

Specificity Modifiers and Selective Indefinites in French*

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1 Introduction

1.1 Questions addressed

This paper is dedicated to the semantic/ pragmatic contribution of specificity modifiers to specific indefinite (SI) NPs, with an accent on French data. More precisely, I will study the semantic/ pragmatic differences between

- i. *un N (a N)* and *un N (bien) précis* (a possible translation of a *particular N*)
- ii. *un N* and *un certain N (a certain N)*
- iii. *un N bien précis* and *un certain N*

Certain and *particular* are often supposed to discard the non-specific reading of the (non modified) indefinite (cf. eg Kratzer (1998) and Hintikka (1986) on *certain*), which justifies to call them “specificity modifiers”. However, this is not entirely true. Jayez and Tovenà (2006a) note that *un certain N* does not always make the indefinite specific (and their observation can be extended to *un N bien précis*):

- (1) Tous les espions qui sont en possession d’un certain renseignement doivent être éliminés. (Jayez and Tovenà (2006a))
Every spy who has a certain piece of information must be eliminated.

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As they observed, (1) is acceptable under any interpretation that provides a 'type' for the piece of information that each spy has.

Another piece of evidence that *(bien) précis* and *particular* does not always make the indefinite specific is that they are compatible with Free Choice indefinites like *n'importe quel* or *any*:

- (2) Prends n'importe quelle carte bien précise.
Take any particular card.

However, I will here ignore the non-specific uses of indefinites modified by *(bien) précis* or *certain*, and only compare *un certain N/ un N bien précis* to *un N* on the specific reading, ie in contexts where it is already clear, independently of the modification, that the reference of the indefinite is stable.

As a *certain N* has been more extensively studied than a *particular N* (see Enç (1991), Kratzer (1998), Houghton (2000), Jayez and Tovenà (2002, 2006b,a) on the former, and Houghton (2000) or Zamparelli (2003) on the latter), I will focalise here on *un N (bien) précis*, with the hope that the analysis can be extended to a *particular N*.

A *particular N* can also translate *un N (bien) particulier* in French. But *un N (bien) précis* is a better correspondent for two reasons. Firstly, while the *attributive* reading is systematically salient with *particulier*, *précis* very often has its *specificity* reading only:

- (3) Il a dansé avec une femme (bien) particulière. (OK specificity modifier, OK attributive modifier)
He danced with a particular woman.
- (4) Il a dansé avec une femme (bien) précise. (OK specificity modifier, # attributive modifier)
He danced with a particular woman.
- (5) J'ai acheté un vélo (bien) particulier. (OK specificity modifier, OK attributive modifier)
I bought this particular bike.
- (6) J'ai acheté un vélo (bien) précis. (OK specificity modifier, # attributive modifier)
I bought this particular bike.

Secondly, *un N (bien) précis* seems to be more often used as *un N (bien) particulier*, whereas a (very) precise *N* seems less used than a *particular N*. Below are the number of occurrences found on the Internet (June 2007) with the noun *thing*:

- (7) *a particular thing* : 250.000
a precise thing : 1450
- (8) *une chose (bien/ très) particulière* : 1821
une chose (bien/ très) précise : 2736

In the examples below, *un N (bien) précis* will systematically be translated by *a particular N*, even if *a (very) precise N* could also be used in some cases.

1.2 A particular puzzle

Specificity modifiers raise a puzzle which has, to my knowledge, never been observed nor explained, namely that they cannot appear easily in *exclamative* nominal sentences.¹ This fact can be observed in French, English and German among others.

- (9) Oh! Un colis!
Oh! A package!
- (10) ??Oh! Un certain colis!
 ??*Oh! A certain package!*
 ??*Oh! Ein gewisses Paket!*
- (11) ??Oh! Un colis bien précis!
 ??*Oh! A particular package!*
 ??*Oh! Ein ganz bestimmtes Paket!*

This is surprising, given that *certain*, *(bien) précis* or *particular* are often supposed to be used to paraphrase SIs. In Martin (2005), I claimed that the problem was due to the averbal property of nominal sentences. However, this cannot be right, because the problem vanishes in *assertive* nominal sentences (cf. the title of this subsection and the following attested examples):

- (12) Je perds mon temps ici, voilà, je me perds. Barbara Kaka. *Un certain talent.* (J. Kristeva, *Les Samourais*)
I lose my time here, that's it, I lose myself. Barbara Kaka. A certain talent.
- (13) Etre faible comme un nouveau-né. La même imprécision dans les souvenirs du vieillard que dans les espérances de l'enfant. La même

¹In sentences of this type, the indefinite is an epistemic SI. On epistemic specificity, see Farkas (1994).

