

“Strong” Indefiniteness and Topicality¹

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Abstract. The paper addresses the relation between “strong” or presuppositional readings of indefinite noun phrases and the notion of topicality in its sentential and discourse-level formulations. Previous discussions of the issue were generally based on the interpretative properties of indefinite noun phrases at positions associated with topicality (e.g. subject of an individual-level predicate, within the antecedent of a conditional). The paper aims to contribute to the debate with data from Turkish, which overtly marks “strong” indefiniteness at a position generally associated with focus rather than topic. It is argued on the basis of Turkish data that “strong” indefiniteness and topicality should be kept distinct.

1. Introduction

Milsark (1977) introduced the “strong” vs. “weak” distinction for a noun phrase as the basis of its acceptability in an existential context (e.g. *there be*__). There have appeared various formulations of what underlies this distributional classification (see Lyons 1999; Abbott 2010; Heim 2011 for reviews). One influential idea is to take a “strong” noun phrase to be one that carries an existence presupposition concerning its restrictor domain, whereas the restrictor domain of a “weak” noun phrase can be completely new to the discourse.

Indefinite noun phrases constitute a sub-class of nominal expressions that exhibit the possibility of bearing both “strong” and “weak” readings. A clear illustration of this phenomenon is provided by von Stechow (1998):

- (1) I’m not sure yet whether there are any mistakes at all in this book manuscript, but we can definitely not publish it. . .
 - a. if some mistakes are found.
 - b. #if some mistakes are major.

The subject slot of an individual-level predicate like *is major* is an environment where an indefinite like *some mistakes* receives a “strong” interpretation. For this reason the conditional antecedent (1b) carries a presupposition triggered by the indefinite that there is a plurality of mistakes in the book manuscript under discussion. Given the usual assumptions of presupposition justifica-

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tion, this presupposition projects to the global discourse level, eventually resulting in a clash with the explicitly declared ignorance of the speaker regarding the existence of any mistakes in the manuscript. No such problem is observed in (1a), given that the existential predicate *is found* renders it possible that the indefinite receive a non-presuppositional “weak” reading.

An issue that has drawn considerable attention is the relation between “strong” (readings of) indefinites and the notion of topicality, in its sentence and/or discourse senses (von Fintel 1994; Cresti 1995; Portner and Yabushita 2001; Endriss 2009; de Swart 2004; Geurts 2010, among others). Among many aspects of the issue, the present paper concentrates on the question *Is topicality a necessary component of “strong” readings of indefinites?*

Despite revealing a lot about “strong” indefiniteness, the data in (1) and the like may not be the ideal empirical ground to base a discussion on topicality and “strong” indefiniteness. The reason is that the subject slot of an individual-level predicate is a position that is somewhat necessarily associated with topicality, though opinions differ on exactly how (see von Fintel 2004 and de Swart 2004 for discussion). This renders it very complicated to dissociate topicality from the presuppositionality of the “strong” reading. In this connection, the present paper is motivated by the idea that it would be useful to look at Turkish, which is a language where “strong” indefiniteness is morphologically marked at a position that is not necessarily associated with topicality. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of morphologically marked “strong” indefinites in Turkish. Section 3 discusses various forms a claim concerning the topicality-“strength” relation can take and evaluates these with respect to Turkish data. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Accusative indefinites in Turkish

As it has become widely known through the work of Enç (1991),² Turkish is a language which has optional accusative case-marking on indefinite direct objects, where the marker carries certain interpretative effects. Enç (1991) claims that there is a bidirectional implication between Acc-marking and “specificity”. She models her notion of “specificity” as an interpretability condition ala Heim (1982). According to this condition an Acc-marked indefinite, besides its standard discourse marker, comes with an additional discourse marker standing for a superset of its restrictor domain, and this superset marker is required to be familiar.³ Here is an example from Enç (1991):⁴

- (2) Odam-a birkaç çocuk girdi.
my-room-Dat several child entered
'Several children entered my room.'

²See also Erguvanlı 1979 and Nilsson 1985 for systematic descriptions of the semantic effects of case-marking in Turkish.

³Enç (1991) equates her notion of “specificity” with Pesetsky’s (1987) D(iscourse)-linking and claims that it is what lies under Milsark’s (1977) “strong”/“weak” distinction.

⁴Note that Turkish is a pro-drop language, and the subject is not overt in Enç’s (1991) examples.

- (3) a. İki kız-ı taniyordum.
two girl-**Acc** knew.1sg
'I knew two girls.' (The girls are among the children.)
- b. #İki kız taniyordum.
two girl knew.1sg
'I knew two girls.' (The girls are new to the discourse.)

