

The mysterious specific indefinite

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Introduction*

When an indefinite newly introduces or reintroduces an accessible referent into the discourse, it is called *specific*. Thus, in (1a), *it* can be coreferential with *a lion* in the previous sentence, which indicates a *particular* lion in the relevant situation. By contrast, a *nonspecific* indefinite has no specific referent at all, as is illustrated in (1b), where *a lion* can be *any* lion. In that case, the problem of reference can be solved by means of modal subordination (where the speaker takes the point of view of a possible world).

- (1) a. Marian speared *a lion_i* last week. *It_i* was a fierce creature.
b. You'd better run if you see *a lion_i*. # *It_i* is dangerous. / *It_i* may be dangerous.

Normally, the referent of a specific indefinite is known to the speaker but not yet to the hearer. A prototypical context for a specific indefinite is a presentational construction, as in (2), but this is not a requirement.

- (2) Once upon a time, there was *a lion* who lived in a cave.

See further Farkas (2006) and Geurts (2010), among others, for discussion and opposing views.

Here, I will show that restrictors on indefinite variables are often construed cataphorically, which forces the hearer to accommodate. I argue that the speaker facilitates this process by extending the intonational domain beyond its regular measures. Section 2 discusses various kinds of relative clauses and especially *quasi-relatives* from this perspective. In the final part, I claim that specific indefinites can be silent as well, dependent on the syntactic context – particularly, in the case of appositive relative clauses.

1 Scope, restrictors, and intonation

The interpretation of an indefinite noun phrase is determined by the context. For instance, the phrase *a lion* can be specific, nonspecific, generic, or a predicate; see the illustrations in (3a) through (3d):

* In my studies of relative constructions, I inevitably ran into Ed Keenan's pioneering typological endeavors. More generally, he has set a great example in combining cross-linguistic research with formal grammar. The present squib is a small tribute to his work. Although much less ambitious, it discusses an interface phenomenon that might interest the *reader of honor*.

- (3)
- | | | |
|----|--|---------------|
| a. | Yesterday, I saw <i>a lion</i> in the zoo. | (specific) |
| b. | I'd like to see <i>a lion</i> some day. | (nonspecific) |
| c. | <i>A lion</i> can roar. | (generic) |
| d. | If only I were <i>a lion</i> ... | (predicate) |

In some cases, sentences in isolation are ambiguous. In (4), *a lion* can be either specific or nonspecific. The specific reading is normally associated with high scope of the indefinite, the nonspecific with low scope:

- (4)
- | | |
|---|-------------------------|
| Every girl saw <i>a lion</i> in the zoo. | |
| (i) There was a particular lion in the zoo that every girl saw. | ($\exists > \forall$) |
| (ii) Every girl saw some lion in the zoo. | ($\forall > \exists$) |

The indefinite can be seen as a (generalized) quantifier with a restrictor and a nuclear scope. In formulaic speech: there is some x , x having property <restrictor>, for which it is the case that proposition <nucleus containing x >. Example (5) shows that a restrictor (underlined) can be quite complex:

- (5) A man in white tie that must be very rich wore a big diamond ring at the party.

This paper focuses on restrictors of specific indefinites. Interestingly, a restrictor, or part thereof, can be separated from the indefinite by means of extraposition across the nucleus. In (6), the nuclear scope of the indefinite corresponds to 'I met x at the party'.

- (6) I met a nice man at the party that was very rich.

Such a situation involves a crossing dependency, and therefore implies a potential parsing problem for the hearer. However, we can only do this if the sentence accent shifts to the right periphery. Consider (7), where prosodic accentuation is indicated by capitals.

- (7)
- | | |
|----|---|
| a. | I met a nice man that was very RICH at the party. |
| b. | I met a nice man at the party that was very RICH. |
| c. | # I met a nice MAN at the party that was very rich. |

In intonational languages, including English and other Germanic languages, there is one main accent per sentence, which is right-aligned with the focus. (Potentially interfering contrastive pitch accents are disregarded here, as this is an independent issue.) If a focused constituent is shifted further to the right, it obligatorily drags the sentence accent along. Note that (7c) is only acceptable under a different, contrastive interpretation, which is irrelevant for our purposes. Clearly then, shifting a restrictor correlates with an extension or reorganization of the intonational phrase.