B is the set denoted by the verb and its other arguments or adjuncts (in (18), B corresponds to the set of entities hired by Peter last month). X is the set introduced by the indefinite NP ($EA \cap X = X$), and $EA\bar{X}$ is the complement set of X in EA , (that is, in (18), the set of contextual Italian students which are not introduced by the indefinite). Finally, a symbolises the element of X (the referent).

2.1 A partitive indefinite

A first difference between the two indefinites is that contrary to *un N*, *un N bien précis* tends to implicate that $|EA| > 1$ (there are other elements in the context satisfying the nominal predicate and its modifiers).² For instance, (19) is odd because it invites to take for granted that there were other UFOs in the context. The same way, (21) sounds contradictory because *forêt déserte* contradicts the implicature triggered by *un N bien précis*.

- (19) Pierre prétend avoir photographié hier un OVNI #bien précis.
Pierre claims to have taken yesterday a picture of a particular UFO.
- (20) a. J'étais dans un café de la rue Darchis, le Café Flore. OK En fait, c'est le seul café de la rue.
I was in a café of the rue Darchis, the Café Flore. Actually, it is the only bar of the Street.
- b. J'étais dans un café bien précis de la rue Darchis, le Café Flore.
 #En fait, c'est le seul café de la rue.
I was in a particular café of the rue Darchis, the Café Flore. Actually, it is the only bar of the Street.
- (21) J'étais perdue dans la forêt déserte. #Après une heure, j'ai pu demander mon chemin à un promeneur bien précis.
I was lost in the desert forest. After one hour, I could ask a particular walker the way.

If the modifier *bien précis* is responsible for this implicature, and if we assume besides that it triggers this partitive reading with every determiner, then we can explain why *bien précis* is compatible with *ce N*, since the demonstrative opposes a N to other N s, cf. Corblin (1987)). We also explain that this modifier cannot modify *le N*, since definites presuppose the unicity of the referent:

²Zamparelli (2003) already makes a similar point about *n specific N*; according to him, a sentence like *I heard it from a specific Italian guy I met in the elevator* implicates that the speaker met several Italian guys in the elevator.

(22) J'ai acheté ce livre bien précis.
I bought this particular book.

(23) *J'ai acheté le livre bien précis.
I bought the particular book.

2.2 A selective indefinite

My first hypothesis about *un N bien précis* is that it is what I propose to call a *selective indefinite*. Selective indefinites have three definitory properties. Firstly, they invite to compare the referent *a* (the element of *X*), which satisfies *B*, with the alternative *As* of the context (ie with the element(s) of *EAX*). Secondly, they evoke the possibility that these alternative elements of *EAX* could satisfy/ could have satisfied *B*. By the Maxim of Quantity, it is by default assumed that they do not satisfy *B*:

(24) Je suis allée dans un café bien précis, le Café Flore.
I went in a particular bar, the Café Flore.

↪ (i) Compare the bar referred to the other bars of the context

↪ (ii) Think about the possibility that I could have been in these other bars (instead/ too)

That we deal with an conversational implicature is confirmed by the fact that it can be canceled later in the discourse:

(25) Je suis allée dans un café bien précis, le Café Flore. Mais en fait, j'ai visité tous les cafés du coin.
I went in a particular bar, the Café Flore. But in fact, I visited all the bars in the neighbourhood.

Thirdly, selective indefinites like *un N bien précis* present as non accidental the fact that it is *the referent a*, and (presumably) not the alternative elements of *EAX*, which satisfies *B*. More precisely, *un N bien précis* suggests that (i) it is in virtue of some of its distinguishing properties Δ that the referent *a* satisfies *B*, and (ii) it is in virtue of the fact that the elements of *EAX* (presumably) do not satisfy Δ that they (presumably) do not satisfy *B*. Let us compare (26a) and (26b) to illustrate this third property of selective indefinites.