Enç (1991) observes that when and only when the direct object is Acc-marked as in (3a), the two girls the speaker knows are understood to belong to the set of children introduced via the discourse opener (2). Therefore the non-marked version in (3b) is not coherent in the given context, as it instructs the hearer to update the current discourse model with a set of two girls disjoint with the highly salient set of children.⁵

Apart from discourse-linking, it has also been observed that Acc-marked indefinites in Turkish give rise to referential readings when they occupy the object position of referentially opaque verbs like *seek* (Nilsson 1985; Dede 1986). In such cases the discourse-linking function Enç (1991) attributes to the marker is not observed. On the basis of this, Kelepir (2001) argued that presupposition of existence is a more unifying concept to characterize the marker.⁶

Özge (to appear) takes Kelepir's (2001) argument one step further and demonstrates with the help of negation that even in extensional contexts the essential contribution of the marker is not discourse-linking (or a similar mechanism of implicit domain restriction), but rather existential import modeled as the anaphoricity (=presuppositionality) of the domain of the Acc-marked indefinite à la van der Sandt 1992; Geurts 2007. This brings Turkish Acc-indefinites more in-line with standard conceptions of “strong” versus “weak” readings. In this regard, Turkish data can provide new insights regarding the nature of the relation between topicality and “strong”/“weak”

⁵There has been posed various empirical challenges to Enç 1991 on the grounds that there are case-marked out-of-the-blue indefinites as well as non-marked indefinites that can be interpreted as linked to the previous discourse (see (Zidani-Eroğlu 1997; Kelepir 2001; von Heusinger and Kornfilt 2005; Kılıçaslan 2006; İşsever 2007; Özge 2011 among others).

⁶Actually it is possible to replicate in Turkish von Fintel's (1998) example given above in (1), with Acc-marked versus non-marked distinction with the same predicate, rather than manipulating the predicate between stage and individual:

- (i) Henüz bu kitapta hatalar olup olmadığından emin değilim; ama...
“I'm not sure yet whether there are any mistakes at all in this book manuscript, but...”
- a. editör bazı hatalar gör-ürse, kitabı kesinlikle basamayız.
editor some mistakes see-Aor-Cond, book-Acc definitely print-Abil-Neg-Aor.2pl.
'If the editor sees some mistakes, we can definitely not publish the book.'
- b. #editör bazı hatalar-ı gör-ürse, kitabı kesinlikle basamayız.
editör some mistakes-**Acc** see-Aor-Cond, book-Acc definitely print-Abil-Neg-Aor.2pl.
'If the editor sees some mistakes, we can definitely not publish the book.' (mistakes presupposed)

distinction in indefinites.⁷

3. Topicality and “strong” indefinites

Let us consider some ways in which one can relate “strong” indefiniteness to topicality. One way is based on a link between topicality and presuppositionality. In accounts like von Stechow 1994 and Beaver 2004, topicality is taken as an effective factor in the process of justifying/resolving presuppositions. Under the assumption that “strong” indefinites constitute a subclass of presuppositional expressions, one can talk of an indirect association between topicality and “strong” indefiniteness being implied by these accounts. Let us call this (the claim of) “indirect association” for ease of reference.

The present paper does not aim to test “indirect association”. The reason is as follows. The claim of “indirect association” belongs to the theory of presupposition justification. Although it will have implications/predictions for particular uses of “strong” indefinites, it is not concerned with whether or not topicality is a part of what it is to be a “strong” indefinite. Within “indirect association”, “strong” indefiniteness does not imply topicality, since it is not claimed that presuppositions are *always* resolved to (or with the aid of) topical information.

A second way in which topicality can be associated with “strong” indefiniteness is by making the notion of topicality a (possibly improper) part of the definition of “strong” indefiniteness.⁸ The present paper concerns this version of association. I will grossly simplify by discerning a number of sub-versions of this kind of argument, and I will evaluate these in the light of Turkish data.

I think it is straightforward to distinguish between at least two types of topics: one at the sentence level, and the other at the discourse level. I will simplify by assuming that the former is a constituent of the semantic representation of the sentence and roughly corresponds to what the assertion conveyed by the sentence is about, and the latter is a question ala von Stechow (1994) that corresponds to what is under discussion at the current state of the discourse model. There are various possibilities regarding the relation of a “strong” indefinite to these two levels of topicality: either (i) the referent of the indefinite; or (ii) the domain of the indefinite; or (iii) a superset of the domain of the indefinite can be (discourse or sentence) topical. I will collapse the options (ii) and (iii) into one. This leaves us with four potential claims regarding topicality-“strength” relation for indefinites. One possibility, namely that the referent of the indefinite belongs to the discourse topic, can be discarded, given that being a (part of) discourse topic clashes with the novelty condition for indefiniteness. In the end we are left with three potential claims:

⁷In the rest of the paper I will continue to use the term “discourse-linking” for descriptive purposes.

