

## Focusing on indefinite noun phrases in German and English: Consequences of reference form on the subsequent discourse

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**Introduction:** One of the fundamental questions underlying theories of language production concerns referent-tracking. A body of linguistic and psycholinguistic studies found out that several factors (e.g. syntactic and thematic prominence) influence the frequency of re-mention and the rate of pronominalization of referents. In this paper, I focus on referents mentioned in non-prominent positions (i.e. direct objects realized by indefinite noun phrases) in English and German and argue that different types of indefinite noun phrases give structure to the subsequent discourse in different ways.

### Study1: The English data (Indefinite-*this* vs. indefinite-*a(n)*)

According to several studies (Prince 1981, Ionin 2006), English *this* can be used as an indefinite determiner alongside the simple indefinite article *a(n)*. The Experiment (**Exp1**) investigates whether referents introduced by *this* and *a(n)* differ in terms of frequency of subsequent mention and likelihood of pronominalization. **Design.** In a sentence-continuation task with no pronoun-prompt, participants ( $n=20$ ) read story fragments and were asked to add five logical and natural-sounding sentence continuations to each of the stories. The critical referents were constructed in direct object position and were realized as indefinite noun phrases. Only the morphological realization of the direct objects was manipulated, which resulted in 2 conditions: *this*-condition vs. *a(n)*-condition. In light of previous studies on indefinite-*this* (Gernsbacher & Shroyer 1989), the prediction is that *this*-referents will be: (i) more frequently picked up, and (ii) more likely to be mentioned with a pronoun in the subsequent discourse, compared to the *a(n)*-referents. **Results.** *This*-referents were picked up more often in the subsequent discourse than *a(n)*-referents (in 85% vs. 15% of the cases), but, contrary to the initial predictions, the anaphoric expressions used for the referents of both types of indefinites were definite noun phrases.

### Study2: The German data (Indefinite-*so'n* vs. indefinite-*ein(e)*)

The distribution of the German determiner *so'n* comes very close to that of English indefinite-*this* (Chiriacescu 2011). Experiment 2 (**Exp2**) had the same design as Exp1 and tested the impact on the discourse of indefinite-*so'n* compared to that of a simple indefinite headed by *ein(e)* ('*a(n)*'). Again, I manipulated only the type of indefinite noun phrase, which resulted in 2 conditions: *so'n*-condition and *ein(e)*-condition. The prediction is that if the discourse function of *so'n*-referents is comparable to that of referents preceded by indefinite-*this*, then the results of the two experiments should be similar. **Results:** Similar to the findings of Exp 1, *so'n*-referents were picked up more often in the following discourse than the *ein(e)*-referents (in 80% vs. 17% of the cases), but did not show a preference for pronominalization.

**Conclusions:** In this paper I argue that indefinites not only introduce new referents in the discourse, but that they are *forward-looking* as well, as they give information about the *future* discourse properties of the referents they are associated with. Specifically, I showed that noun phrases headed by indefinite-*this* in English and indefinite-*so'n* in German signal the referential persistence of their referents. The findings of the two experiments furthermore indicate that *the frequency of subsequent mention* of a referent and its probability to be mentioned with *a particular type of referring expression* in the subsequent discourse should be kept apart, as these two factors point to different characteristics of that referent (see Kehler et al. 2008 for a similar observation).

### Selected References

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