(26) a. # Pierre habite au-dessus de chez un écrivain bien précis,
Christoph Hein.
Pierre lives above a particular writer, Christoph Hein.

- b. Ils ont invité un écrivain bien précis, Christoph Hein.
They invited a particular writer, Christoph Hein.
- (27) a. # Hier, j'ai rencontré par hasard chez Kaufhof un ami bien précis.
Yesterday, I met by accident at Kaufhof a particular friend.
- b. Hier, j'étais profondément déprimé. J'ai décidé de prendre rendez-vous avec un ami bien précis.
Yesterday I was deeply depressed. I decided to meet with a particular friend.

If (26a) is fine, it is because it is easy to imagine that Christoph Hein was invited for a certain event in virtue of some of his distinguishing properties Δ . Besides, it is unproblematic to assume that had other writers satisfied this relevant property Δ , they maybe would have been invited too/instead. On the other hand, if (26b) is marked, it is because it requires an odd context where it is in virtue of some of his distinguishing properties Δ that Christoph Hein lives above Pierre, and, besides, that if the alternative contextual writers would have satisfied this property, they would have had Pierre as a neighbour too/instead. This is curious, since we generally do not conceive the neighbourhood relation as a causal one.

The label “selective indefinites” is proposed because the referent seems to be “selected” among the contextual set of A to satisfy B .

Selective indefinites may be defined with the help of the definition of positive relevance of Merin (1999). According to this definition, a proposition E is positively relevant in the context j for another proposition H if $P^j(H|E) > P^j(H)$.

(28) *Selective SIs implicate that there is an implicit property Δ such that, in the context of the assertion j*

- (i) $\forall x \in X, P^j(\Delta x) = 1$ (members of X instantiate the property Δ)
- (ii) $\forall x \in EA\bar{X}, 0 < P^j(\Delta x) < P^j(\bar{\Delta}x)$ (it is more likely that members of $EA\bar{X}$ do not satisfy Δ)
- (iii) $\forall x \in EA, P^j(Bx|\Delta x) > P^j(Bx)$ (an entity is more likely to satisfy B if it satisfies Δ)

I assume that it is the modifier *bien précis* which makes the indefinite selective. As *bien précis* can also combine with *n'importe quel* 'any', this means that there are some selective indefinites which are non-specific, as in (2) repeated below:

- (2) Prends n'importe quelle carte bien précise.
Take any particular card.

Non-specific selective indefinites like the one in (2) are interpreted as follows: although the referent is not stable yet and can be freely chosen in the relevant contextual set (this is the contribution of *n'importe quel*), it would not be fixed in an indiscriminate way: *bien précis* indicates that certain properties which differentiate the referent from the other elements of the set will play a crucial role in the setting of the referent.

2.3 A presuppositional indefinite

Un N bien précis also differs from *un N* in terms of informational structure. The modifier *bien précis* tends to be focused and invite to background the rest of the sentence. In other words, if *P* symbolises the rest of the sentence containing *un N bien précis*, “*un N bien précis P*” tends to presuppose (\rightarrow_P) that “*Un N P*”.

- (29) Il est possible qu'ils aient tué un prisonnier bien précis.
It is possible that they killed a particular prisoner.
 \rightarrow_P They killed a prisoner (what is possible is that it wasn't just any one)
- (30) Je n'ai pas acheté de gâteau bien précis.
I didn't buy a particular cake.
 \rightarrow_P I bought a cake (but not any one)

Interestingly, some of my informants reject the example (30), justifying this rejection in saying that if I bought a cake, it must be a particular cake. But this reasoning precisely confirms that they interpret (30) as presupposing that I bought a cake.

To be sure, one could may be claim that the presupposition at hand is triggered by any postnominal modifier:³

- (31) Je n'ai pas acheté de gâteau au chocolat.
I didn't buy a chocolate cake.
 $\rightarrow_P^?$ I bought a cake.

³This has been claimed several times about (postnominal) restrictive *relatives* (RR), very similar to postnominal modifiers: Henry (1975) states that the content of the RR is “implicitly admitted”, “*préconstruit*”; Larreya (1979) considers that the RR is “presupposed” or “sub-presupposed”.

