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Book Review

Hansjörg Bisle-Müller, *Artikelwörter im Deutschen: Semantische und pragmatische Aspekte ihrer Verwendung (Linguistische Arbeiten 267)*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1991, 172 pages.

EMIEL KRAHMER

Artikelwörter im Deutschen contains four chapters. It starts off with a small chapter on methodological and theoretical issues. The second chapter concerns definiteness (*Bestimmtheit*). Here Bisle-Müller lays the foundation for the two final chapters. In the third chapter he discusses the meaning and use of the various articles in German, and the last chapter concerns their generic uses.

The book contains a lot of interesting data and discusses a large part of the relevant (mostly German) literature. But the book is also interesting for linguists and philosophers interested in the articles in general. It seems to be a reasonable hypothesis that all languages code definiteness and related matters in one way or another, at least to some degree. And apart from that, German has a rich article paradigm as well as some well-known interesting features: there are dialects (Mönchengladbach, North Frisian) which have two definite articles with different functions, and in more informal German there is an interesting difference between accentuated articles like *zu dem* ('to the') and cliticized ones like *zum*.

Next to linguists and philosophers, Bisle-Müller explicitly aims his study at people who want to learn German as a second language. He correctly points out that it is very difficult to illustrate the uses of, say, the definite article without also taking its alternatives into consideration. This motive of German as a *foreign language* also partly determines the methodology of the book. Bisle-Müller aims to describe the use of articles in spoken discourse and to do this he makes use of what he calls *Gricean reasoning (Räsonnement)*. Mutual knowledge plays a crucial role in this reasoning. With the use of a certain article the speaker gives a clue to the hearer what kind of reasoning he has to do to find a referent in the mutual knowledge. In other words, the various articles function as *co-ordinators* of this mutual knowledge.

Bisle-Müller distinguishes two sorts of mutual knowledge: background knowledge (*Dauerwissen*) and contextual knowledge (*Laufwissen*). The contextual knowledge is the only relevant part of mutual knowledge for understanding. It contains information about the context (in the broad sense), as well as activated pieces of information from the background knowledge

(world-knowledge, linguistic knowledge, information about communication patterns). Speaker and hearer use this mutual knowledge for generating frames or scripts (*Rahmen*) which aid to determine referents. The presupposition behind all this is that, no matter what the mother-language is, Gricean reasonings about mutual knowledge can be carried out by anyone.

Bisle-Müller's approach is obviously related to the one presented in Hawkins (1978). Hawkins also argues for a Gricean treatment of the various articles. This is not the place to dig deep in the differences in set-up and predictions between Bisle-Müller and Hawkins, but, in a nutshell, I think it is fair to say that Bisle-Müller's criticism of Hawkins is largely correct, but the solutions he offers are not the final answers either.

Gricean reasoning is a strong mechanism. To see this let us discuss one type of example which is interesting in that it requires a different article from what one would expect. In this case, we take a possessive (which normally require a 'definite' referent), where an indefinite might seem more appropriate.

- (1) Bruno wanted to hit a nail in the wall, but in doing so he hit *his finger* with the hammer.

According to Bisle-Müller a script for 'hitting a nail in the wall' contains the elements 'hammer' and 'finger'. There is one hammer so there the definite article is expected, but there are ten fingers in this script. Now the reasoning goes as follows:

When we exclude the five fingers of the hand that holds the hammer, we only have five fingers left to choose from. But since the number of fingers can be overlooked, and moreover the finger closest to the nail (i.e. the forefinger) is the most probable referent in question, the definiteness of the referent is unproblematic. And since the thumb directly next to the nail is usually referred to with the description 'thumb', this alternative can also be excluded (p. 54, my translation).

But if this kind of reasoning is allowed, we have a serious problem: how can we explain that in a lot of cases where we have ten possible referents a possessive (or some other non-indefinite article) is not suitable? Take for instance:

- (2) During an argument, Petra hit Hans so hard that she broke *his tooth*.

One cannot say this out of the blue, neither in English nor in German. Still, a similar kind of reasoning can be applied here: the tooth in question is probably one of Hans's front teeth, it is very unlikely that it is one of his molars, and moreover we can describe these with another word, namely 'molar', etc.

These examples show that although Gricean reasonings and the frames they trigger might answer some questions, they raise a number as well. How can we find frames for sentences? And what kinds of Gricean reasonings are allowed or *not* allowed? In general, how can we expell *infelicitous* article uses?

Bisle-Müller is correct in stating that mutual knowledge and context are

important features for a theory of the articles, but we have already learned this from the writings of Searle and Hawkins. Bisle-Müller applies his Gricean reasonings to a broad class of examples. But since he does not give a recipe for 'finding' the right frame, or for restricting the possible reasonings, I think non-Germans will still have difficulties with the German article paradigm. And this is as good a sign as any that more work needs to be done.

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