The semantics of Hmong indefinites

This project argues for a choice functional analysis of the indefinite article in White Hmong.[1] Our discussion includes the indefinite article *ib* and two common classifiers (*tus* and *cov*). The research question is formulated in two parts. The first question is, what are the individual meanings of *ib*, *tus*, and *cov*? The second question is about how the indefinite article combines with *tus* or *cov* classifier phrases.

1. Facts & Data

Fact 1: Classifiers *tus* and *cov* have definite readings (1).
Fact 2: The indefinite article *ib* always occurs with a classifier (2)-(3).
Fact 3: Combining *ib* with the classifier *cov*, results in a 'some' reading (2b).

(1) a. Keng pom **tus** aub
Keng see **CLF.SG** dog
"Keng sees the dog."

b. Keng pom **cov** aub
Keng see **CLF.PL** dog
"Keng sees the dogs."

(2) a. kuv pom **ib** **tus** aub
1SG see **INDEF CLF.SG** dog
"I see a dog." (non-specific)

b. kuv pom **ib** **cov** aub
1SG see **INDEF CLF.PL** dog
"I see some dogs."

(3) ***** kuv pom **ib** aub
1SG see **INDEF** dog
"I see a dog."

2. Literature Review

There is no discussion in the Hmong literature of the nature of the indefinite article *ib*. More broadly, choice functional analyses of indefinites have been present in the semantic literature for a while. For example, Winter (1997) used a choice functional analysis to account for differences in scopal properties between singular and plural indefinites. More recently, the trend in semantics has been to analyze indefinite articles as existential quantifiers (Elbourne 2005), although both views are still relevant in the literature.

3. Proposal

The current proposal argues that Hmong indefinites behave more like choice functions, rather than existential quantifiers. The lexical denotations for both classifiers are the same (4a)-(4b), except *cov* does not need to refer to an atomic entity. They both turn bare nouns into predicates (Chierchia 1998).

(4) a. $[\![tus]\!]^g = \lambda P.\lambda x.[P(x) \wedge AT(x)]$
b. $[\![cov]\!]^g = \lambda P.\lambda x.[P(x)]$

Combining a classifier with a bare noun (a type *e* kind) returns a nominal predicate (Chierchia 1998). The difference between *tus aub* and *cov aub* is that the former selects a unique atomic dog entity and the latter selects a maximal group entity of dogs from the context.

[1] All of my data and discussion are based on elicitation on Zoom with Mai-Ying Xiong and in person with Keng Xiong, two White Hmong speakers who were raised in Wisconsin. Keng was born in Wisconsin and Ying immigrated to the US at age 4.

In a context with three dogs (Apollo, Mars, and Copper), *tus aub* (6a) picks out one of the three dogs, based on discourse reference or gestures. This is a singular definite description. In the same context, *cov aub* only refers to the maximal group of dogs (7a).

Now that the meanings of both types of bare classifier phrases are established, we can return to indefinite descriptions. Recall that the indefinite article *ib* is a choice function (5) that applies to a group and arbitrarily selects one of the entities from the group of options generated by the classifier phrase.

(5) $[\![ib]\!]^g = \lambda P_{\langle e,t \rangle}.f_{cf}(\lambda y.P(y) = 1)$

With the same context, when *ib* combines with *tus aub*, *ib tus aub* can arbitrarily select any one of the atomic dog entities in the context (6b).

(6) AUB_C: {Apollo, Mars, Copper}
   a. *tus aub* = A
   b. *ib tus aub* = A or M or C

In the case of *ib cov aub*, the choice function does not select the largest entity; otherwise, some definite ι operator would be the determiner chosen for the utterance instead of *ib*. The choice function also does not select an atomic entity; otherwise, the singular classifier *tus* would have been chosen instead of *cov*. This antipresupposition yields the non-singular and non-maximal entities as the pragmatically sound options when *ib cov aub* is uttered (7c).

(7) AUB_C: {Apollo, Mars, Copper}
   a. *cov aub* = AMC
   b. *ib cov aub* = AMC or AM or AC or CM or A or M or C
   c. *ib cov aub* = AM or AC or CM (**anti-presupposition**)

Analyzing *ib* as a choice function (along with the notion of antipresupposition) allows us to see how a non-maximal entity is selected from *ib cov aub*, but only the maximal entity can be selected by *cov aub* (7a).

References

[1] Chierchia, Gennaro. 1998. Reference to kinds across language. *Natural Language Semantics* 6:339–405.

[2] Elbourne, Paul D. 2005. On the acquisition of Principle B. *Linguistic Inquiry* 36:333–366.

[3] Winter, Y. 1997. Choice Functions and the Scopal Semantics of Indefinites. *Linguistics and Philosophy 20*, 399–467. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005354323136