Predication over aspects of human individuals

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In German, as in other Germanic and Romance languages, nouns denoting well-established roles of humans occur bare in the predicate position. Alternatively, such nouns can be used with an indefinite article.

(i) a. *Peter   ist   Schauspieler.*
     Peter   is   actor
   b. *Peter   ist   **ein** Schauspieler.*
     Peter is   an actor

Bare NPs ascribe properties to some aspect of the human (e.g., profession, religious denomination, political affiliation) that can be made explicit by a qualifier expression, such as *von Beruf* 'by profession', *von Nationalität* 'by nationality'. The meaning of an indefinite NP is less restricted. (ib) does not exclude that Peter can be an actor by profession. However, in contrast to (ia), (ib) can mean that the subject referent only tends to behave like an actor or shares some stereotypical properties with actors, without being an actor by profession.

The restriction to a social aspect of the individual, what I refer to as "partiality of predication" following Mari & Martin (2008) can be captured in a binding analysis. Following McNally & Boleda (2004), I assume that nouns have an implicit kind argument and denote a set of subkinds. In (ib), the bare NP includes an implicit qualifier expression von *seinem$_i$ Beruf her* 'by his profession' which picks out professional (=well-established) subkinds from the actor kind. Object instances of this well-established subkind are derived by the Binder Rule of Hole (2012, 2014), using lambda abstraction of the variable introduced by the pronoun *sein* 'his'. Following Hole (2014), I assume that theta heads can introduce binder indices into the structure. In Hole's account of Free Datives, the Landmark theta head with the binder feature introduces an argument that is mapped to some neighborhood region, entailing that the event denoted by the complement VP affects this spatial region of the referent. By analogy, I assume that the subject of sentences with bare NPs is introduced by a binder theta head, which maps the subject argument in its specifier to some social aspect of it and entails that the state denoted by the VP holds for this social aspect. The (implicit) qualifier expression in (ia) is in complementary distribution with the indefinite article in (ib). The indefinite article is a numeral that picks out an object of the set of kinds denoted by the noun.

It will be shown how this analysis can account for the characteristics of bare predicate NPs attested in the literature, such as partiality of predication, restricted modifiability, and number neutrality (Berman 2009), without introducing new ontological categories like "capacities" (de Swart et al. 2007).

Selected References

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