Nonrestrictive material has no such effect. In (8), addition of an appositive relative clause does not influence the intonational contour of the host clause, similarly to the situation with subsequent sentences. Instead, the additional material constitutes an independent intonational domain.

- (8)
- | | |
|----|--|
| a. | I met a nice MAN at the party. |
| b. | I met a nice MAN at the party, who was very RICH (by the way). |
| c. | I met a nice MAN at the party. He was very RICH. |

There is a subtle meaning difference between (7a/b) and (8b/c). In the first examples, the

restriction *being rich* implies that there is a potential set of people that is not rich. In (8), this is not the case. So if everyone present at the relevant party happened to be rich, it would be infelicitous to express (7), as opposed to (8). The difference between restrictive and appositive meanings comes out more dramatically in (9).

- (9) a. I invited only nice people that are rich to the party.
 b. I invited only nice people, who are rich, to the party.
 c. I invited only nice people to the party. They are rich.

Example (9b) implies that all nice people in the domain of discourse are rich, because *being rich* is a property parenthetically attributed to this full set of referents; consequently, all nice people are said to be invited to the party. This is equivalent to the situation in (9c). In (9a) there is no such implication: the set of nice people is restrictively intersected with the set of rich people, and only those are invited; thus there may well be nice people who are poor and consequently not invited.

2 Relative clauses and quasi-relatives

Quasi-relatives or ‘V2-relatives’, are found in Dutch and German. An example from Dutch is (10a). What is striking here is that the apparent relative clause displays verb second, whereas normally embedded clauses are verb final. For comparison, the corresponding regular relative clause is given in (10b).

- (10) a. Ik ken een man [die is erg rijk].
 I know a man DEM is very rich
 ‘I know a (particular) man who is very rich.’
 b. Ik ken een man die erg rijk is.

Previous research has shown that quasi-relatives are actually juxtaposed or coordinated main clauses containing a preposed demonstrative rather than a relative pronoun (Gärtner 2001, Zwart 2005, Endriss & Gärtner 2005, Huber 2006, and De Vries 2012; see also Den Dikken 2005 for a somewhat different take on the matter). Since the most frequent relative pronouns are homophonous with demonstratives in the relevant languages, confusion easily arises. Where the paradigms diverge, the difference is clearly detectable; see (11), for instance.

- (11) a. Ik ging naar een feest **daar/*waar** kwamen rijke mensen.
 I went to a party there/*where came rich people.
 ‘I went to a party where rich people came.’
 b. Ik ging naar een feest **waar/*daar** rijke mensen kwamen.

Furthermore, quasi-relatives are necessarily sentence-final, contrary to regular relatives, as is shown by the minimal pair in (12), compared to (11):

- (12) a. * Ik ben naar een feest [**daar** kwamen rijke mensen] geweest.
 I am to a party there came rich people been
 ‘I have been to a party where rich people came.’
 b. Ik ben naar een feest **waar** rijke mensen kwamen geweest.

In Dutch (but not in German, according to Gärtner 2001), it is possible to optionally spell

out the coordinator *en* ‘and’ between the host clause and a quasi-relative:

- (13) Ik ben naar een feest geweest (en) daar kwamen rijke mensen.

Thus, it seems reasonable to assume the following approximate structure, where CoP is some kind of coordination phrase (in fact, specifying coordination, as discussed in Koster 2000, De Vries 2007):

- (14) [CoP [_{host_clause} ... DP_i ...] [(Co) [_{quasi-RC} DEM_i ...]]]