I would rather claim that while the presupposition of most postnominal adjectives is optional, the one triggered by *un N bien précis* is compulsory. This explains the following contrast:

- (32) Je n'ai pas acheté de gâteau au chocolat. Il n'y avait plus rien.
I didn't buy a chocolate cake. There was nothing left.
- (33) Je n'ai pas acheté de gâteau bien précis. #Il n'y avait plus rien.
I didn't buy a particular cake. There was nothing left.

While (33) sounds totally contradictory, (32) is fine.

In sum, this section showed that *un N bien précis* is partitive, selective and presuppositional. In what follows, *un N bien précis* is differentiated from *un certain N* and *un N* under the specific reading.

3 *Un certain N* versus *un N (bien précis)*

3.1 *Un certain N* and *un N bien précis*

In two words, *un certain N* has none of the three properties ascribed to *un N bien précis* in the previous section. Firstly, contrary to *un N bien précis*, *un certain N* does not implicate the existence of other As in the context:

- (20) b. J'ai été dans un café bien précis de la rue Darchis, le Café Flore.
 #En fait, c'est le seul café de la rue.
I went in a particular bar of the rue Darchis, the Café Flore.
Actually, it is the only bar of the Street.
- c. J'ai été dans un certain café de la rue Darchis, le Café Flore. En fait, c'est le seul café de la rue.
I went in a certain bar of the rue Darchis, the Café Flore. Actually, it is the only bar of the Street.
- (34) Une certaine Ludovica Zagrebelsky voudrait te parler. (cp. # "Une LZ bien précise")
A certain Ludovica Zagrebelsky wants to speak with you.
 ↗ There are several Ludovica Zagrebelsky in the context

While *bien précis* would oddly suggest in (34) that the context contains several individuals named Ludovica Zagrebelsky, it is not the case of its *certain*-version. *Un certain N* is thus not partitive.

According to the definition proposed above, selective indefinites must

be partitive. Thus, *un certain N* is not a selective indefinite: it does not implicate a causal relation between *B* (what is predicated of the referent by the verb and its complements) and an implicit property Δ , which would explain why the referent *a*, and (probably) not the alternative elements of *A*, satisfies *B*. Consequently, the problem of (26a) vanishes once *(bien) précis* is replaced by *certain*:

- (26) a. # Pierre habite au-dessus de chez un écrivain bien précis,
Christoph Hein.
Pierre lives above a particular writer, Christoph Hein.
- c. OK Pierre habite au-dessus de chez un certain écrivain,
Christoph Hein.
Pierre lives above a certain writer, Christoph Hein.

Finally, contrary to *(bien) précis*, *certain* does not automatically tend to be focused:

- (35) Il est possible qu'ils aient tué un certain prisonnier.
It is possible that they killed a certain prisoner.
 \nrightarrow_P They killed a prisoner.

As a conclusion, *un certain N* is neither partitive, nor selective, nor presuppositional.

3.2 *Un certain N* and *un N*

3.2.1 The uses of *un certain N*

The unpublished dissertation of Houghton (cf. Houghton (2000)) is certainly one of the most comprehensive empirical descriptions of *a certain N*. The analysis is largely transferable to French. Houghton extracted 233 instances of *a certain N* out of ten texts (1.000.000 words) and identified the most frequent categories of use of this indefinite, namely, in order of frequency:

1. indicating a loss for words (the speaker has a particular notion or impression she wishes to convey but she is not sure she has found the right words to convey it): *a certain je ne sais quoi*, *a certain nameless terror*, *a certain filial, confident, land-like feeling towards the sea*
2. alluding to withheld knowledge: *a certain party told me what you said*

3. indicating that particular knowledge is hearsay (i.e. that the speaker's information is dependent upon a third party's testimony or authority): *Now a certain grand merchant ship once touched at Rokovoko, and its commander — from all accounts, a very stately punctualious gentleman...*
4. understating, hedging (only alluding to a more complete, precise statement of a belief): *'No', he said, 'women rarely boast of their courage. Men do so with a certain frequency.*
5. alluding to mutual knowledge kept off public record: *a woman of a certain age* (ie *a woman whose age it would be impolite to inquire about or to mention*).
6. indicating mere acquaintance (the entity is known by the speaker only tangentially): *a certain Frank Smith is here to see you*

