

**Towards an Explanation of the Definiteness Effect:
A New Classification of Interpretations***

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1. Introduction: the Definiteness Effect and Inalienability

It has long been recognized that *there*-constructions display the definiteness effect (Milsark (1974, 1977) among others). The effect prohibits certain noun phrases from occurring as the post-verbal noun phrases in *there*-constructions: *There*-constructions permit indefinite noun phrases to occur in the post-copular position, while definite phrases fail to appear in this position.

In order to account for the distribution of the definiteness effect, Milsark (1977) coined the terms *weak determiner* and *strong determiner* as labels for two complementary distributional classes of noun phrases. Weak determiners are those in cardinal noun phrases such as *a, some, several, many*, and number determiners, while strong determiners are those in quantificational noun phrases such as definite descriptions including the definite article *the*, demonstratives, pronouns, possessive determiners, and universal quantifiers (like *all, every, each*).

More importantly for our discussion, this particular effect is found in a number of related constructions. These include possessive constructions and constructions with verbs of acquisition (cf. Moltmann (1995), Kishimoto (2005)).

It has apparently been accepted that there is a strong correlation between the definiteness effect observed in English possessive constructions and the notion of inalienable possession expressed by the object of *have* (cf. de Jong (1987), Keenan (1987), Partee (1999)). In other words, in the previous studies, the type of reading of the object is a crucial factor in accounting for the distribution of the definiteness effect.

In the present paper, contrary to what is normally assumed in most previous analyses, a new distinction will be introduced between a “possessive” interpretation and a “holding” interpretation and hence the definiteness effect of these constructions can be treated in a unified way.

Relational nouns such as *sister* imply that the possessee is conceived of typically as being inseparable from the possessor. When inalienable possession is expressed by using a relational noun, the definiteness effect arises, which can be found in (1b).

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- (1) a. John has a sister.
 b. * John has the sister.

By contrast, the effect does not seem to be relevant to the case of alienable possession denoted by the object. In the following examples, for instance, the effect does not arise, in which case the non-relational noun *book* is used as the object expressing alienable possession.

- (2) a. John has a book.
 b. John has the book.

These kinds of facts have led many researchers to hypothesize that the definiteness' effect in English possessive constructions is due to the inalienability denoted by the object.

However, this issue seems to require further consideration. The example in (3A), for example, cannot be accounted for by the previous analyses, since the effect does show up even when a non-relational noun is used as the object.

- (3) Q. What will you give to Eliza for her birthday?
 A. Eliza has {a/#the} mirror, so I won't give one to her.

In this dialogue, where Eliza's ownership of a mirror is relevant, the addressee must use an indefinite object rather than a definite one.

Also, there is another sense in which most previous works are not sufficient to account for the definiteness effect. For instance, in some cases the effect does not arise even when relational nouns are used as objects, which can be seen in (4).

- (4) John has the sister as a dance-partner.

In (4), the object noun phrase includes a relational noun *sister*. According to the previous studies, a relational noun expressing inalienable possession is supposed to be a crucial factor in determining the occurrence of the effect. However, contrary to their expectations, the effect does not show up here.

Therefore, the facts given in (3A) and (4) must be problems for the previous approaches, where the effect in possessive constructions is assumed to be due to the notion of inalienable possession expressed by the object. In other words, this allows us to predict that the effect has nothing to do with the conceptual distinction between inalienable and alienable possession described by the object in the first

place.

Contrary to the previous analyses of the effect as coming from the inalienability expressed by the object, we will argue that the distinction between alienable and inalienable possession described by the object is not directly relevant.

Instead, we will suggest a more elaborate classification. In the present chapter, a new classification will be proposed based on the type of interpretation of the possessive construction as well as the construction with verbs of acquisition in English and Japanese. We argue that the effect in these constructions is dependent on the interpretation of the construction as a whole.