Crucially, quasi-relatives come with a particular intonation (15a) that corresponds to the pattern for extraposed restrictive relatives (15b) already mentioned in section 1. There is a single prosodic contour, and the sentence accent is shifted to the right. In (15), the approximate rise and fall of the intonation is indicated by / and \. Note that the rise of pitch near the beginning of the focus creates a secondary accent on *feest* ‘party’ (thus producing the familiar ‘hat’ pattern, cf. Keijsper 1984).

- (15) a. Ik ben naar een /FEEST geweest (en) daar kwamen rijke MENSEN\
 b. Ik ben naar een /FEEST geweest (*en) waar rijke MENSEN\
 kwamen.

The situation for subsequent main clauses and appositive relatives is quite different; here we obtain two prosodic contours, of which the main rise and fall are indicated in (16):

- (16) a. Ik ben naar een /FEEST\
 geweest. (En) daar kwamen rijke /MENSEN\
 b. Ik ben naar een /FEEST\
 geweest, waar overigens rijke /MENSEN\
 I am to a party been where by.the.way rich people came

It is the extension of the intonational domain to the second clause in (15) which facilitates the restrictive reading that is absent in (16). Since (15a) involves two main clauses, this possibility is somewhat unexpected, since normally main clauses cannot be prosodically integrated; compare (17a) to (17b), for instance.

- (17) a. Ik ben naar een /FEEST\
 geweest. Er waren rijke /MENSEN\
 I am to a party been. There were rich people.
 ‘I have been to a party. There were rich people.’
 b. * Ik ben naar een /FEEST geweest. Er waren rijke MENSEN\
 \.

Apparently then, the specific indefinite in (15a) and other quasi-relatives is responsible for cross-main clausal dependencies. A specific indefinite’s search for restrictors is powerful enough to extend the regular intonational domain beyond its regular measures in certain configurations, but as soon as the prosodic contour containing the indefinite is closed off, newly added material can no longer function as a restrictor of it.

Interestingly, definite expressions do not have the power to extend an intonational domain, which implies that quasi-relatives cannot be related to a definite noun phrase at all. Compare the minimal pair in (18a), the corresponding regular relative construction in (18b), which is fine with a definite antecedent, and the regular subsequent sentences in (18c), which are also fine but have a slightly different meaning, as discussed.

- (18) a. Ik ken {een, *de} /KAPITEIN die is erg RIJK\
 I know a, the captain DEM is very rich
 ‘I know {a, [*]the} captain who is very rich.’

- b. Ik ken {een, de} /KAPITEIN die erg RIJK\ is.
- c. Ik ken {een, de} /KAPITEIN\ Die is erg /RIJK\.

Returning to indefinites, we can now explain the funny contrast in (19). Like a regular restrictive relative (19b), the quasi-relative in (19a) acts as a restrictor on the indefinite variable. In (19c) and (19d) the second clause is outside the scope of the indefinite, which leads to an odd interpretation in which the house has only one wall in total.

- (19) a. Dit huis heeft /ÉÉN MUUR die is ROOD\ (quasi)
 this house has one wall DEM is red
 ‘This house has one wall which is red.’
- b. Dit huis heeft /ÉÉN MUUR die ROOD\ is. (restrictive)
- c. (#) Dit huis heeft /ÉÉN MUUR\ Die is /ROOD\ (subsequent)
 ‘This house has one wall. It is red.’
- d. (#) Dit huis heeft /ÉÉN MUUR\, die /ROOD\ is. (appositive)

Similarly, (20a/b) have an interpretation very different from (20c/d). The first two examples state that relatively many rich people live in Haren. The last two that many people live in Haren and that they are all rich: in accordance with the intonational pattern, the reference of the indefinite needs to be established in the first clause, and hence the second cannot be interpreted as a restrictor.

- (20) a. In Haren wonen veel mensen die zijn rijk.
 In Haren live many people DEM are rich
 ‘Many people live in Haren who are rich.’
- b. In Haren wonen veel mensen die rijk zijn.
- c. In Haren wonen veel mensen. Die zijn rijk.
 ‘Many people live in Haren. They are rich.’
- d. In Haren wonen veel mensen, die rijk zijn.

