

## On weak readings of definite DPs

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### 1. Introduction\*

So-called weak definites constitute one of the classical problems for theories of definiteness, mainly for approaches based on the notion of uniqueness, but also for approaches based on familiarity, salience or other alternative notions. Weak definites have received much more attention in the last fifteen years than in earlier times of research on definiteness, and recent studies have made significant contributions to our knowledge of the semantic and pragmatic properties of the central cases of definite weak expressions (see Aguilar-Guevara 2014, Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts 2013, Aguilar-Guevara, Le Bruyn & Zwarts (eds.) 2014, Le Bruyn 2014, Zwarts 2014, Beyssade 2013, Donazzan 2013, Corblin 2013, Espinal and Cyrino 2017a, b, Barker 2005, Carlson & Sussman 2005, Carlson, Sussman, Klein & Tanenhaus 2006). Within such a context, in this paper, I would like to address two main issues: 1) the relation between the interpretation of the definite DP and the linguistic contexts for weak definiteness, as they are described in the literature; and 2) the inclusion of new empirical data under the label of weak definiteness, and the limits of cross-linguistic variation in this domain. The first issue implies specifying the basic ideas of an informal approach to weak definites; this is also a necessary step for laying a minimal foundation before addressing the second issue, which represents a tentative extension of the notion of weak definiteness to cover some facts whose connection with the core, classical cases has, to my knowledge, never been explored. This will also bring to the fore some theoretical consequences that are worth discussing.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 collects ideas from current views on weak definites, and seeks to set out the fundamental questions that a theory of weak definiteness should address. In section 3, I sketch the essentials of an informal view of weak definites, built on the assumption that the uniqueness condition must be satisfied in every use of the definite article. Section 4 examines cases of cross-linguistic variation in the domain of weak definiteness. It includes data that have received very little attention in previous research and should be integrated into a comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Section 5 is a brief summary of the presented ideas.

### 2. The basic ingredients of weak definiteness

#### 2.1 Uniqueness

Weak definites represent an interesting case of form-meaning mismatch: in examples like *take the bus* and *play the piano*, a definite expression receives a seemingly indefinite interpretation, as it is not required that the context includes a uniquely identifiable referent – any bus or any piano will make the proposition true, in the weak reading. However, it is important to recall that, out of context, the examples are actually ambiguous: they may be assigned a weak, indefinite or existential reading, which is the most natural one, but also a

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strong reading that obeys the uniqueness condition encoded by the definite article, in which case specific buses or pianos are mentioned. This is quite obvious, but it is worth keeping in mind, since it is a general feature of most classical examples of weak definites.

The main question raised by weak definites concerns the uniqueness requirement, that is, the requirement that the referent is uniquely identifiable by the hearer on the basis of the descriptive information in the DP. If definiteness is characterized as the uniqueness condition, as it is in the formal tradition starting with Russell's theory of definite descriptions (see Hawkins 1978, Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski 1993, Abbott 2008, 2014, Aguilar-Guevara 2014, Roberts 2003, Barker 2005, Beaver & Coppock 2015, and Leonetti 1999, 2019 for Spanish), the problem is simply that weak readings should be incompatible with the definite article. But the examples we saw above are perfectly acceptable and, in addition, the facts are recurrent in all languages that have a definite article. This calls for a solution, either a) by showing that definiteness is actually absent in the cases under discussion and therefore there is no mismatch at all, or b) by explaining how it is possible that it holds in expressions that receive indefinite/existential interpretations. The dilemma is not new: it is essentially the same problem arising in most cases of form-meaning mismatch. This puzzling situation is the starting point for the following discussion.

If definiteness, on the other hand, is characterized as a semantic condition that does not involve uniqueness (for instance, if it is defined in terms of familiarity, or salience), examples like *take the bus* and *play the piano* still pose a problem, as weak readings do not involve familiar or salient referents, thus being at first sight incompatible with definiteness under these views. However, I will not consider such alternative hypotheses here.

In what follows I will take for granted that in the languages under discussion – English and Romance languages – there is one definite article with one single meaning, and that meaning is the uniqueness condition (relativized to some context).<sup>1</sup> This is, I believe, the simplest and most reasonable assumption we can make in facing the puzzle. Thus, the problem boils down to having uniqueness as the linguistic meaning of the definite article and at the same time having weak readings of definite DPs that count as violations of the uniqueness condition. As noted above, this implies choosing between two options: either uniqueness is not in force, for some reason, in the relevant examples, and the problem vanishes, or in fact there is some way out by which uniqueness allows for indefinite readings. Given my starting assumptions, I choose the second option: under this view, uniqueness is a constant, rigid meaning that holds in all uses of definite DPs; it can be conceived as an instruction (see the notion of procedural meaning in Relevance Theory: Wilson & Sperber 1993, Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2011). If there are apparent counterexamples to the uniqueness requirement, they should be treated, in principle, without abandoning the idea that the definite article is a meaningful element and makes a systematic contribution to the proposition expressed. The question, then, is why and how indefinite readings arise.

A few words on the first option are due, however. There are two ways to develop an approach along those lines. One is more cautious, and the other one is more radical, but in my opinion, neither is fully convincing. On the one hand, we could accept that in certain uses the definite article is devoid of its usual meaning and becomes, in some sense, a purely formal device: this is the essence of the notion of *expletive article* (Longobardi 1994, Zubizarreta & Vergnaud 2002, and Carlson & Sussman 2005, Espinal & Cyrino 2017a for the analysis of weak definites). Weak definiteness would involve the insertion of expletive or “empty” articles that, being deprived of their uniqueness component, do not block indefinite interpretations. The solution is simple, but neither insightful nor elegant. In my view, if there is no specific proposal about why there are expletive articles, it just replaces the problem of weak definites with the problem of expletive articles, with no real progress. As we do not

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<sup>1</sup> For arguments in favor of uniqueness as the essence of definiteness, I refer the reader to Abbott (2008, 2014).

know exactly the conditions under which expletive articles occur, and how they are licensed, it is difficult to figure out why they should display precisely indefinite readings. On the other hand, we could dissociate the form (the definite article) from the meaning (uniqueness) and simply argue that the definite article does not encode uniqueness, thus dissolving the puzzle of weak definites all at once. This is a stronger position. Giusti (2015) argues in favor of this view, and supports it by discussing several cases of articles in different languages that do not induce a referential interpretation; in her analysis, definiteness is linked to a null iota operator as the source of the referential interpretation of definite DPs in both languages with and without articles. I cannot adopt Giusti's hypothesis, since it is radically incompatible with my starting assumptions about definiteness. Note that in her theory it is strong readings, instead of weak ones, that represent the major problem: accounting for them implies determining under what conditions the null operator responsible for uniqueness is licensed by the co-occurring article.

Briefly, I assume, as a methodological principle, that the definite article must receive a unitary analysis as a meaningful element, without ambiguities and expletive uses. The uniqueness condition, thus, must be in force also in weak interpretations (see Barker 2005 and Le Bruyn 2014 for arguments in favor of this stance). This leads us to posit some kind of type-shifting process, as we will see below.

## 2.2 Types of weak definites

In the literature on weak definiteness it is usual to distinguish between *short weak definites* and *long weak definites*. The first group is represented by the English examples in (1), where the DP contains only the definite article and a common noun; similar lists can be found in many languages.

- (1) *read the newspaper / go to the hospital / call the doctor / answer the phone / take the train / play the violin / check the calendar / go to the beach / go to the mountains / do the dishes / go to the cinema*

The second group corresponds to a more complex scheme, usually 'the N of {a/the} N', where the first N is mostly relational and the second one represents an argument of the first one, as in the well-known examples in (2), taken from Barker (2005) (see also Poesio 1994, Flaux 1992, 1993, Corblin 2001, 2013, Espinal & Cyrino 2017a).

- (2) *at the corner of a busy intersection / on the side of the road / between the pages of a book / the student of a famous linguist / the finger of the surgeon / the outline of a human face / the picture of a young couple*

Evidence for weak readings is found in the compatibility of some of these definite DPs with existential contexts, as in (3).

- (3) (a) *There is the outline of a human face hidden in this puzzle.*  
 (b) *There was the picture of a young couple on the bedside table.*  
 (c) *Beneath his fragile form, there was the soul of a lion...*

A third group of classical examples, apparently related to short weak definites, comes from the use of the definite article in the expression of inalienable possession in Romance languages (Le Bruyn 2014, Espinal & Cyrino 2017a): in (4) a weak reading is obtained in which an unspecified hand or leg is mentioned.

- (4) (a) *Juan levantó la mano.* (Spanish)  
 Juan raise.PST.3SG the hand  
 ‘Juan raised his hand.’
- (b) *Me duele la pierna.* (Spanish)  
 me.DAT hurt.PRS.3SG the leg  
 ‘My leg hurts.’