2. Organization

The arguments proceed as follows. In section 3, we will show that the occurrence of the definiteness effect in possessive constructions and constructions with verbs of acquisition in English and Japanese is not predictable from the inalienability expressed by the object alone. Rather, we will claim that it depends on what type of interpretation is obtained by the construction as a whole.

That is, it is in terms of our new distinction between possessive and holding interpretation that we can predict the distribution of the definiteness effect not only in possessive constructions but also in constructions with verbs of acquisition both in English and Japanese.

Finally, we will summarize the main points of the present study.

3. Possessive Constructions and Constructions with Verbs of Acquisition in English and Japanese

As was mentioned at the beginning, the definiteness effect in English possessive constructions does not have a strong relation to the inalienability expressed by the object.

However, this is not peculiar fact to English possessive constructions. Rather, it is at least a cross-linguistic and more general fact. That is to say, the same problem holds for possessive constructions in Japanese.¹ In these constructions, the definiteness effect also arises when a non-relational noun as well as a relational noun is used as the object. Moreover, the effect may not appear even when a relational noun is used.

Interestingly, this is also true for constructions with verbs of acquisition both in English and Japanese.

¹ The following abbreviations are used in the glosses of examples in this paper: DAT = dative case marker, NOM = nominative case marker, CL = classifier, GEN = genitive case marker, TOP = topic marker.

3.1. The Definiteness Effect and Interpretations of the Construction

When a relational noun is used as the object in Japanese possessive constructions, some cases display the definiteness effect. Observe the following contrast.

- (5) a. *Kanojo-ni-wa ootoo-ga iru.*
 she-DAT-TOP brother-NOM be
 ‘She has a brother.’
- b. * *Kanojo-ni-wa {sono/arayuru/hotondo-no/subete-no} ootoo-ga iru.*
 she-DAT-TOP {the/every/most-GEN/all-GEN} brother(s) be
 ‘She has {the/every/most-GEN/all-GEN} brother(s).’

As is clear from the examples in (5b), the object nominative phrase *otooto-ga* (‘brother-NOM’), which is a relational noun, is incompatible with strong determiners including the demonstrative *sono* (‘the’) (cf. Muromatsu (1996), Kishimoto (1996, 2000, 2005)).

By contrast, the definiteness effect does not usually arise when a non-relational noun *hon* (‘book’) is used as an object, as in (6).

- (6) *John-ni-wa ano hon-ga aru.*
 John-DAT-TOP that book-NOM be
 ‘John has that book.’

On the basis of these examples, the previous studies claim that the definiteness effect is dependent upon the inalienability of the object.

However, we argue that this is not the case. The following construction does not display the definiteness effect although a relational noun is used as the object.

- (7) *John-ni-wa Mary-no ootoo-ga iru.*
 John-DAT-TOP Mary-GEN brother-NOM be
 ‘John has Mary’s brother.’

Although the object phrase, *Mary-no ootoo-ga* (‘Mary’s brother-NOM’) is definite, it contains a relational noun.

Moreover, the definiteness effect may arise even when a non-relational noun is used as the object of Japanese *iru* (‘be’) and *aru* (‘be’).

- (8) a. *Kanojo-ni-wa* {*takusan-no/ikuraka-no*}
 she-DAT-TOP {plenty of-GEN/some-GEN}
okane-ga aru
 money-NOM be
 ‘She has {plenty of/some} money.’
- b. * *Kanojo-ni-wa* {*sono/arayuru/hotondo-no/subete-no*}
 she-DAT-TOP {the/every/most-GEN/all-GEN}
kanojo-no} okane-ga aru
 she-GEN} money-NOM be
 ‘She has {the/every/most/all/her} money’

The object noun *okane* (‘money’) in (8), which is a non-relational noun, is compatible with weak determiners such as *takusan-no* (‘plenty of-GEN’) and *ikuraka-no* (‘some-GEN’), as in (8a), while it is incompatible with strong determiners as in (8b).