About the last use which seems to be above all selected with proper names, Houghton writes that “There is usually a note of disdain in mere acquaintance uses of *certain* [...] without *certain*, one has the sense that the speaker feels she has come to count Frank [Smith] among her acquaintances. With *certain*, the speaker is indicating her lack of faith in the mutuality of knowledge of F[S] [...] I posit that in every case the perceived negative tone arises from the denial of an otherwise presupposed mutual knowledge.” If this last use appears with proper names, it is certainly because the direct competitor of *a certain Frank Smith* is not **a Frank Smith* (which is not used), but rather the proper name itself, which presupposes mutual knowledge. As Houghton suggests, using the indefinite instead of the proper name itself then amounts to reject this presupposition.

The last use is responsible for the following contrast (Martin (2005)):

- (36) (Context: the speaker wants to introduce (a) a colleague of hers to the audience of the conference or (b) a cat he found on the street to the addressee)
- a. #Je voudrais vous présenter un certain M. Smith de l'Université de Californie.
#*I would like to introduce to you a certain Mr Smith of the University of California.*
 - b. Je te présente un certain Félix que j'ai trouvé dans la rue ce matin. Pauvre petit chat.
I would like to introduce to you a certain Felix that I found in the street this morning. Poor little cat.

Suggesting only mere acquaintance with the referent *a* in front of *a* is certainly impolite if *a* is a speaker, but not if *a* is a cat.

3.2.2 The evidential value of *un certain N*

At this stage, a legitimate question is the following: is there one value of *un certain N* from which all these uses may be derived?

I will show here that the *double identification scenario* that Jayez and Tovenà (2002, 2006b,a) associate to *un certain N* can do the job. According to Jayez & Tovenà, *un certain N* indicates that “the speaker believes that there is an agent who identifies the referent under a description other than the one provided by the sentence. The identity of the agent and the nature of the identification are underspecified.” (Jayez and Tovenà (2006a), p. 242).

Houghton (2000) independently proposes a roughly similar characterisation of *a certain N*: “*certain* indicates that some epistemic agent, by default the speaker, has information regarding a particular referent and it implies that the speaker wishes the hearer to know that the e-agent has this information.” (p. 217).

The different uses delineated by Houghton can be seen as different ways of motivating the fact that the speaker *indicates* that an agent knows another description D_2 of the referent *without giving it*. In some cases, we can justify this withdrawal in supposing that the speaker does not want to reveal D_2 ; this explains the uses 2 (allusion to withheld knowledge), 4 (understating, hedging), 5 (allusion to mutual knowledge kept off public record). In the others, the speaker’s choice can be justified in assuming that she does not know D_2 ; this explain the uses 1 (loss for words), 3 (hearsay) and 6 (mere acquaintance).

Now that the respective contributions of *certain* and (*bien*) *précis* have been differentiated, one can explain why their co-occurrence in a same NP does not generate redundancy, as suggested by the acceptability of (16) repeated below:

- (16) Il l’a caché à un certain endroit bien précis.
He hide it at a certain particular place.

In this sentence, *certain* signals double-identification, and *bien précis* makes the indefinite selective.

4 The puzzle of exclamative nominal sentences

Let us now turn back to the puzzle raised by specificity modifiers in exclamative nominal sentences, illustrated by the contrasts (9)-(11) repeated below.

- (9) Oh! Un colis!
Oh! A package!
- (10) ??Oh! Un certain colis!
??Oh! A certain package!
??Oh! Ein gewisses Paket!
- (11) ??Oh! Un colis bien précis!
??Oh! A particular package!
Oh! Ein ganz bestimmtes Paket!

Martin (2005) proposes a first solution to the problem, arguing that *un N bien précis* is unacceptable in nominal sentences because the specificity modifiers implicate a causal relation between the fact that the referent *a* satisfies *A* (the property denoted by the NP) and the fact that *a* satisfies *B* (the property denoted by the VP). As no verb is present in nominal sentences, the property *B* is lacking and the implicated relation cannot be interpreted.

As already suggested above, the problem of this solution is that the puzzle vanishes in *assertive* nominal sentences.⁴ Besides, *un certain N* does not bear such a relation.