The basic common property of the three groups of examples is that – in the weak reading – being able to identify a referent for the definite DP is irrelevant for understanding the proposition and determining its truth conditions. There is more than one entity that satisfies the descriptive content of the DP, and identification of the referent is not at stake (like in indefinite expressions). Another interesting property that is shared by all examples is that it is not possible to have weak readings if a demonstrative replaces the definite article: this suggests that the stronger conditions imposed by demonstratives<sup>2</sup> on the identification of referents force strong readings, and it is only pure definiteness, when uniqueness is deprived of any additional condition – as is found in the article and in pronouns – that allows for weak interpretations.

I will keep using the terms *short* and *long* to refer to the two patterns (1) and (2), though they are only superficially descriptive. The three groups of examples do not constitute a real classification, and they raise one of the main questions I want to address here, namely why the linguistic contexts that are correlated with weak readings are precisely those, and not others – in other words, why we have just those three groups. The answer that intuitively comes to mind is that the contexts are the sources of the evidence that the addressee relies on in working out the interpretation in accordance with the uniqueness condition. This is the core intuition to be fleshed out in section 3.

### 2.3 A list of properties...

The properties of weak definites have been intensively studied. Any theory of weak definiteness should aim at accounting for them in a unitary way and explaining how they are related to each other. A simplified list follows that should be taken more as a list of family resemblances than as a list of necessary features (see Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts 2013, Aguilar-Guevara et al. 2014: 4-6).

a) Weak definites, especially singular ones, do not introduce discourse referents that can be retrieved by anaphoric pronouns. This is a general property that is shared by all referentially weak expressions (definites, indefinites and bare nouns). However, anaphoric pronouns can have weak antecedents under certain conditions (see Corblin 2011 and Donazzan 2013 for discussion).

b) Weak referentiality implies scopal deficiency, that is, the inability to take wide scope with respect to other scope-bearing elements. In (5), if the DP *the newspaper* is assigned a weak reading, it must take narrow scope with respect to the quantified DP *each of them*.

(5) *At the moment each of them is reading the newspaper in the lounge.*

c) Short weak definites tend to occur as complements of a lexical head (a verb or preposition). They share this property with Romance bare nominals – another kind of weak nominal – and, more generally, with incorporated nominals. It is common to assume that they never appear in

<sup>2</sup> Weak readings with demonstratives are only possible in constructions like *that kind of N* in English: *that kind of book* is understood as *books of that kind*. I will not consider this particular fact in what follows, and I assume it can be accommodated in the approach I put forward.

subject position. However, the condition is not as rigid as a syntactic constraint, and some examples of weak definite subjects can actually be found: the examples in (6) make a variegated landscape.

- (6) (a) *The train passes through here twice daily...*  
 (Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts 2013)
- (b) *The hospital is where you should go when very ill.*  
 (Carlson et al. 2006)
- (c) *Nos han picado los mosquitos.*  
 us have.PRS.3PL bitten the mosquitos  
 ‘Mosquitoes bit us.’ (Spanish; V. Escandell-Vidal, p.c.)
- (d) *En su casa ya entraron los ladrones una vez.*  
 In his/her house already enter.PST.3PL the thieves one time  
 ‘Thieves had already entered his/her house once before.’ (Sp.)
- (e) *I leoni hanno invaso il Serengeti quest’ estate.*  
 the lions have.PRS.3PL invaded the Serengeti this summer  
 ‘Lions invaded the Serengeti this summer.’ (Donazzan 2013)

While (6b) could be set apart as a generic definition, with a metalinguistic component, the Spanish examples in (6c)-(6d) include postverbal subjects that, being part of wide focus, are integrated in a single informational constituent together with the verb, thus in some sense complying with the condition that favors complement positions. In (6e) the subject is preverbal, but again informationally integrated in the predicate, as it seems that the sentence has athetic interpretation. I believe that the main constraint could tentatively be rephrased as a ban against weak definites as sentence topics, rather than keeping a ban against subjects (see Zamparelli 2002 for some inspiring ideas on this point). But it is not clear how to integrate (6a). In any case, the reason why grammatical relations and syntactic position are relevant has to do with the possibility of obtaining stereotypical situations: topical DPs, being informationally singled out, cannot be integrated into a predicate, and thus cannot be parts of the description of a stereotypical situation.

d) When weak definites combine with verbs or prepositions, there are lexical restrictions affecting both the lexical heads and the definite DP. In the contrasts in (7), the restrictions concern the definite DP: with a verb like *read*, the noun *newspaper* gives rise to a weak reading, but *book* does not; with the verb *call*, *doctor* gives rise to a weak reading, but *professor* does not. In (8), the contrasts are related to the choice of different verbs: weak readings emerge in *read the newspaper* and *play the clarinet*, but not in *crumple the newspaper* and *sell the clarinet*.

(7) *read the newspaper/read the book; call the doctor/call the professor*

(8) *read the newspaper/crumple the newspaper; play the clarinet/sell the clarinet*

The data suggest that there is no general grammatical or semantic rule that can account for the role of different lexical items in licensing weak readings. As we will see, there is a certain amount of cross-linguistic variation that has to do with lexical restrictions.

e) The occurrence of nominal modifiers is also severely restricted: short weak definites are only compatible with a specific kind of modifier, namely those establishing subclasses. Whereas no weak reading is available in a predicate like *go to the old hospital*, the contrary is true in *go to the psychiatric hospital*, where the modifier is a classificatory, relational adjective (Aguilar-Guevara & Schulpen 2014).

f) It has been repeatedly pointed out that short weak definites, together with other weakly referential nominals like bare nouns, display stereotypically enriched interpretations that are absent from ordinary strong readings of definite DPs. Enrichment typically results in the expression of habitual and institutionalized situations. Thus, *call the doctor* is understood as ‘call the doctor to ask for medical help’, *go to the cinema* is understood as ‘go to the cinema to watch a movie’, and *go to the store* equals ‘go to the store for shopping’. Though enrichment is not always present to the same extent (see Donazzan 2013 for Italian data), it is true that weak definites usually contribute to the description of stereotypical events and activities.

g) A well-known test to check for the existence of weak readings is based on the availability of sloppy interpretations in VP-ellipsis. Since in the VP-ellipsis context in (9) it is possible to imagine a situation in which Bob and Mary went to different stores, and this situation makes the proposition communicated true, this is evidence for a weak reading of *the store* in the first sentence (the example is actually ambiguous between a strong and a weak reading, as usually happens).

(9) *Bob went to the store, and Mary did too.* (Carlson et al. 2006)

With this list of properties in mind, we can now try to establish what the desiderata for a theory of weak definiteness are. I will do this through a brief list of questions.

#### 2.4 ...and a list of questions

A review of the issues presented in this section leads us to set out (some of) the questions that we need to answer if we wish to achieve a comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study.

The first point concerns definiteness as the uniqueness condition. As already pointed out in 2.1, assuming that weak definites are in fact true definite expressions and that uniqueness must be complied with systematically, the question is how to make uniqueness compatible with indefinite, existential readings. Most recent proposals on weak definiteness are explicit attempts to deal with this problem, and, in section 3, I will rely on some common features of such proposals to sketch an informal answer.

The second question – rather, set of questions – has to do with the distinction between short and long weak definites. They represent two independent formal patterns. It is puzzling that a single phenomenon manifests itself through two different, apparently unrelated schemes. How are the two schemes related to weak readings? What basic property do they share? Are they the only ways of expressing weak definiteness? Why are weak readings excluded from other contexts? By formulating these questions, we are also wondering what the limits of the phenomenon might be.

The following issues concern the basic properties summarized in 2.3. The properties in the list cluster together in different ways. On the one hand, sloppy identity readings, narrow scope, and the difficulty to establish discourse referents point to the non-referential nature of weak definites: they are consequences of the fact that a speaker using a weak definite refers to no specific entity. Thus, accounting for this cluster of properties means explaining why a non-referential reading is available in the DP, with no linguistic clue favoring it, and possibly in competition with other formal options such as bare nominals. This is a central question in any approach to weak definiteness.

On the other hand, restrictions on lexical items and modifiers, restrictions on positions, with the tendency to exclude subjects, and enriched stereotypical interpretations seem to constitute evidence for a process of semantic incorporation of the definite DP into a complex predicate (Carlson & Sussman 2005, Carlson et al. 2006). This cluster of properties also fits

well in a model that relates weak definites to predicates that express kinds of events (Schwarz 2014). However, notice that this second group of properties characterizes short weak definites, perhaps with some exceptions, but it is absent from long weak definites: in expressions like *the side of the road* and *the picture of a young couple*, no lexical restrictions are found – apart from those related to the relational nature of the first noun – there is no stereotypical enrichment, and the syntactic position of the DP plays no specific role. The disparity between the two formal patterns stands out again, and confirms that the list of properties in 2.3 is not a list of necessary conditions for weak definiteness. The facts suggest that the second cluster of properties is not relevant in the scheme ‘the N of {a/the} N’ because the weak reading obtains in any case without semantic incorporation or the denotation of kinds of events. This raises two questions. The first is why weak definiteness is connected to semantic incorporation, or, alternatively, to the expression of kinds of events. The second is why this happens only in the ‘short’ group, and what this means for an account of weak readings.