It follows then that the effect can arise even when alienable possession is expressed by a non-relational noun in Japanese possessive constructions. Furthermore, some cases do not display the effect even when relational nouns are used.

Incidentally, unlike the previous researchers, Tham (2006:138) points out that the definiteness effect in English possessive constructions arises even when a non-relational noun is used as the object (cf. Kobukata (2004a, b)). This proposal is very attractive; yet Tham still argues in favor of the previous analyses where the notion of inalienability expressed by the object is responsible for the definiteness effect (cf. Tham (2005)).

Therefore, unlike previous works including Tham (2006), we will propose that the effect must be accounted for in terms of the type of interpretation of the construction regardless of the inalienability of the object.

Specifically, we argue that the effect arises when the construction has a “possessive” interpretation, whereas it does not arise when the construction has a “holding” interpretation. It will become clear that this distinction will enable us to account in a unified way for the definiteness effect found in possessive constructions as well as constructions with verbs of acquisition.

3.1.1. *The Possessive Interpretation*

To make the “possessive” interpretation clear, consider first the following case.

- (9) John has a wife of his own.

The sentence in (9) includes a relational noun as the object. This example expresses an inherent property attributed to the subject. In what follows, we will call this kind of interpretation a “possessive” interpretation.

Similarly, the following Japanese possessive constructions are considered to have a possessive interpretation. They also express an inherent property attributed to the subject *Taroo*.

- (10) *Taroo-ni-wa kyoodai-ga {a-ru/i-ru}*.
 Taroo-DAT-TOP brother-NOM be
 ‘Taroo has {a brother/brothers}.’

Importantly, there is another reading which can also be subsumed into a possessive interpretation. Observe the following examples with verbs of acquisition in English:

- (11) Mary {got/selected/chose/picked/picked out} a {husband/secretary}.

Without a special context, the sentences in (11) typically mean that an inherent relation has established between the subject and object. Take as an example the object *husband*. The examples indicate that the subject Mary established an inherent relation with the object referred to as husband. Thus, these sentences denote Mary’s inherent property (e.g. a married person).

Also, the following Japanese constructions can be accounted for in the same way.

- (12) *John-ni {takusan-no/nanninka-no} koibito-ga dekita*.
 John-DAT {many-GEN/some-GEN} lover-NOM got
 ‘John got {many/some} lovers.’

The examples in (12) indicate that the subject and object have established a certain possessive relation. That is, Japanese constructions with verbs of acquisition can be considered to obtain a possessive interpretation.

It should be noted here that a possessive interpretation is available when one uses a non-relational noun expressing alienable possession:

- (13)a. Eliza has a car.

- b. Eliza {owns/possesses} a car.

The utterance in (13a) can typically mean that Eliza is the owner of the car. The car belonging to her can be treated as her property. In other words, example (13a) has a similar meaning to that of the examples in (13b).

In the same manner, Japanese possessive constructions where a non-relational noun is used as the object are considered to have a possessive interpretation:

- (14) *John-ni-wa kuruma-ga a-ru.*
 John-DAT-TOP car-NOM be
 ‘John has a car.’

3.1.2. *The Holding Interpretation*

The second interpretation, called the “holding” interpretation, is obtained in the following possessive constructions in English.

- (15) Q. What can I use to hold these papers down?
 A. Eliza has a mirror.
 (cf. # Eliza {owns/possesses} a mirror.)
- (16) Eliza has a mirror, but it doesn’t belong to her.
 (cf. # Eliza {owns/possesses} a mirror, but it doesn’t belong to her.)

Example (15A) says that the subject *Eliza* can avail herself of the object *a mirror*, but cannot claim ownership to it. As pointed out by Heine (1997), this kind of reading involves a temporary possession. Similarly, the example in (16), where the second conjunct can negate the implication conveyed in the first conjunct, expresses a temporary possessive relation between Eliza and the mirror. We will henceforth call this kind of reading a “holding” interpretation.