⁸Certain variations of this argument can be found in Cresti 1995, Portner and Yabushita 2001 and Endriss 2009. I would like to make it explicit that the present paper is short of, and therefore does not claim to be, evaluating the proposals of Cresti (1995) and Endriss (2009). These authors are primarily interested in the non-standard scope behavior of indefinites. The issue of whether their non-standard indefinites can be subsumed under the notion of “strong” indefiniteness considered here deserves a discussion that is hard to fit into the present paper.

- (4) *Topicality Claim Version 1:*
A “strong” indefinite is a sentence-topic.
- (5) *Topicality Claim Version 2:*⁹
The domain of a “strong” indefinite is a sentence-topic.
- (6) *Topicality Claim Version 3:*
The domain of a “strong” indefinite is a discourse-topic.

Let us start with (4). Actually, the topic-focus articulation of Enç’s (1991) example given in (3) appears to stand in favor of (4).¹⁰ Here I repeat the example by reconstructing its intended intonation, where ‘↗’ indicates a rising boundary and the italics indicate focal prominence.¹¹

- (7) Odam-a birkaç çocuk girdi.
my-room-Dat several child entered
‘Several children entered my room.’
- (8) a. İki kız-ı ↗ tanıyordum.
two girl-Acc knew.1sg
‘I knew two girls.’ (The girls are among the children.)
b. #İki kız tanıyordum.
two girl knew.1sg
‘I knew two girls.’ (The girls are new to the discourse.)

The crucial observation is that while the non-marked (and therefore non-linked) indefinite *iki kız* (‘two girl’) in (8b) receives focal intonation, the Acc-marked (and therefore discourse-linked) indefinite *iki kız-ı* (‘two girl-Acc’) in (8a) is read with a topic intonation. Therefore there is an overlap between “strength” and sentence-topicality in (8a).

I will now show through slight changes to the context that the overlap between “strength” and sentence-topicality is not definitional, but is due to the specifics of the given context. First let us observe that Enç’s (1991) example – with the given topic-focus articulation – breaks when the association between the antecedent set and the linked referent is “loosened”, for instance by replacing *child–girl* with *man–accountant*.

⁹See Portner and Yabushita (2001) for a formulation of this claim. The authors, building over Enç 1991, claim that a specific indefinite is a presuppositional indefinite whose domain of quantification is the topic of the sentence.

¹⁰This observation appears to be generalizable to other examples in Enç 1991.

¹¹Turkish is a basically SOV language where the default focal prominence is on the immediately preverbal constituent. The two common strategies for topicalizing an object are (i) to scramble it to a left peripheral position, or (ii) inserting a rising boundary to its right edge and shifting the focal prominence to the verb.

- (9) Odam-a birkaç adam girdi.
my-room-dat several man entered
'Several men entered my room.'
- (10) a. #İki muhasebeci-yi ↗ tanyordum.
two accountant-Acc knew.1sg
'I knew two accountants.'
- b. #İki *muhasebeci* tanyordum.
two accountant knew.1sg
'I knew two accountants.'

The non-marked version (10b) is still infelicitous for the same reason as above, namely that it introduces two accountants who do not belong in the men in the room, disturbing the coherence of the discourse. However, this time the Acc-marked version (10a) as well becomes infelicitous. The problem appears to be that there is not sufficient ground to topicalize the indefinite *iki muhasebeci-yi* ('two accountant-Acc'), unless one accommodates a context of a financial institution where it is commonplace to have some accountants around. No such extra inferential steps were required for the original form of Enç's (1991) example. This shows that Acc-marking is not sufficient for topicality marked via intonational structure.

Now we will observe that it is possible to put Enç's (1991) discourse-linking effect back at work, by devising a context where the indefinite is not required to be the topic of the sentence. With the help of a question, it is possible to make the indefinite object the focus of the sentence, as illustrated in the following discourse.