Thus, there is an essential similarity between quasi-relatives and restrictive relative clauses related to scope. There is also a crucial difference, which I believe is related to the difference between relative pronouns and demonstratives. Consider (21). Due to the negative context, the indefinite *een vriend* ‘a friend’ cannot be interpreted as specific. Therefore, the demonstrative in the quasi-relative (21a) cannot find a referent, which leads to unacceptability. In (21b), *die* is a relative operator, which is not referential; hence the problem disappears.

- (21) a. * Niemand van ons heeft een vriend die is miljonair.
 nobody of us has a friend DEM is millionaire
 ‘[*] None of us has a friend who is a millionaire.’
- b. Niemand van ons heeft een vriend die miljonair is.

What this example proves is that a quasi-relative necessarily relates to a *specific* indefinite. From this we can predict that a quasi-relative resolves potential ambiguities. This is indeed the case. In (22a), *een vriend* ‘a friend’ can be understood as specific or nonspecific. If we add a quasi-relative, the only interpretation involves a particular friend. Thus, some kind of accommodation takes place. By contrast, a regular restrictive relative as in (22c) does not curtail the possibilities in this way.

- (22) a. Ik heb een vriend. (specific or nonspecific)
 b. Ik heb een vriend die is miljonair. (only specific)
 I have a friend DEM is millionaire.
 ‘I have a friend who is a millionaire.’
 c. Ik heb een vriend die miljonair is. (specific or nonspecific)

Not very surprisingly then, subsequent sentences containing an independent demonstrative or a personal pronoun pattern with quasi-relatives.

- (23) a. Ik heb een vriend. Die/hij is miljonair. (only specific)
 b. * Niemand van ons heeft een vriend. Die/hij is miljonair. (cf. (21a))
 ‘[*] None of us has a friend. He is a millionaire.’

Appositive relative clauses behave in the same way. As is well-known, they cannot take a non-specific antecedent. In previous research, it has been claimed that appositives involve E-type pronominal reference (see Del Gobbo 2007, for instance). This is compatible with the facts in (24), but it shifts the burden of explanation: why is the relative pronoun in an appositive different from a relative pronoun in a restrictive?

- (24) a. Ik heb een vriend, die miljonair is. (only specific)
 b. * Niemand van ons heeft een vriend, die overigens miljonair is.
 ‘[*] None of us has a friend, who is a millionaire, by the way.’

In the coordination account of appositives I proposed earlier (De Vries 2006, 2012), these facts fall out naturally. This requires some elaboration. The structure is sketched in (25). Here, ParP is a functional projection indicating parenthetical specifying coordination, which generalizes over – at least – appositions (as in *my neighbor, John*) and nonrestrictive relative clauses. The relative clause proper is embedded in a DP, which turns it into a semi-free relative. The abstract D head corresponds to a specific indefinite pronoun that is coreferential with the antecedent. A paraphrase of the analysis would be roughly *a friend, namely someone (a particular person) who is a millionaire*.

- (25) [host clause ... [ParP [DP antecedent] [Par [DP D [CP relative clause]]]] ...]

The relative clause is in fact restrictive with respect to its immediate head (D), i.e., it acts as a restrictor on the indefinite variable. The internal relative pronoun therefore behaves equivalently to relative pronouns in restrictive relative constructions, i.e. as an operator. This is a big advantage: relative constructions are always the same, and it is the syntactic context (here, ParP) that can establish a nonrestrictive meaning. Since many other construction types besides relative clauses can be assigned a parenthetical status, it must be an independent mechanism that takes care of this.

To repeat, the D head necessarily acts as a referential pronoun. From this, it follows that its antecedent must also be specific, whence the facts in (24). Secondly, since the relative clause is already a restrictor of D, it cannot be a restrictor of the antecedent itself. The relationship between the relative clause and the visible antecedent is therefore indirect, mediated by anaphoric linking through discourse, but separated by intervening structure. I believe this is an important insight, which explains the fact that appositive relatives behave on a par with subsequent clauses involving run-of-the-mill pronominal coreference in various respects.

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