It should be noted here that when we speak of “holding”, the first thing we can think about is typically holding a certain physical entity. But, in this paper, we will use the term “holding” in a more abstract sense so that the holding interpretation can be obtained when the object is even animate or human, as in the following example.

- (17) Ann has a sister as her secretary, but she doesn’t have a sister of her own.

In (17), the object of *have* is human. Since the second conjunct can deny the implication in the first conjunct, the first conjunct means that the subject and object

have a temporary relation determined by the context. Therefore, we can say that the example also obtains a holding interpretation.

As is clear from the examples in (15), (16) and (17), a holding interpretation can be obtained either by using a relational noun expressing inalienable possession or by using a non-relational noun expressing alienable possession.

This interpretation can also be observed in Japanese possessive constructions, as shown in (18) and (19).

- (18) *John-ni-wa ano hon-ga aru* (= (6))
 John-DAT-TOP that book-NOM be
 ‘John has that book.’

In (18), the non-relational noun *hon* (‘book’) is used as the object. The sentence does not mean that John is the owner of the book. The book may be some healing item for John. Hence, this reading also corresponds to a holding interpretation.

In (19), by contrast, the object includes the relational noun *otooto* (‘brother’).

- (19) *John-ni-wa Mary-no otooto-ga iru.*
 John-DAT-TOP Mary-GEN brother-NOM be
 ‘John has Mary’s brother.’

The sentence does not express an inherent property of the subject *John*. Thus, this example is considered to have a holding interpretation.

The same holds for the example in (20). The sentence does not mean that Mary is married. Rather, it says that the subject and object establish a contextually dependent relationship (the dance-partner relationship in this case).

- (20) Mary got a husband as a dance partner, and she is still single.

Similarly, the examples in (21), where non-relational nouns are used as the objects, get a holding interpretation, too.

- (21) Mary got {an idiot/a Bulgarian/a transvestite/a bachelor}.

These examples also express a certain context-dependent relationship between the subject and the object. They do not express Mary’s inherent property.

In the following section, we argue that we can provide a unified explanation of the distribution of the definiteness effect in terms of these newly introduced

interpretations. Every instance of contexts where the definiteness effect is observed is attributed to the possessive interpretation, while every example of contexts where the effect does not arise is attributable to the holding interpretation.

3.1.3. *The Definiteness Effect as Seen in Terms of the Newly Introduced Interpretations*

The occurrence of the definiteness effect can be well predicted if we take these two interpretations into consideration. The effect arises when a possessive interpretation is obtained, but it does not when a holding interpretation is obtained.

For example, the acceptable sentences in (22), (23A) and (24)-(27) all obtain a possessive interpretation. Notice that they all include indefinite objects.

- (22) John has a sister.
- (23) Q. What will you give to Eliza for her birthday?
A. Eliza has a mirror, so I won't give one to her.
- (24) *Taroo-ni-wa* {*takusan-no/futa-ri-no/nan-nin-ka-no*}
Taroo-DAT-TOP {many-GEN/two-CL-GEN/some-CL-GEN}
kyoodai-ga {*a-ru/i-ru*}.
brothers-NOM be
'Taroo has {many/two/some} brothers.'
- (25) *Kanojo-ni-wa* {*takusan-no/ikuraka-no*}
she-DAT-TOP {plenty of-GEN/some-GEN}
okane-ga aru
money-NOM be
'She has {plenty of/some} money.'
- (26) She got a husband who is eighty years old.
- (27) *John-ni* {*takusan-no/nan-nin-ka-no*} *koibito-ga dekita*.
John-DAT {many-GEN/some-CL-GEN} lover-NOM got
'John got {many/some} lovers.'

However, they will become unacceptable when they are embedded in certain contexts, as shown in (28), (29A) and (30)-(33).