4.1 The guise of the surprise

One of the two hypotheses presented here is rooted on the following basic intuition: although the indefinite in an exclamative nominal sentence (henceforth ENS)s is used referentially – the speaker is certainly speaking about a particular entity that she can identify, since it is in her perceptual field –, the choice of the descriptive content *must*, contrary to what happens with typical referential descriptions, have conversational relevance over its utility in picking out the intended referent. For instance, although (37)

⁴Which means that one may assume that in these nominal sentences, the relation implicated by *un N bien précis* takes as one of its argument an *implicit* VP, i.e. something like *be present there*.

may be conversationally equivalent to (38), (39) cannot be conversationally equivalent to (40):

(37) Look. A man drinking a Martini is speaking to her.

(38) Look. A man with a red suit is speaking to her.

(39) Oh ! A man drinking a Martini !

(40) Oh ! A man with a red suit !

In fact, indefinites in ENSs must *also* be used attributively (and not only referentially) because they express the guise under which the entity surprises the speaker.⁵

I would like to claim that from the fact that indefinites in ENSs are attributively used, we can derive that they are predicate nominals (these being attributively used by definition). In other words, a sentence like (9) can be paraphrased as follows:

(9) Oh! A package!

≈ A package is in front of me and I am surprised that what I see in front of me is *a package*.

One advantage of this hypothesis is that it can explain why *un certain N* or generalized quantifiers like *chaque N* are not acceptable in ENSs. Indeed, they cannot be used as predicate nominals:

(43) *?Ceci est un certain colis.

This is a certain package.

(10) → ??Oh! Un certain colis!

Oh! A certain package!

⁵On descriptions which are simultaneously used referentially and attributively, see also Nunberg (2004). Note that rigid designators like definite NPs and proper names are *not* attributive in *Oh* exclamatives. For instance, (41) does not express that the speaker is surprised to perceive the man *a* in S_u at t_u under the guise *man with the red suit*. It could be that the description provided by the NPs is totally irrelevant for the surprise. In fact, (42) could serve exactly the same purpose as (41) (if we assume that (42) and (41) refer to the same entity).

(41) *Oh*₁! L'homme au costume rouge!

Oh! The man with the red suit!

(42) *Oh*₁! Le remplaçant de l'épicier!

Oh! The grocer's substitute!

My claim about *Oh* exclamatives is restricted to NPs which are not rigid designators.

(44) *Ceci est chaque colis.
This is each package.

(45) → ??Oh! Chaque colis!
Oh! Each package!

However, it cannot explain why *un N bien précis* is not acceptable in ENSs. Indeed, it seems to be used in predicate nominals. Interestingly, Houghton (2000) also notes that “*particular* can be used predicatively in one sense, unlike *certain*” (p. 201).

(46) OK Ceci est un colis bien précis.
This is a particular package.

(11) ??Oh! Un colis bien précis!
Oh! A particular package!

I still think however that this solution may be the right one to explain the unacceptability of *un certain N* in ENSs. My suggestion is that the unacceptability of *un N bien précis* in ENSs does not have the same source as that of *un certain N*.

4.2 A temporal conflict

The problem of *un N bien précis* in ENSs is rather of *temporal nature* and has its source in the presuppositional nature of this indefinite. A piece of evidence for this is that the problem tends to vanish when the exclamation containing *un N bien précis* is preceded by *Oh! Un N!*:

(11) ??Oh! Un colis bien précis!
Oh! A particular package!

(47) Oh! Un colis! Et un colis BIEN PRÉCIS, en fait!
Oh! A package! And a PARTICULAR package in fact!

Note that the same is true for *pas n’importe quel N* (not any N):

(48) *Oh! Pas n’importe quel colis!
Oh! Not any package!

(49) Oh! Un colis! Et pas n’importe quel colis en fait!
Oh! A package! And not any package in fact!

To explain the problem, one has to investigate further the semantic and pragmatic properties of the exclamatives under study. Unfortunately, most of the literature devoted to this kind of speech-acts concerns *wh*-exclamatives (*What a package!*), whose properties are quite different.⁶

There are at least two types of *Oh!* ENSs in French. As already suggested above, the ones under study (“disruptive *Oh*₁ ENSs”) implicate that the speaker is surprised to perceive the referred entity *a* in the current situation *S_u* at the utterance time *t_u*. Consequently, disruptive *Oh*₁ ENSs are unfelicitous in a context where the speaker is obviously aware of the presence of *a* in *S_u* at *t_u*, as in (50) below (this sentence is of course acceptable on the irrelevant reading when the two averbal sentences refer to different entities).