These are the issues we need to consider in order to explain why weak definiteness is observed in a limited set of contexts.

### 3. Weak readings and linguistic contexts

#### 3.1 How is uniqueness maintained?

As already pointed out in 2.1, I adhere to the claim that in weak readings the definite article must be analyzed as a standard definite article, with the uniqueness condition as its linguistic meaning, along the lines of many proposals in recent literature (Barker 2005, Bosch & Cieschinger 2010, Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts 2013, Beyssade 2013, Donazzan 2013, Aguilar-Guevara 2014, Le Bruyn 2014, Schwarz 2014). Maintaining uniqueness forces us to explain how weak readings are possible, being apparently violations of the uniqueness condition. The proposals mentioned solve the problem by elaborating different varieties of a single strategy that can be summarized as follows: if uniqueness is not satisfied at the level of token referents, it can be satisfied at some more abstract level, be it the level of types, or of kinds, or roles and functions. In this way the core feature of definiteness is kept in force, and the possibility opens up of deriving most characteristic properties of weak readings from the requirements imposed by uniqueness. I believe that this strategy is simple and illuminating, and I will devote this section to working it out and exploring its consequences.

A representative sample of this approach is found in the analysis of English long weak definites in Barker (2005). Barker points out that the apparent failure of uniqueness in examples like *open the window* is typically correlated to the irrelevance of the referent’s identifiability: the speaker is indifferent as to which particular token – which window – is being referred to. In the DP *the corner of a busy intersection*, “...the properties that distinguish between the four corners of the intersection are irrelevant: all that matters is whether they are corners on a busy intersection” (Barker 2005: 104); thus, the uniqueness condition is satisfied by the existence of a single non-specific corner, taken as the relation of being a corner in an intersection. This holds for weak definiteness with relational nouns. However, the irrelevance of distinguishing properties in tokens of one single kind or type underlies the use of definite DPs also in examples like the ones in (10), from Barker (2005) and Beyssade (2013).

- (10) (a) *I drive a Ford Falcon, and Tom drives the same car.*  
 (b) *John and Mary wear the same T-shirt.*

Barker’s proposal is actually more complex, but these words are enough to introduce an intuitive idea that others have also tried to develop.

Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2013) claim that weak definites (of the short type) refer to kinds (see Beyssade 2013 and Espinal & Cyrino 2017b for some criticism). In this approach, “what licenses the definite article is the uniqueness of the kind referred to” (Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts 2013: 43); reference to kinds explains also the restrictions on modification mentioned above, and a number of similarities between short weak definites and generic definites. Once again, the failure of uniqueness at the level of tokens is solved at a more abstract level. However, the authors note that in examples like *read the newspaper* and *play the violin* the predicates *read* and *play* are object-level predicates, and not predicates that select a kind-level internal argument; moreover, one does not read or play a kind, but rather some instantiation of the kind. This motivates the introduction of some type-shifting rules à la Hall-Partee (1986) and other technical adjustments, like a realization relation *R* that connects individuals and the kinds they are realizations of. The assumptions that a) weak readings correlate with situations that involve an indeterminate number of instantiations of a kind or type and b) uniqueness is satisfied at some kind/type abstract level are shared by many approaches to weak definiteness. Here I will be more interested in bringing to the fore what they have in common than in analyzing the aspects in which they differ. In this sense, though remaining unconvinced by the idea of reference to kinds,<sup>3</sup> I agree with the spirit of Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts’ proposal. The crucial point is that the weak reading systematically highlights the fact that the referent instantiates a certain type – both in the short and the long pattern – and bans the choice of a specific entity among the ones that comply with the description, because the context makes the choice irrelevant (Beyssade 2013 rightly points out that in this respect weak definites behave like attributive definite descriptions). This is the main consequence of satisfying uniqueness at the ‘non-token’ level, and also the main difference with respect to strong readings.

Beyssade (2013) puts forward a similar proposal, but she replaces kinds with types, which I find more natural. Her main generalization is that “In contexts where there is more than one token which satisfies the property denoted by *N'* (*N* or *N* and its complement), *N'* has to be interpreted as an expression which refers to a type. So to speak, it is a case of coercion” (Beyssade 2013: 133). The idea is that when a definite DP is used in a context where more than one (token) referent satisfies the description, the uniqueness presupposition forces the hearer to infer a weak interpretation, which means interpreting the DP as a type-referring expression: “...the definite determiner is used to shift from tokens to the type which groups tokens together and presents them as indistinguishable. In order to build a type, the Speaker erases the differences between the various tokens, she makes as if they were irrelevant” (Beyssade 2013: 134). A related strategy is applied to inalienable possession constructions in Le Bruyn (2014).

There are, of course, differences among relations, kinds and types, and each one of these notions should be carefully defined. However, examining those differences is not among the goals of this paper. In what follows, I merely assume that in any variety of weak definites the uniqueness condition is satisfied at some abstract level that does not consider tokens, whatever it may be – I will follow Beyssade in talking about types; not only does this allow us to keep treating the article as a standard definite article, which is a welcome result, but it is also the basic intuition from which the analysis of the whole set of data derives.

Some clarifications are in order here. One could wonder why an interpretive shift from

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<sup>3</sup> Among the reasons why the notion of kind does not seem adequate to me, I would mention the difficulty of analyzing all kinds of weak definites as kind-referring expressions, and the fact that weak definites do not actually refer like singular definite generics. Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2013) is often understood as an approach based on the idea that common nouns are ambiguous between the denotation of objects and the denotation of kinds. In my view, there is no lexical ambiguity of nouns. Objects, kinds and types as referents are not a list of pre-existing denotations of nouns, but rather the results of the inferential elaboration of the underspecified lexical meaning of nouns.



tokens to types occurs at all to save the constructions under discussion and make them acceptable. Why are they not excluded? Why do definite DPs receive readings that depart from the regular referential use? The answer is that two forces conspire in favor of having type shifts. One is the general tendency to search for relevance in utterance interpretation (Sperber & Wilson 1986): if a semantic mismatch between two elements is perceived – in our case, given the conflict between uniqueness and a context that does not provide the information required to satisfy it, the hearer will try to make sense of the utterance by applying some adjustment process that solves the mismatch, before considering the utterance as anomalous. Strategies for mismatch resolution are systematically exploited in interpretation (see de Swart 2011 for an overview); the shift from tokens to an abstract type is just a particular strategy that is triggered by the possibility of using the definite article in a context that provides a number of undifferentiated referents, thus failing to obey uniqueness. Instead of blocking the interpretive process because uniqueness is not satisfied, an alternative way to maintain uniqueness is found. This is what Beyssade (2013) describes as a case of coercion, but note that the trigger is not necessarily the exclusion of any strong reading in the context, but rather the simple possibility of obtaining a different way of complying with uniqueness in the search for a relevant interpretation (recall that most examples of weak definiteness can be assigned a strong reading too).

The second force behind the interpretive shift is the procedural nature of definiteness: as argued for in Leonetti and Escandell-Vidal (2011), instructions encoded in procedural items like articles and pronouns are typically rigid, in the sense that they must be satisfied at any cost, and at the same time cannot be modulated or adjusted to comply with the requirements of another linguistic item. If definiteness, as it is encoded in determiners and pronouns, is rigid, it must trigger some kind of type-shifting operation when a uniquely identifiable referent is not available.

Weak readings are thus predicted to occur whenever the conditions for a successful shift are given. In line with these assumptions, shifting operations must be seen as inferential processes that develop the logical form of an utterance into a fully specified proposition. Weak readings are pragmatically inferred from the logical form under certain contextual conditions, and arise as a result of the inferential specification of the explicature of the utterance by the hearer. Definite determiners may be interpreted in this way only if they do not encode any additional requirements that could further constrain the search for the referent: such requirements – for instance, deictic features in demonstratives – would inhibit the shift from tokens to types. This is why weak readings are not obtained with demonstratives.

### **3.2 How are the two formal patterns related to weak readings?**

The problem raised by the existence of (at least) two kinds of weak definites – short and long – in need of a unitary account now begins to look easier to face. The two formal patterns simply represent two contexts that allow for uniqueness to be satisfied by shifting from tokens to types. This is the property they share. Of course, short weak definites and long weak definites exhibit a different behavior in several respects, but this is expected, since they force the hearer to follow different paths in order to reach reference to types.