- (11) A1 Odama birkaç adam girdi.
'Several men entered my room.'
- B1 Aralarında tanıdık birileri var mıydı?
'Did you know anyone among them?'
- A2 İki *muhasebeci-yi* tanyordum.
two accountant-Acc knew.1sg
'I knew two accountants.' (The accountants are among the men.)
- A2' #İki *muhasebeci* tanyordum.
two accountant knew.1sg
'I knew two accountants.' (The accountants are new to the discourse.)

Here (11A2) constitutes a natural reply to the question in (11B1), and the accountants are understood to belong in the men entered the room. Again, the non-marked version in (11A2') causes incoherence due to the disjointness implication. This shows that the "strength" of an indefinite direct object in Turkish is independent of whether the indefinite is a sentence-topic or not.

Now let us consider the claims (5) and (6), namely that the domain of a “strong” indefinite is the sentence or the discourse topic, respectively. In (11), it is fairly clear that the set of men, which is the superset of the domain of the indefinite *iki muhasebeci-yi* (‘two accountant-Acc’), is discourse topical in the sense that the current question or issue can be construed to be about these men. Although it is not equally clear whether (11A2) is a sentence about this set of men, let us grant that (11A2) conforms to the claims (5) and (6).

Now the question is whether it is possible to have a “strong” indefinite whose domain (or an antecedent superset of it) is neither the discourse nor the sentence topic. In order to be able to affirm this possibility, a well-formed discourse with the following properties is needed. First, there needs to be a set – or more precisely a set valued discourse referent – introduced into the discourse model which will serve as the antecedent domain for the “strong” indefinite. Second, there needs to be a “strong” indefinite that targets this set. Third, at the point where the antecedent set is targeted, it must be neither the sentence nor the discourse topic. Maintaining the third property involves some complications for the following reason. In discourses like Enç’s (1991) (3) above where the discourse is initiated by introducing a set, this set tends to become topical in the upcoming discourse. In order to avoid this, we need an extended and more complicated discourse, where the antecedent set is introduced in order to resolve a previous discourse topic. Thereby one can avoid new discourse questions or issues being opened up about the introduced antecedent set. Consider the following discourse:

- (12) A1 Dün John’la bir toplantı yaptık.
‘Yesterday we had a meeting with John.’
- B1 Sadece ikiniz?
‘Only two of you?’
- A2 Başta öyleydi; sonra odama birkaç öğrenci geldi.
‘It was so in the beginning; but later several students came.’
- B2 Toplantı nasıldı?
‘How was the meeting?’
- A3 Genelde iyiydi; ama bir ara garip birşey oldu.
‘It was good in general; but at some point something strange happened.’
- B3 Ne oldu?
‘What happened?’
- A4 John iki kız-ı göster-ip, oda-dan çıkarma-m-ı istedi.
J. two girl-Acc show-Conj room-Abl take out-Inf-1sg-Acc want-Past.3sg
‘John pointed to two girls, and asked me to take them out.’
- A4’ #John iki kız göster-ip, oda-dan çıkarma-m-ı istedi.
J. two girl show-Conj room-Abl take out-Inf-1sg-Acc want-Past.3sg
‘John pointed to two girls, and asked me to take them out.’

Right before (12A4), which introduces the “strong” indefinite, the discourse topic is the general

question *What happened?* At that point the set of students, the antecedent set for the “strong” indefinite, is not salient in the discourse. This is evident from the fact that the conversation can go on without ever mentioning the set of students again. This set got introduced in the previous discourse and were “used” in the resolution of the question whether A and B were alone or not in the meeting. Therefore there is no reason to assume that the set of students is discourse topical at the point where (12A4) comes. The set of students is not a sentence topic in (12A4) either. (12A4) is about what John did. The crucial observation is that still the Acc-marker is needed to maintain the coherence of the discourse, by tying the two girls mentioned in (12A4) to the set of previously introduced students. Once again we observe that the interpretative effect contributed by the case-marker operates independently of sentence and discourse topicality, refuting the claims (5) and (6).

4. Conclusion

The paper addressed the question *Is topicality a necessary component of “strong” readings of indefinites?* I devised three potential claims regarding the relation between topicality (in its sentence and discourse senses) and “strong” indefiniteness, and evaluated these claims in the light of data from Turkish. My aim was to provide data that would help disentangle the effects of topicality from the effects contributed by the overt-marking of “strong” indefiniteness. I observed that overtly-marked “strong” indefiniteness in Turkish is independent of topicality, though the two notions usually overlap. If the claim that “strong” indefinites in Turkish have anaphoric domains (Keleşir 2001; Özge to appear) is correct, this overlap is more than expected; because anaphors look back, and that is where topics usually are.

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