- (50) *Tiens, un paquet_a. #Oh₁! un paquet_a (rouge)!*
Look, a package_a. Oh! A red package_a!

Besides, as suggested above, when the NP in the *Oh*₁ exclamatives is attributively used, it is conveyed that the speaker is surprised by the presence of *a* in *S_u* *under the guise P* (the property denoted by the noun and its possible modifiers).

In the second kind of *Oh* ENSs, the interjection is typically longer and prosodically more complex. This second *Oh*, or *Oh*₂, can also be replaced by *Ah*. Contrary to *Oh*₁ ENSs, *Oh*₂ ENSs express that the presence of *a* in the current situation *S_u* is taken for granted at *t_u*. This time, the property determining the “guise of the surprise” is denoted by the focused constituent of the NP (given in small capitals in the examples), which can sometimes excludes the head noun *N* itself. In this latter case, the fact that *a* is a *N* is not surprising in *S_u*; it is rather the fact that *a* satisfies the property denoted by the adjective(s) which is surprising:

- (51) *Oooh₂! Un PAQUET!*
Oooh₂! A PACKAGE!
- (52) *Oooh₂! Un paquet ROUGE!*
Oooh₂! A RED package!

For instance, (51) expresses the surprise that *a* – whose existence is taken for granted in *t_u* – is a package, while the speaker of (52) is only surprise

⁶The only exceptions I am aware of for French are Martin (1987) and Vinet (1991). However, the first one does not make any distinction between different types of *Oh! Un N* as proposed below, and the latter only addresses ENSs of the type *Incroyable, le paquet!* ‘Incredible, the package!’

by the fact that the package *a* is red.

As the presence of *a* in S_u is taken for granted in t_u , the ENS can this time be felicitously uttered in a context where the presence of *a* has already been mentioned shortly before t_u , as in (53)-(54):

(53) Oh₁! Un truc_{*a*} devant la porte! Oooh₂! Un PAQUET_{*a*}!
Oh₁! A thing_{*a*} in front of the door! Oooh₂! A PACKAGE_{*a*}!

(54) Oh₁! Un paquet_{*a*}! Oooh₂! Un paquet_{*a*} ROUGE!
Oh₁! A package_{*a*}! Oooh₂! A RED! package_{*a*}!

Distinguishing between these two types of *Oh* ENSs is relevant here because *bien précis* is compatible with the second ones (ie when the specificity modifier is focused, and the noun *N* backgrounded):

(11') Oooh₂! un colis... BIEN PRÉCIS!
Oooh₂! A PARTICULAR package...

Un certain N cannot be rescued the same way, which confirms that the problem does not have the same source:

(55) Oooh₂! #un CERTAIN colis!
Oooh₂! A CERTAIN package...!

I propose to explain the problem raised by *bien précis* in *Oh*₁ ENSs as follows. On the one hand, *Oh*₁ ENSs signal that it is the presence *per se* of *a* in S_u which is surprising for the speaker in the time of utterance t_u . On the other, *bien précis* presents *a* as the object of quite complex cognitive operations before t_u . Firstly, as suggested above (cf. section 2.3), “*un N bien précis [VP]*” presupposes “*un N [VP]*”. Secondly, as a “selective indefinite”, it presents *a* in t_u as “chosen” among a presupposed set of other entities to satisfy the verbal predicate.⁷ Thirdly, in this type of exclamatives, the modifier contributes to define the guise of the surprise. In the case of this specificity modifier, the surprise of the speaker must a.o. bear on the fact that it is this entity *a*, and not others satisfying *N*, which is present in front of him.

Presenting *a* as the object of such elaborated thoughts conflicts with the information conveyed by the ENS that it is *the presence itself* of *a* which is surprising in t_u . On one hand, the object of the surprise is the presence of *a per se*; on the other, the object of the surprise is a property which obliges to

⁷In the case of nominal sentences, the implicit verbal predicate corresponds to something like *to be here*.

take for granted the presence of *a* (namely the fact of being chosen among the relevant superset of presupposed entities). Hence the temporal clash at the root of the problem.