In the short scheme, the DP offers no valuable clues to guide the inferential process; then, some DP-external element must play a role in licensing reference to types. Here it is crucial that the whole VP or PP can denote an event kind (Schwarz 2014), a stereotypical, habitual, conventional situation that does not imply selecting a specific (token) referent, like in *go to the hospital*, *do the dishes* or *take the train*. The kind reading of the whole predicate is needed to license reference to a type in the definite DP. Instead of pausing to discuss the details of a plausible notion of event kind, I would just like to stress the role that stereotypical situations play in the argument: they are required to support the shift from tokens to types. Briefly, they are there to keep uniqueness in place, ultimately. This view differs significantly from other

views in the literature, in which they are related to familiarity, with the familiarity condition allegedly encoded by the article somehow transferred to the denotation of the VP/PP to obtain familiar, prototypical situations (Donazzan 2013, Carlson, Klein, Gegg-Harrison & Tanenhaus 2013). I prefer to avoid any marked operation that places definiteness out of the DP, and, above all, I do not want to take familiarity as the meaning of definiteness. My claim is that here, as in any other use of the definite article, familiarity is only a side effect of uniqueness: familiarity in the accessibility of stereotypical situations is indirectly derived from the main role of event kinds. As Donazzan (2013: 74) puts it, “prototypical situations are situations sufficiently established as recurrent and habitual routines to be considered part of the common ground or of the conventional knowledge shared by speaker and hearer, and to be sometimes judged ‘nameworthy’ in their own respect”. This is certainly true, but it is relevant for short weak definites only because it makes reference to types possible. Stereotypical events are also required in the expression of inalienable possession in Romance, which I will not deal with (see Le Bruyn 2014).

Turning now to the long scheme, what we find is a different path leading towards reference to types. In this case the shift takes place inside the DP domain, and the trigger is the combination of uniqueness with relational nouns, either those describing relations that do not determine uniquely identifiable referents, like *side*, *finger* or *corner*, or any relational noun with an indefinite, non-specific complement, like *student of a linguist*, *mother of a boy in the class*, or *picture of a young couple*. In the first case, the information contained in the lexical part of the DP does not satisfy uniqueness by itself, though additional contextual data can do the job when a specific referent is intended – for instance, by providing a discourse antecedent, or favoring accommodation; if no more data supporting uniqueness are available in the context, the existence of several sides, fingers or corners of something leads to a violation of uniqueness, unless the condition is satisfied by a type that can be realized by more than one token. The context may make manifest to the hearer that individuation of particular tokens is pointless and contributes nothing to the interpretation: as a consequence, a weak reading is obtained. In the second case, with the ‘N of a N’ pattern, uniqueness is again violated, given that the lexical part of the DP is not restrictive enough, and can only be satisfied at an abstract level (possibly by ‘functional identification’, if Corblin 2011, 2013 is right) through an interpretation like ‘a N that represents the type *N of a N*’. Thus, the problem raised by the uniqueness condition is essentially the same in short and long weak definites, but the kind of linguistic material involved in its resolution is different.

Then, all we need for licensing weak definiteness is a context that provides data that can support a specific way of satisfying uniqueness. This suggests that other formal schemes for weak definiteness could be found. I discuss some examples in section 4. As for the contexts where weak readings are excluded, they fail to provide the hearer with evidence – access to event types or to functions – that reference to types is required. No ambiguity in any lexical item is involved.

### 3.3 How is the non-referential reading licensed?

In 2.4 I suggested that the properties of narrow scope, sloppy identity readings and the difficulty for establishing discourse referents cluster together as signs of a non-referential reading. Non-referentiality is due to reference to types, or alternatively to the absence of reference to tokens: the presence of event kinds or functions in the interpretation rules out the possibility that individual discourse referents are introduced. To my knowledge, these properties are shared by all kinds of weak definites. Thus, they can be seen as intrinsically tied to weak definiteness. Reference to types is reached through different inferential paths in the specification of utterance explicatures, depending on the linguistic context. If this has been made clear by the preceding discussion, now the question is why the non-referential reading is computed by speakers/hearers. Since it is usually in competition with a strong

reading that looks simpler and does not involve any interpretive shift, one may wonder how it is that hearers strive to reach the weak reading in the processing of utterances.

I can only offer a partial answer, by focusing on two points. One concerns the competition with the strong reading, and the other concerns the competition between weak definites and weak indefinites.

As for the strong reading, it is not so clear that the referential reading is a simpler and more economical option with respect to the weak reading. Take, for instance, *go to the beach* and *take the train*. In their strong reading, these expressions point to a particular beach – say, Las Salinas – and a particular train – say, the 10:15 train. Since in short definites the DP does not include restrictive information, obeying uniqueness to identify the referent implies accessing contextual data, by either searching for a discourse antecedent or relying on information shared by the interlocutors. This means that identification of a token referent requires devoting some cognitive resources to the task, and this processing effort will be rewarded with a relevant interpretation only in certain contexts, namely the contexts in which the speaker makes manifest his intention to refer to Las Salinas beach or the 10:15 train. But in other contexts, the speaker may be interested in talking about the stereotypical activities of going to the beach or taking the train: in those cases, no effort will be invested in identifying a token referent, no search for a discourse antecedent will be activated, and switching to a type will be enough to satisfy uniqueness. Some kind of inferential elaboration is needed both for strong and for weak readings, and it is not evident that an asymmetry in processing cost would penalize weak readings. However, the crucial factor in favor of them is that reference to types, and, eventually, to event types, allows speakers to communicate something that they could not communicate otherwise, namely the assumption that what counts is having a stereotypical situation instantiated, with all the cognitive effects associated. Thus, even if weak readings look like marked readings with respect to strong ones, the cost of reaching them is adequately balanced by their consequences in communication.

The competition between weak definites and (weak) indefinites raises intricate problems that I cannot discuss here, but the basic point I am interested in is the following: if weak definiteness means having indefinite readings of definite expressions – that is, readings in which more than one referent complies with the description in the DP and any of those referents could be selected and make the intended proposition true – then why is a definite DP used to express the same meanings that speakers usually convey by using indefinite DPs, apparently blurring the definite/indefinite distinction? The answer is again the same as before: weak readings of definites are indefinite/existential, but they have communicative effects that cannot be achieved by means of indefinite expressions. Such effects are due to the role of stereotypical situations and the associated meaning enrichment: *go to a beach* and *take a train* lack the meaning enrichment component that is found in *go to the beach* and *take the train* (go to the beach to relax at the seaside, choose the train as a means of transport from among other options).<sup>4</sup> Intuitively, this is what justifies the existence of weak definiteness.

Things become more intricate when weak definites are compared with bare nouns, as in the two series of examples in (11), from Carlson et al. (2006).

- (11) (a) *Sue took her nephew {to college / to prison / to class}*.  
 (b) *Sue took her nephew {to the hospital / to the store / to the beach}*.

The problem is that bare nouns, being semantically incorporated, show the same kind of semantic enrichment that we find in short weak definites (this, together with a number of other common properties, leads Carlson & Sussman 2005, and Carlson et al. 2006 to propose that weak definites are also semantically incorporated). The two options seem to be

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<sup>4</sup> See Corblin (2013: 113ff) for a detailed discussion.

equivalent: both are used to represent stereotypical situations. Far from being a problem, however, this is actually the reason why weak definites and bare singular nouns tend to exist in complementary distribution, rather than occurring as competing options in the same environments. What remains to be explained is the principle that determines this distribution. I am afraid that, for the moment, we cannot make much progress on this point: the occurrence of definites and bare singulars seems to depend on idiosyncratic choices in each language. Though I will return to this issue in section 4.1, I leave aside the problem of how to account for the cases in which complementary distribution fails (see 4.2).

To sum up, weak readings in definites are licensed because they represent optimal ways to exploit definiteness giving rise to interpretations that could not be obtained by other means.

