions.

(23) a. A man walked into a crowded room.
      b. His daughter was there.

In contrast, the definite possessive in (23b) is perfectly felicitous, even assuming that it refers to the same entity as the intended referent of the pronoun in (22b). The theory advanced here explains why the daughter entity cannot be referred to by a pronoun—she simply is not salient—and also why the daughter entity can be referred to by a definite description: as long as the possessor phrase is familiar, and as long as the possession relation is sufficiently salient, and as long as other independent felicity conditions are satisfied (such as consistency with the common ground), then the description in (23b) will be felicitous. In other words, the crucial innovation of my analysis is to claim that familiarity is a property of description tokens, and not of the entities referred to by those descriptions.

We should also see whether Condoravdi's (1992) proposed revision of the standard familiarity condition will suffice for our needs. She proposes that familiarity should be divided into two separate conditions: familiarity of index (what we simply call familiarity), and familiarity of descriptive content. Perhaps, she supposes, certain constructions in certain languages can have one kind of familiarity but not the other. We have seen that definite possessive do not require novelty of index, so perhaps the right thing to say about them in Condoravdi's terms is that they happen to be definites which require only familiarity of descriptive content. What this would mean is that a use of such an expression will be predicted to be felicitous only in a situation in which the previous context entails the descriptive content of the expression. But a possessive like *his daughter* can be used as a first mention even in contexts which fail to entail that the man in question has a daughter. Thus whether or not Condoravdi's proposed revision turns out to be necessary on independent grounds, it does not provide us with any help in explaining the behavior of definite possessives.

A number of people have suggested that my proposed refinement of familiarity is unnecessary in view of the fact that the ability of definite possessives to refer to novel discourse entities can be explained away by

appealing to the notion of accommodation (Lewis (1979)). On the accommodation story, definite possessives are required to obey the normal familiarity condition, except that (as long as there is no contradictory information present in the context to prevent it) an accommodating listener is usually willing to pretend that the described individual was salient in the discourse model all along. This supposedly instantaneous, automatic retroactive revision of the list of salient entities, then, is what accounts for the failure to perceive a violation of the familiarity condition. In defense of this view, the contrast between (4) and (7) now becomes obvious: daughters are more easily hypothesized than giraffes, and that is why accommodation is easier for (4) than for (7).

But what the accommodation analysis leaves unexplained is why the availability of accommodation depends so strongly on whether the head noun denotes a relation or not. If lexical definite possessives are without exception good as first mentions, doesn't that systematic pattern deserve to be reflected in the grammar, rather than treating them as a particularly coherent class of exceptions? To sharpen this objection, consider the minimal pair in (24).

(24)   A man walked in.

    a.   The first thing he saw was his enemy.

    b. #The first thing he saw was his stranger.

As argued in section 2, recall that even though *enemy* and *stranger* are both relational conceptually, only *enemy* denotes a two-place relation semantically. On my analysis, this is sufficient to guarantee that *his enemy* can be a lexical possessive, and therefore that (24a) is a felicitous continuation. But since *stranger* is not semantically relational, *his stranger* must be an extrinsic possessive, and, in the absence of a salient function relating people to strangers, (24b) will be infelicitous, exactly in parallel to our standard contrast between (4) and (7). On the accommodation analysis, however, I see no reason to expect that the presence of an enemy ought to be any easier to accommodate than the presence of a stranger.

Thus in view of the exceptionless ability of lexical definite possessives to serve as first mentions on the one hand, and the seemingly pragmatically indistinguishable contrast displayed in (24), I conclude that the burden of proof at this point falls on the accommodationists.

Finally, we should also note that although nothing we have said so far requires that the referent of a definite description must be salient, there is nothing that prevents the referent from being salient, either. And in fact—rather surprisingly—definite descriptions are as capable of describing salient objects as non-salient ones.

(25)   a.   A man walked in.
        b.   His daughter was with him.
        c.   She was rather quiet.
        d.   So after a while, the man turned to his daughter and said ...

Here different tokens of the same possessive description function with equal
ease either as a first mention of the sort we have been discussing, as in
(25b), or as a subsequent mention, as in (25d). That is, even if the relevant
entity becomes salient (as demonstrated by the success of the pronominal
reference in (25c)), a definite description can nevertheless refer to that
entity.

Thus in general a familiar description can refer to an entity which
either is or is not salient.

6. Summary and conclusions

As a final empirical comment, I would like to point out that there may be
other well-defined classes of expressions which behave like the possessives
studied here. Consider, for instance, the discourse in (26):

(26)   Do you see that woman over there? The man I saw her with
        last night was the tallest guy I ever met.

Here the definite description *the man I saw her with last night* seems to
be serving as a description of a novel discourse entity. It is suggestive that
here, as for definite possessives, it seems crucial that there is a well-defined
(extemporaneous) relation between the described entity and the referent
of a familiar description, namely, the I-saw-it-with relation. Whether the
theory proposed here can be extended to such cases, of course, remains to
be seen.

To conclude, the specific analysis proposed here can be summarized
as follows.

Felicity conditions:
(27)   a.   Definite descriptions must be familiar.
        b.   (The referents of indefinite descriptions must not be salient.)
        c.   Possession relations must be salient.

Definitions and rules:
(28)   a.   Always maintain a list of salient entities and relations.
        b.   A pronoun is familiar iff its referent is salient.
        c.   A possessive noun phrase = possessor + 's + head nominal.
        d.   Lexical possessives express salient possession relations.
        e.   A possessive is definite iff its possessor is definite.
        f.   **A possessive is familiar iff its possessor is familiar.**

Of these assumptions, the one which is truly crucial and which is novel to my account is the bolded assumption in (28f). This is the assumption which explains how it is that a definite possessive can count as familiar whether or not the entity it refers to is salient. The importance of the earlier discussion of relational nouns and lexical possessives is that it allows us to factor out examples like (7), in which a definite possessive with a familiar possessor fails as a first mention; I have argued that this failure is not due to the familiarity condition on definite descriptions, but is due to an independent condition on the felicitous use of possessives, namely, the requirement that the possession relation expressed by a possessive must be salient.

What this paper has attempted to do, then, is to refine Prince's empirical observations by describing a homogeneous class of expressions which systematically behave in defiance of the traditional wisdom concerning definites. More specifically, definite lexical possessives are systematically capable of serving as descriptions of novel discourse entities.

I have gone on to suggest that the best way to revise the traditional stance is to separate the notion of familiarity from the notion of salience. Paradoxically, this means that the referent of a familiar description can fail to be salient, which is exactly what seems to happen with definite possessives. And by aligning the familiarity of the whole possessive with the familiarity of the possessor, my account brings this aspect of possessive behavior in line with many other properties (including definiteness, bound pronoun anaphora, and licensing of negative polarity items) for which the possessor projects its own character onto the possessive NP which contains it. Thus as far as possessives are concerned, familiarity works like the old adage: the friend of a friend of mine is a friend of mine too.

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