That this problem is of temporal nature is further confirmed by the acceptability of *bien précis* in *Oh*₂ ENSs. Indeed, as exclamatives of this type do not suggest anymore that the presence of *a* is surprising in *t_u*, it is plausible again that *a* was already the object of these complex cognitive operations before *t_u*, and that the object of the surprise is not the presence of *a*, but some of its other properties.

4.3 Some speculations about evaluative items

Interestingly, specificity modifiers like *bien précis* are not the only items to raise problems in *Oh*₁ exclamatives. For instance, *beaucoup de N* (*a lot of*) is strange in this context, while the quasi-synonym *plein de N* (*plenty of*) is fine. The contrast between *peu de* (*few*) and *un peu de* (*a few/ a little bit*) is of the same nature:

- (56) *Oh*₁! Plein de lapins!
*Oh*₁! *Plenty of rabbits!*
- (57) ??*Oh*₁! Beaucoup de lapins!
*Oh*₁! *A lot of rabbits!*
- (58) *Oh*₁! Un peu de neige!
*Oh*₁! *A little bit of snow!*
- (59) ??*Oh*₁! Peu de neige!
*Oh*₁! *Not much snow!*

Again, the difficulty vanishes in *Oh*₂ exclamatives:

- (60) *Oooh*₂!... BEAUCOUP de lapins!
*Oooh*₂!...A LOT of rabbits!
- (61) *Oooh*₂!... PEU de neige!
*Oooh*₂!...NOT MUCH snow!

The difference between the object of the surprise is similar as before: while the speaker of *Oh*₁ exclamatives (56)-(59) is a.o. surprised by the simple presence of snow/rabbits in *t_u*, the one of *Oh*₂ exclamatives (60)-(61) takes it for granted in *t_u*, and is rather surprised by the quantity of entities/stuff

at hand.

To my view, the problem of *beaucoup de N* and *peu de N* is of the same nature as for *un N bien précis*. These appreciative quantifiers are more complex than *plein de N* and *un peu de N* in that they suggest that some previous expectations of the relevant cognitive agent *C* (the speaker or somebody else) wrt to the quantity of *N* are not met at the reference time t_r . This in turn implies that *C* entertains the belief that the denoted stuff/entities exists before t_r . The following contrasts illustrate the point:

- (62) Pierre entra dans le café. Il sortait plein de/un peu de fumée du bar.
Pierre entered the bar. Plenty of/ A little bit of smoke was coming out of the taproom.
- (63) Pierre entra dans le café. # Il sortait beaucoup/peu de fumée du bar.
Pierre entered the bar. A lot of/not much smoke was coming out of the taproom.

Let us assume a context – which is presumably the context by default – where the relevant cognitive agent *C*, here Pierre, does not entertain any belief about the existence of smoke in t_r (the moment where he entered the bar). In this context, (63) is marked, precisely because the appreciative quantifiers suggest that some expectations about the quantity of *N* which is referred to are not fulfilled, which presupposes in turn that the existence of the referent is already taken for granted in t_r . However, (63) would be perfect in a context where Pierre is a fireman, because it would then be natural that he already entertained the belief that some smoke was present in the bar before entering it.

The conflict between these appreciative quantifiers and *Oh*₁ exclamatives is then the following: in t_r (which corresponds to t_u in exclamatives), the speaker should simultaneously be surprised by the presence of stuff/entities, and entertain some previous belief about it.

5 Conclusions

In this paper, I firstly showed that *Un N bien précis* (and possibly *a particular N*) is partitive, “selective” and presuppositional, in the sense that *bien précis* tends to be focused. On these three points, *un N bien précis* differ from *un certain N*. Secondly, I suggested that the different uses of *un certain N* differentiated by Houghton (2000) may be derived from “the double identification scenario” (Jayez & Tovenet) conveyed by this determiner (these uses are different ways to justify the fact the speaker indicates

that a second description of the referent exists without giving it). Thirdly, I claimed that the problem of *un certain N* in *Oh₁!* exclamative nominal sentences comes from impossibility to use this NP as a predicate nominal, while the one generated by *un N bien précis* in ENSs is the result of a clash between two incompatible informational structures.

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