### 3.4 What is behind the typical properties of short weak definites?

The cluster of properties typically associated with short weak definites includes lexical restrictions, restrictions on modifiers and syntactic positions, and enrichment in interpretation. Why do they cluster together? As indicated in 3.2, they do so because they represent pieces of a complex process triggered by the uniqueness requirement when the descriptive content of the DP is insufficient to guarantee that a referent is identifiable by the addressee, and no discourse antecedent is available to establish an anaphoric interpretation. Under such conditions, reference to types becomes a satisfactory way of justifying uniqueness, but it is dependent on the possibility of accessing an event type. The above-mentioned set of properties fits naturally into this interpretive strategy:

- Lexical restrictions obviously emerge because not all predications describe stereotypical situations that are easily conceived as event types. *Go to the store* is among the possible stereotypical situations in English, but *close the store* and *go to the harbor* are not.
- Restrictions on modifiers are well justified: only classificatory modifiers are compatible with weak definiteness because all other modifiers would orient the interpretation towards the search for an identifiable token that complies with the description in the DP.
- Restrictions on syntactic positions – in favor of complements and against subjects – are less systematic than what is usually assumed, but they can also be derived from the need to rely on an event type: this implies a high degree of informational integration into a predicate, which is typical of complements, but not of subjects as external arguments. If the restrictions can be ultimately formulated as a ban against weak definiteness in topic positions, the argument remains the same.
- Finally, enriched meanings are usually required in the denotation of stereotypical situations with simple predicates. They result from a general pragmatic tendency to understand unmarked expressions as associated with stereotypical meanings (see Horn's 2004 R principle: 'Say no more than you must'). The way enrichment appears in the interpretation has attracted the attention of several authors. Enrichment is usually seen as driven by the activation of the telic component in the lexical meaning of nouns (Corblin 2013, Zwarts 2014, Espinal & Cyrino 2017b): the meaning of *hospital* contains the function of healing injured and ill people, the meaning of *piano* includes the goal of making music, the meaning of *bus* includes the function of transporting people to certain destinations, etc. If an event type has to be defined when interpreting a weak definite, the information contained in the telic *qualia* of nouns provide speakers with the primary information resource needed to enrich the basic meaning of the DP; so to speak, stereotypical situations are identified on the basis of the telic *qualia*. The same logic that underlies other properties of weak definites operates here too: uniqueness can only be satisfied at the level of types, which requires

that the DP be a part of the description of an event type, and this in turn highlights stereotypical situations associated with the telic component of the meaning of nouns.

According to this view of the phenomenon, the typical properties shared by short weak definites emerge from a specific path for satisfying uniqueness. They do not play any role when a different interpretive path is followed. This is what happens in long weak definites and, as I will show in section 4, in other environments.

### 3.5 Is cross-linguistic variation expected?

To my knowledge, cross-linguistic variation in the expression of weak definiteness has not received much attention in current research. However, variation is certainly one of the areas that are worth exploring if we aim to make progress in understanding the phenomenon of weak definiteness. The overview presented in the previous sections leads us to expect variation in two aspects (for languages that have Romance-like definiteness marking, at least). On the one hand, if the conditions for satisfying uniqueness through reference to types are given in contexts other than the ones described for short and long weak definites, then we should expect to have manifestations of weak definiteness in such contexts as well, and thus the traditional set of data discussed in the literature could be extended to include new patterns. On the other hand, since the occurrence of short weak definites is strongly dependent on the availability of stereotypical, habitual situations, which is in turn dependent on cultural, idiosyncratic ways of representing the world, variation is expected to occur – at a superficial level – in the combination of short definite DPs with their governing verbs and prepositions, ultimately due to cultural differences. As mentioned in 3.3, this kind of variation is partially explained by extra-grammatical factors and should not have important consequences for a general theory of weak definiteness. What is worth indicating is that variation seems to be limited to the short pattern. It does not affect the long pattern because this context does not require accessing stereotypical, culturally established situations to reach a relevant interpretation.

The basic fact that unifies all the data up to now and in the next section is the presence of an indeterminate number of non-identifiable tokens of a single type in the situation that makes the proposition true. This is enough to classify the examples as instances of weak definiteness, despite minor differences in other aspects.

## 4. Cross-linguistic variation

### 4.1 Variation in short weak definites

My aim in this section is to discuss mainly data from Basque and Romance languages (basically Italian and Spanish). These data show different levels of cross-linguistic variation that go from superficial variation in lexical choices to facts that seem to be more intertwined with the internal organization of the grammatical system.

#### 4.1.1 English and Romance

The first level is represented in the examples in (12)-(18), where the symbol # means ‘weak reading not acceptable’.

(12) *take the train; prendre le train* (French); *coger el tren* (Spanish); *prendere il treno* (Italian)

(13) #*take the car; prendre la voiture* (French); *coger el coche* (Spanish); *prendere la macchina* (Italian)

- (14) *go to (#the) school; aller à l'école* (French); *ir al colegio* (Spanish); *andare a scuola/#alla scuola* (Italian)
- (15) *talk on the phone; parler au telephone* (French); *hablar por (#el) teléfono* (Spanish); *parlare al telefono* (Italian)
- (16) *have a/#the girlfriend; avoir une/#la fiancée* (French); *tener (#la) novia* (Spanish); *avere la fidanzata* (Italian)
- (17) *eat with (#the) chopsticks; manger avec des/#les baguettes* (French); *comer con (#los) palillos* (Spanish); *mangiare con i bastoncini* (Italian)
- (18) *wear a/#the hat; porter un chapeau* (French); *llevar (#el) sombrero* (Spanish); *portare il cappello* (Italian)

A look at the list of examples reveals evidence for a certain amount of small-scale variation across English, French, Spanish and Italian: the use of a weak definite article is acceptable in all languages in (12), but is not systematically allowed in the remaining cases, with idiosyncratic gaps scattered throughout the paradigm, and with no clear pattern emerging from the data. It is true that certain languages, in particular Italian and to a minor extent French, show a clear tendency to choose weak definites instead of indefinites or bare nominals, mostly due to the heavy constraints they pose on the use of bare nouns. However, what the list highlights is that there is no single grammatical principle or parameter that can cover this kind of variation, that it is extremely difficult to make predictions about the distribution of short weak definites, and that the choice between definites and bare nouns is partially a matter of the conventionalization of idiomatic expressions (see Laca 1999 on Spanish bare nouns). The conclusion is that the facts cannot be completely explained in grammatical terms and that the existence of superficial variation does not contradict the essential homogeneity of the syntax and semantics of the definite article in the languages under discussion. Is it possible to give a convincing account of this set of cross-linguistic differences simply by appealing to the connection between definiteness and stereotypical situations? This would seem to be quite difficult. For the cases in which weak definites are in competition with singular bare nouns (for instance, *llevar sombrero* ‘wear a hat’ in Spanish vs. *portare il cappello* in Italian), the main problem is that both formal choices are associated with the expression of stereotypical, habitual or institutionalized situations, and there is no clear reason why, with the same combination of verb and noun, one language prefers one option and another one prefers the other – leaving aside the role of distributional constraints on bare nouns in particular languages.

To sum up, the panorama emerging from (12)-(18) suggests that there is little room for large scale predictions. A detailed comparative study that includes other languages will surely throw some light on this point.

#### 4.1.2 Italian vs. Spanish

A second level of variation that points towards something more systematic from a cross-linguistic perspective is found in the set of examples in (19)-(24), where Spanish and Italian are compared (again, # means ‘weak reading not acceptable’ and its absence indicates ‘weak reading acceptable’).

- |      |     |                        |   |                    |   |                       |   |                   |     |
|------|-----|------------------------|---|--------------------|---|-----------------------|---|-------------------|-----|
| (19) | (a) | <i>beber/ tomar</i>    | { | (# el) <i>café</i> | / | (# la) <i>cerveza</i> | / | (#el) <i>vino</i> | Sp. |
|      | (b) | <i>bere / prendere</i> | { | <i>il caffè</i>    | / | <i>la birra</i>       | / | <i>il vino</i>    | It. |
|      |     | drink have             |   | the coffee         |   | the beer              |   | the wine          |     |

- (20) (a) *comer* { (# *el*) *pescado* / (# *los*) *bombones* } Sp.  
 (b) *mangiare* { *il pesce* / *i cioccolatini* } It.  
 eat the fish the chocolates
- (21) (a) *llevar* (#*la*) *chaqueta* / *ponerse* (# *la*) *corbata* Sp.  
 (b) *indossare* *la giacca* / *mettersi* *la cravatta* It.  
 wear the jacket put.on the tie
- (22) (a) *tener* (# *el*) *coche* / *llevar* (# *las*) *gafas* / *tener* (# *el*) *resfriado* Sp.  
 (b) *avere* *la macchina* / *portare* *gli occhiali* / *avere* *il raffreddore* It.  
 have the car wear the glasses have the cold
- (23) (a) *poner* (# *el*) *azúcar* *en la salsa* Sp.  
 put the sugar in the sauce  
 (b) *mettere* *lo zucchero* *nel sugo* It.  
 put the sugar in.the sauce
- (24) (a) *el gato* *con* (# *las*) *botas* / *ese señor* *con* (# *el*) *bigote* Sp.  
 (b) *il gatto* *con* *gli stivali* / *quell signore* *con* *i baffi* It.  
 the cat with the boots that man with the mustache

Far from the idiosyncratic and unpredictable gaps in the patterns we saw when we compared English with Romance, here the differences in behavior between the two languages are quite consistent (though not unrelated to what is shown in (12)-(18)). In each VP, and even in the DPs in (24), a bare noun in Spanish corresponds to a weak definite in Italian; no weak definite is licensed in the Spanish examples, but some bare nouns are acceptable in Italian – in examples (19), (20) and (23), with a very subtle, intriguing difference between them and the weak definites: see *bere caffè* ‘drink coffee’ and *bere il caffè* lit. ‘drink the coffee’. There is a systematic contrast between Spanish and Italian (already noted in Zamparelli 2002). Judging informally, Italian seems to admit a huge variety of short weak definites, many more than Spanish (and English). The remaining uses of the definite article are equivalent in the two languages, and I see no solid reason to abandon the assumption that the grammar and meaning of the article are essentially the same in Spanish and Italian. If resorting to the expression of stereotypical situations is not useful, since they are evoked by both weak definites and incorporated (singular) bare nouns, we are left without a sound motivation for the contrast. This is particularly disappointing because the contrast looks quite robust. Just to confirm this point, it is worth mentioning additional Italian examples from Zamparelli (2002) and Donazzan (2013) (and see similar examples in Ippolito 2016).

- (25) *Ogni settimana, il mio sito web viene attaccato dagli hackers.*  
 each week the my site web come.PRS.3SG attacked by.the hackers  
 ‘Every week, my web site is attacked by (the) hackers.’
- (26) *La casa è sporchissima. In cantina ci sono i topi.*  
 the house be.PRS.3SG filthy in basement LOC be.PRS.3PL the mice  
 ‘The house is filthy. In the basement there are (the) mice.’
- (27) *In quale aula c’è il videoproiettore?*  
 in which classroom LOC be.PRS.3SG the video-projector  
 ‘In which classroom is there a video-projector?’

- (28) *Ha passato il pomeriggio a leggere i fumetti.*  
 have.PRS.3SG spent the afternoon to read the comics  
 ‘(S)he spent the afternoon reading (the) comics.’

Zamparelli (2002) pointed out that definite DPs with indefinite readings are widespread in Italian, and noted that these readings disappear when different kinds of modifiers are added, or when the head noun is substituted for another noun; this shows that the definite DPs in (25)-(28) are subject to the typical constraints that affect short weak definites. As these constraints are shared with kind-level definite DPs, Zamparelli concludes that definite DPs in Italian may have indefinite readings only when (in some context) they can have a kind-level meaning, so that indefinite readings are derived from kind readings by means of a type-shifting operation, like in the neo-Carlsonian view of bare plurals in English (the author claims that definites can be used to produce “nameless representatives” of the kind they refer to). Notice that Zamparelli deals with several of the basic properties mentioned in the literature on weak definiteness – see section 2 – without even referring to such a notion. I take it for granted that the definite DPs in the Italian examples in (25)-(28) are genuine examples of short weak definites; they have no definite counterparts in Spanish (except, marginally, for the first one).

Let me devote a few lines to underlining the significance of the Italian and Spanish data presented so far. There are two points that deserve special attention:

1. As mentioned above, the contrast between Spanish and Italian is systematic and cannot be reduced to a mere lexical issue without losing sight of the underlying generalization. There must be some principle that explains the difference, but it is not clear where to locate it in the organization of the grammatical system; I would not say that it is a syntactic or a semantic principle. Variation does not affect the cornerstones of weak definiteness as they have been established in the previous sections. Informally, all I can say is that the origin of variation seems to lie at the intersection of uniqueness and stereotypical situations: Italian deviates from the pattern of short weak definites that is usual in other languages in allowing for the use of the definite article when it is just based on a habitual, expected situation that does not necessarily correspond to a stereotype or to conventional behavior. The habitual repetition of attacks on web sites by hackers and afternoons spent reading comics is enough to allow the weak definites in (25) and (28).<sup>5</sup> It may be a stereotypical assumption that classrooms are equipped with projectors, as in (27), but it is not really stereotypical that mice are found in the basement, as in (26). Note that these two examples contain existential constructions: it is common to use weak definites as pivots of existentials in Italian. In short, Italian is characterized by a relaxation of the contextual requirements for weak definiteness. This might be related to other properties of the system, as will be suggested below.

2. A second point has to do with the need to integrate this kind of data from the Romance domain into the general discussion on weak definiteness, since they have not received any attention in such a context. Doing this has some interesting consequences. A consideration of

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<sup>5</sup> The subtle interpretive contrast between (i) and (ii) – weak definite vs. bare nominal – has to do with the habitual, familiar flavor conveyed by the presence of the article in (i), which is absent in (ii):

(i) *Ha passato il pomeriggio a leggere i fumetti.*  
 have.PRS.3SG spent the afternoon to read the comics  
 ‘(S)he spent the afternoon reading comics.’

(ii) *Ha passato il pomeriggio a leggere fumetti.*  
 have.PRS.3SG spent the afternoon to read comics

A weak reading cannot be obtained with *leggere {i libri / gli articoli}* ‘read {the books / the articles}’, apparently because reading books and reading articles, though being possible situations, are not identifiable as common, habitual, daily activities. In (iii) the definite DPs can only get a strong, anaphoric reading:

(iii) *Ha passato il pomeriggio a leggere i libri / gli articoli.*  
 have.PRS.3SG spent the afternoon to read the books the articles



the Italian examples leads us to accept that the traditional picture of short weak definites based on English is too rigid: it must be enlarged to include DPs that are not governed by lexical heads (even subjects), internal DPs in existential environments, and DPs that do not exactly conform to the list of basic properties. Briefly, this suggests that our view of the phenomenon needs to be somehow adjusted. A good sign is the possibility of having short weak definites – in particular, in plural – that do not convey enriched meanings in Italian, as pointed out in Donazzan (2013: 69-73): this is clear in examples like (28) or (25)-(26), and for instance in (29), where the predicate *bere il caffè* ‘drink the coffee’ has a regular compositional interpretation.

- (29) *Esco a bere il caffè al bar.* (Donazzan 2013: 69)  
 go.out.PRS.1SG to drink the coffee at.the bar  
 ‘I am going out to have a coffee at the bar.’

This confirms that the emergence of enriched meanings is not a necessary requirement for short weak readings, but rather a factor subordinated to the establishment of stereotypical situations. Moreover, it seems plausible that if the conditions for having a weak interpretation are relaxed in Italian, meaning enrichment is prone to disappear in many contexts.

#### 4.1.3 The case of Basque

After this perhaps inconclusive overview of the contrast between Italian and Spanish, I can now go on a third level of variation and examine the special case of (Standard) Basque in the context of the previous observations on Romance.

Etxeberria (2010, 2014) analyzes the enclitic Basque form *-a* (*-ak* in plural) as a definite article with indefinite, existential readings (see also Manterola 2012 for a characterization of *-a* as a definite article). As he points out, the examples in (30), from Etxeberria (2010), are ambiguous: combined with *-a(k)*, the nouns *goxoki* ‘candy’ and *ardo* ‘wine’ can receive either a strong, definite reading or a weak, indefinite one.

- (30) (a) *Amaiak goxoki-ak jan ditu.*  
 Amaia.ERG candy-DET.PL.ABS eat AUX  
 ‘Amaia has eaten (the) candies.’  
 (b) *Izarok ardo-a edan du.*  
 Izaro.ERG wine-DET.SG.ABS drink AUX  
 ‘Izaro has drunk (the) wine.’

The indefinite reading of *-a* nominals is also found, in object position, with predicates that describe stereotypical situations, as in the examples in (31).

- (31) (a) *auto-a / etxe-a erosi*  
 ca-D.SG house-DET.SG buy  
 ‘buy a car / a house’  
 (b) *senarr-a / emazte-a eduki*  
 husband-D.SG wife-DET.SG have  
 ‘have a husband / a wife’  
 (c) *xapel-a eraman*  
 hat-DET.SG wear  
 ‘wear a hat’

Etxeberria (2010: 34) notes that there are environments where the indefinite reading is excluded, as in the object of *erosi* ‘buy’ in (32).

- (32) *liburu-a erosi*  
 book-DET.SG buy  
 ‘buy the book’

So far, the data suggest that Basque *-a* is in fact a definite article that gives rise to weak readings under the same conditions operating in other languages. The parallel with Italian, in particular, is striking: the Italian equivalents of (30)-(31) contain a definite article with a weak reading, whereas the Italian translation of (32) can only have a strong reading. Why is Basque so tolerant with weak definites? Because bare nouns in Basque are not allowed in argument position, *-a* became an obligatory element in argumental DPs (Etxeberria 2014), and it is reasonable to assume that *-a* developed indefinite readings in contexts in which other languages resort to bare nouns just because bare nouns are not an option. Briefly, the idea is that the definite determiner takes the interpretations that cannot be conveyed by means of an alternative formal option. Etxeberria (2010) argues that Basque *-a* is particularly flexible in its ability to type-shift; it allows both the referential and the kind reading, as definite articles do in many different languages, and in episodic sentences the weak reading is derived from the kind-level interpretation through a covert operation that introduces existential quantification over instantiations of the kind (in line with Zamparelli 2002). It is not clear that this approach can predict under which conditions weak readings are excluded, as in (32), but it seems that Basque behaves like Italian in this respect. Basque speakers, like Italian speakers, make a notably broader use of the definite article than speakers of other languages.

A potential problem for this view is raised by some peculiar facts in the use of *-a*. As Manterola (2012) points out, *-a* can be used even in existential contexts, as in (33), and in predicate nominals, as in (34), – that is, even in non-argument positions – which suggests that perhaps it has reached the final stage in its grammaticalization process – the scale that goes from demonstrative to definite article to noun marker, according to Greenberg (1978).

- (33) *Ardo-a badago.*  
 wine-DET.SG there.is  
 ‘There is wine.’

- (34) *Jon irakasle-a da.*  
 Jon teacher-DET.SG be.PRS.3SG  
 ‘Jon is {a/the} teacher.’

There is, in fact, some controversy in Basque linguistics surrounding the status of *-a*: not all experts accept that it is a true definite article, and some of them claim that it is actually a nominal marker, deprived of its original definiteness feature (see Artiagoitia 2002). Etxeberria (2014: 359) argues that *-a* cannot have reached the status of pure nominal marker, as it does not appear systematically with every noun. Thus, on the one hand there is evidence in favor of its status as a definite determiner (for instance, on historical grounds; see Manterola 2012), but on the other hand its use has extended to a point that makes it look quite different from other definite articles in European languages. I think it is fair to assume, without committing myself to more specific claims, that Basque *-a* is still a definite article, but has gone further in its grammaticalization path than most of its counterparts in Romance languages (including Italian). Though additional data are required to establish the extension of indefinite readings with *-a* in a precise fashion, there is enough evidence to give a tentative answer to the question concerning Basque tolerance with weak definites: it is due to the high degree of grammaticalization of the article, together with the ban against bare nouns. Both factors conspire to favor the use of the definite article with interpretations that usually correspond to bare nouns. The same idea could be applied to the difference between Spanish and Italian,

within the Romance domain: if Italian shows a broader use of the definite article than Spanish, it is because its article has achieved a higher degree of grammaticalization along the path from demonstrative to noun marker, and the extension of weak readings through different contexts is an indication that their licensing conditions are less strict than in other languages. This is not simply an ad hoc stipulation: it actually fits nicely in the picture offered by recent research on Romance languages (Lamiroy & De Mulder 2011) showing that these languages display at a given point in synchrony varying degrees of grammaticalization, and that in this grammaticalization cline Spanish is the most conservative language and Italian and French are more innovative. The spreading of weak definiteness in Italian seems to be, then, a particular manifestation of a more general trend.

#### 4.2 Variation in definite clitic pronouns

So far, I have been dealing with lexical definite DPs, following the main lines in the literature. Now I would like to consider pronouns, which have never been included in the discussion until very recently, and even in this case not exactly in the context of research on weak definites. I will assume that personal pronouns are definite determiners, more precisely definite articles with no overt nominal constituent associated; this is one of the central claims of the DP hypothesis.

Alexopoulou and Folli (2010), Leonetti (2011) and Ippolito (2016) noticed that Italian clitic pronouns display indefinite readings under certain conditions. A set of examples from Alexopoulou and Folli (2010) and Ippolito (2016) is given in (35)-(37), where the English glosses indicate the occurrence of indefinite, existential readings.

- (35) *L' anno scorso i vicini hanno comprato un cane.*  
 the year last the neighbours have.PRS.3PL bought a dog  
*Quest' anno lo compriamo anche noi.*  
 this year it buy.PRS.1PL also we  
 'Last year the neighbors bought a dog. This year we'll buy one / \*it too.'
- (36) *Gianni sta cercando un idraulico, ma non lo trova.*  
 Gianni be.PRS.3SG looking.for a plumber but not it find.PRS.3SG  
 'Gianni is looking for a plumber, but he can't find him / one.'
- (37) A: *Vuoi un maglione rosso per il tuo compleanno?*  
 want.PRS.2SG a sweater red for the your birthday  
 B: *Me l' hanno già regalato.*  
 to.me it have.PRS.3PL already given  
 A: 'Would you like a red sweater for your birthday?  
 B: 'They have already given me one as a present.'

The main reason why it is important to pay attention to examples like these is that they contain true weak definites, though the definite expressions do not look like the ones in the classical cases in (1), (2) and (4). In (35)-(37) clitic pronouns refer to non-specific and indeterminate instantiations of the kinds introduced by their antecedents: there is no uniquely identifiable referent that the hearer has to individuate to make the proposition true. It is exactly the same interpretation found in lexical weak definites, and the cluster of properties related to non-referentiality – sloppy identity readings, narrow scope – is also the same (I will not provide direct evidence for this). It is the second cluster of properties – lexical restrictions, constraints on modifiers, stereotypicality, enriched meanings – that is absent here (as in long weak definites, see 2.4). This is not unexpected, since there is no lexical material involved in the licensing of the weak reading, and access to stereotypical situations and kinds of events

does not play any role. Far from being a reason to exclude these clitics with indefinite readings from the family of weak definites, the absence of certain crucial properties confirms that the traditional view of short weak definites is too restrictive: there are members of the family that, though exhibiting undeniably indefinite readings, lack some typical properties of lexical short weak definites, and this is not a problem at all, if we accept that such properties emerge only when a certain inferential path is activated to comply with uniqueness, but can be irrelevant when another path is activated in a different context.

With these ideas in mind, and assuming without further discussion that the pronominal clitics in (35)-(37) are genuine instances of weak definiteness, the question is how the indefinite reading is possible in pronouns. The proposals in the literature certainly shed some light on the matter, but in my opinion, they do not give a satisfactory answer.

In Alexopoulou and Folli (2010) the behavior of Italian clitics is correctly seen as related to the absence of a null anaphoric pronoun that can retrieve bare nominals as antecedents: to build anaphoric chains that have bare nouns or non-specific indefinites as antecedents, Italian has to resort to the partitive clitic *ne* (only for bare nouns) or to a definite clitic, whereas other languages like Greek and Spanish typically exploit null anaphora (indefinite argument drop). The contrast is tied to the different nature and distribution of bare nouns in Italian and Greek, according to Alexopoulou and Folli. There is an obvious correlation between this point and the competition between bare nouns and weak definites mentioned above. However, in Alexopoulou and Folli (2010) the problem of the compatibility of definite determiners/pronouns with indefinite readings is not explicitly addressed.

In Ippolito (2016) a generalization regarding “definite existential pronouns” is put forward, namely that languages which allow indefinite definites allow pronominal clitics to be interpreted existentially. This generalization is meant to capture the difference between Italian and languages like French (and Spanish). The idea is that Italian allows for indefinite readings in pronominal clitics in (35)-(37) because it also allows for indefinite readings in lexical definite DPs; by contrast, French and Spanish pose heavier constraints on lexical definites and consequently exclude “definite existential pronouns”, according to Ippolito. This is perfectly reasonable, and reinforces the assumption that clitics provide good examples of weak definiteness, but unfortunately the generalization does not hold for Spanish, for reasons that are difficult to ascertain (see below). Ippolito accounts for existential readings by assuming that the definite determiner/pronoun is a D head that combines with the covert noun KIND and involves reference to kinds; a type-shifting operation – the same one invoked by authors like Zamparelli and Etxeberria, among others – then introduces existential quantification over instantiations of the kind, giving rise to the usual interpretation of weak definites. The information about the kind is provided by a contextually salient antecedent.

In an informal attempt to explain how pronouns get an existential reading despite being definite Ds, and avoiding ad hoc assumptions about determiners that select kinds, I suggest that the crucial condition lies in the non-specific value of the antecedent of the pronoun.<sup>6</sup> A non-specific antecedent introduces the kind/type that the anaphoric pronoun has to retrieve (the pronoun recycles the descriptive content of the antecedent, giving rise to property anaphora), and also places a condition on the interpretation of the pronoun: it must be non-specific too.<sup>7</sup> With pronouns, definiteness without nominal content implies that uniqueness

<sup>6</sup> The condition is meant to cover also those cases in which the anaphoric link is established between a dislocated topical DP and the corresponding resumptive clitic, like in (i), which can have a non-specific as well as a specific reading of *un libro* ‘a book’:

(i) *Un libro, l' ho letto.*

A book it have.PRS.1SG read

‘A book, I read (one).’

(Italian; Rizzi 2005)

If *un libro* is interpreted as non-specific (‘at least one book’), the clitic is a weak definite. Note that no definite object pronoun is used in the English translation of the example.

<sup>7</sup> Non-specific antecedents include indefinite DPs, bare nominals and also lexical weak definites, as in (i),

can only be satisfied by identifying a salient antecedent. Thus, a problem appears when uniqueness must be obeyed by accessing this antecedent, but the antecedent happens to have no uniquely identifiable referent. The rest of the story is the same as in any case of weak definiteness: uniqueness cannot be satisfied at the level of token referents, but a switch to the more abstract level of types resolves the mismatch, and the result is a weak reading, by which the proposition is verified by any indeterminate token referent of an abstract type. In (35)-(37), the types are *dog*, *plumber* and *red sweater*. As Ippolito (2016) points out, the indefinite reading of pronouns should be available only in languages that display other weak uses of definite determiners.

I think this is enough to justify welcoming Romance clitic pronouns into the family of weak definites. However, whatever the true explanation of the weak reading may be, there are pending questions that concern the distribution of weak definite pronouns. I have no complete answers for them, but a brief discussion is worthwhile here. The most immediate question is why speakers resort to definite pronouns to retrieve non-specific antecedents.

Let me start with Italian, where a simple explanation could be offered along the following lines: as Italian lacks null anaphora (argument drop) for non-specific antecedents, the only device available in the anaphora toolbox to do the job of connecting with this kind of antecedent is a definite pronoun. Otherwise, the partitive clitic *ne* (plus an indefinite pronoun) can be used; in fact, *ne* is an acceptable alternative option in any of the three examples in (35)-(37). If a partitive clitic is available, why do speakers keep using a definite clitic to convey an existential reading? The only logical explanation is that the two competitors, the definite clitic and the partitive clitic, give rise to slightly different interpretations. There should be some subtle difference, then, between (38a) and (38b).

- (38) (a) *Quest'anno lo compriamo anche noi.*  
 this year it buy.PRS.1PL also we  
 (b) *Quest'anno ne compriamo uno anche noi.*  
 this year PART buy.PRS.1PL one also we  
 'This year we'll buy one too.'

It is not clear to me what that difference is, however,<sup>8</sup> and I am not aware of any detailed study on this point. It seems that the two options are equivalent. These overlaps between the two options therefore deserve further investigation.

As for the rest of the Romance languages, the problem is quite similar. Spanish presents a double puzzle. On the one hand, as lexical weak definites are less productive than in Italian, we could expect that examples of weak definite clitics are not easy to find. Nevertheless, they are quite common, in existential contexts,<sup>9</sup> as in (39)-(40), and in other environments, such as Clitic Left Dislocation, as in (41)-(42) – this is unexpected, if Spanish is compared to languages like Greek, for instance.

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from Alexopoulou and Folli (2010): *gli occhiali* 'the glasses' is a short weak definite and the clitic inherits its indefinite interpretation.

- (i) A: *Porti gli occhiali?* – B: *Sì, li porto.* (Italian)  
 wear.prs.2sg the glasses yes them wear.PRS.1SG  
 A: 'Do you wear glasses?' – B: 'Yes, I do.'

<sup>8</sup> Intuitively, the version with the definite clitic conveys the idea that the situation of buying the dog is stereotypical and belongs to an expected behavior pattern, and the version with the indefinite pronoun is simply neutral.

<sup>9</sup> Definite clitics in existential contexts constitute, at first sight, clear counterexamples to the Definiteness Effect. However, it is precisely their weak reading that licenses their insertion in a position – following the existential verb *haber* – that excludes most definite DPs in Spanish.

- (39) A: *¿Había problemas en ese momento?* B: *Sí, (los) había.*  
 have.PST.3SG problems in that moment yes them have.PST.3SG  
 A: ‘Were there problems at that time?’ B: ‘Yes, there were.’
- (40) *Esas sandalias, ahora ya no las hay.*  
 those sandals now already not them have.PRS.3SG  
 ‘Those sandals, now you cannot find them anymore.’
- (41) *Dos películas de Hitchcock, (las) ha visto todo el mundo.*  
 Two films of Hitchcock them have.PRS.3SG seen all the world  
 ‘Two films by Hitchcock, everyone has seen them.’
- (42) *3000 euros, te (los) vas a tener que gastar.*  
 3000 euro CL.2SG them go.PRS.2SG to have to spend  
 ‘(At least) 3000 euros, you’ll have to spend.’

On the other hand, a second reason why weak definite clitics in Spanish pose a problem is that in most contexts their insertion is optional, because null anaphora is always an option with non-specific antecedents (see Leonetti 2011). Again, as in the case of the partitive clitic in Italian, it is not easy to explain how the two formal options coexist.

To sum up, once the existence of weak definite clitics is established, the question that still calls for an answer is why they are acceptable in contexts where an apparently simpler option – partitive clitic, null anaphora – is acceptable too. Note that even English allows for some weak uses of pronouns: Carlson (1977) mentions examples like (43) and (44), with a bare plural and a mass noun as non-specific antecedents (here the definite pronoun is the only option).

- (43) *Queenie is seeking unicorns, and Phil is seeking them, too.*
- (44) *Cedric is seeking furniture, and Hiram is seeking it, too.*

Before closing this section, it is of interest to add another special case to the set of data that involve pronouns. If we agree that null subjects in null-subject languages count as definite pronouns, following common practice, then a consequence of the previous discussion is that, under appropriate conditions, a null-subject language could allow for weak readings of null pronouns. This is, in fact, the case of Spanish. In (45) and (46) the null subjects in the answers are interpreted as referring to unspecified tokens of the kinds *cheques* ‘checks’ and *estudiantes* ‘students’ – something the English translation does not show clearly; in order to obtain this existential interpretation, the antecedents must be bare nominals.

- (45) A: *¿Se aceptan cheques?* B: *Sí, ∅ se aceptan.*  
 CL accept.PRS.3PL checks yes CL accept.PRS.3PL  
 A: ‘Are checks accepted?’ B: ‘Yes, they are.’
- (46) A: *¿Vinieron estudiantes?* B: *No, ∅ no vinieron.*  
 come.PST.3PL students no not come.PST.3PL  
 A: ‘Did any students come?’ B: ‘No, they didn’t.’

As Italian is a null-subject language, we should expect to find similar facts in Italian as well, but here things are quite different. In Italian weak readings of null subjects are severely constrained, though weak readings of all other definite expressions are much more common than in other Romance languages. One factor that must be relevant is the existence of the

partitive clitic: the Italian versions of (45)-(46) include a partitive *ne* (otherwise the only possible reading of the null subject is generic or strong). A more in-depth study of the contrast between Italian and Spanish in weak readings of pronouns is left for future research.

### 4.3 A broader view of weak definites

The overview of cross-linguistic variation in this section includes only Romance (mainly Spanish and Italian) and Basque, apart from English, but it allows us to draw some generalizations that future research could test with data from other different languages. The generalizations are as follows:

- Variation concentrates in the domain of short weak definites, but long weak definites do not seem to be affected. This is probably due to the different interpretive processes triggered by the two groups of expressions.
- In short weak definites, some of the differences among languages are related to the conventionalization of certain formal patterns rather than others and resist easy reduction to general grammatical rules. Certain other facts reveal deeper and more systematic contrasts, possibly due to the stage that each language has reached in the grammaticalization cline of definite articles. As there are languages that clearly accept weak definites more liberally than others, future research should ascertain whether variation in this area corresponds to regular patterns (for instance, whether variation is constrained by some underlying scale or hierarchy).
- In languages that display short lexical weak definites, the prediction is that weak readings should appear also in pronouns, under the appropriate conditions. Again, some languages are more prone to use weak definite pronouns than others. This depends mainly on the system of formal options for pronominal anaphora that each language is provided with, but other factors must be considered as well.
- The classical typology of weak definites must be modified to include also pronouns, which opens new directions for research.

## 5. Conclusions

The leading assumption in this review of the problem of weak definiteness is that a formally definite DP can have an indefinite reading while still being a regular definite expression in its linguistic semantics, in other words, the uniqueness condition. In this sense, weak definites represent one particular case of a common phenomenon: a mismatch arises between a linguistic item's meaning and the context in which it has to be interpreted, and an interpretive strategy is activated in order to solve the mismatch. Such a strategy is seen here as an inferential process operating in the mapping from logical form to explicatures, but it corresponds to the well-known type-shifting operations in the tradition of formal semantics. The mismatch consists in the impossibility of satisfying the uniqueness condition encoded by the definite article at the level of token referents, and the resolution involves obeying uniqueness at the more abstract level of types (or roles/functions in a frame). It goes without saying that the most obvious advantage of this perspective is that it allows us to keep uniqueness in force even in cases in which it is apparently violated, and thus maintain a unitary analysis of the article.

Other positive results deriving from the main role of the uniqueness condition are 1) the possibility of accounting for all the properties usually associated with weak definites by treating them as factors that contribute to sustaining uniqueness (which explains why we find just those properties, and not different ones), and 2) the possibility of determining what the two classical manifestations of weak definites – the short pattern and the long one – have in common, and what separates them.

From an empirical point of view, the main contribution of this study is the integration of facts that have thus far received scant attention into the general picture of weak definiteness: on the one hand, data on cross-linguistic variation in the distribution of short weak definites, and on the other hand, data concerning weak readings of definite pronouns, which are not usually considered in the context of a unified approach to the phenomenon. The problem of variation certainly deserves further investigation with data from more languages, but hopefully the discussion in this paper can contribute to orienting such an undertaking by revealing certain aspects that have received no attention in previous research.

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