- (28) # John has the sister of his own.
- (29) Q. What will you give to Eliza for her birthday?
A. # Eliza has the mirror, so I won't give one to her.
- (30) * *Taroo-ni-wa* {*sono/hotonndo-no/subete-no/kare-no*}
Taroo-DAT-TOP {the/most-GEN/all-GEN/he-GEN}

- kyoodai-ga* {*a-ruli-ru*}.
 brothers-NOM be
 ‘Taroo has {that/most/all/his} brother(s).’
- (31) * *Kanojo-ni-wa* {*sono/arayurulhotondo-no/subete-no/*
 she-DAT-TOP {the/every/most-GEN/all-GEN}
kanojo-no} *okane-ga aru*
 she-GEN} money-NOM be
 ‘She has {the/every/most/all/her} money.’
- (32) * Mary got the husband who is eighty years old.
- (33) ?* *John-ni* (*sono*) {*hotondo-no/ryoohoo-no/subete-no*}
 John-DAT (the) {most-GEN/both-GEN/all-GEN}
koibito-ga dekita.
 lover-NOM got
 ‘John got {most/both/all} lovers.’

Although these examples are all intended to receive a possessive interpretation, they fail to obtain it because the objects are definite. Note that in these examples, both relational and non-relational nouns are used as the objects. Thus, the definiteness effect arises when the possessive interpretation is obtained, irrespective of the type of object noun phrase.

By contrast, the several constructions given in (34), (35A) and (36)-(39) display no definiteness effect; they only receive a holding interpretation. Also, in these constructions, relational as well as non-relational nouns are used as the objects.

- (34) Anne has Bill’s sister as secretary.
- (35) Q. What can I use to hold these papers down?
 A. Eliza has {a/ the/ John’s} mirror.
- (36) *John-ni-wa* *Mary-no ootoo-ga iru*.
 John-DAT-TOP Mary-GEN brother-NOM be
 ‘John has Mary’s brother.’
- (37) *John-ni-wa* *ano hon-ga aru*.
 John-DAT-TOP that book-NOM be
 ‘John has that book.’
- (38) Mary got the husband as a dance partner, and she is still single.
- (39) Mary got {the idiot/the Bulgarian/the transvestite/the bachelor}.

On the traditional view, it is the inalienability described by the object that

causes the definiteness effect in possessive constructions. It is clear, then, that the distinction between inalienable and alienable possession expressed by the object alone is inadequate as a means of accounting for the effect.

Rather, the definiteness effect must be accounted for in terms of the interpretation of the construction in question. By introducing the possessive interpretation and the holding interpretation, we can account for the definiteness effect in possessive constructions as well as constructions with verbs of acquisition in a unified way.

3.2. *Summary*

We have argued that the definiteness effect in possessive constructions and constructions with verbs of acquisition is predicted precisely from the interpretation of the construction as a whole.² The newly introduced distinction between the possessive and the holding interpretation differs crucially from the previous distinction between alienable and inalienable possession in that the former does not depend on the meaning of the object itself. The effect in these constructions has nothing to do with the inalienability of the object. Importantly, the two interpretations proposed here enable us to account for the effect in several constructions in a unified way.

The relation between the types of interpretation to be distinguished and the distribution of the definiteness effect in these constructions can be summarized in the following table:

² The possessive interpretation and the holding interpretation proposed here correspond approximately to the “predicational” reading and the “specificational” reading respectively in copular sentences discussed by Nishiyama (2003).

According to Nishiyama, copular sentences are ambiguous between a predicational reading and a specificational reading. Depending on which interpretation is taken, there are two types of noun phrases. On a predicational reading, the subject noun phrase is referential, while on a specificational reading the subject noun phrase contains a variable.

It may then follow that the object noun phrase in possessive constructions and constructions with verbs of acquisition is assumed to contain a variable when the definiteness effect arises. By contrast, the object is referential when the effect does not occur. Typically, the noun phrases which contain a variable are relational nouns such as *sister*. For example, a person is counted as a sister only by virtue of standing in a particular relationship with another individual.

Importantly, in our proposal, the possessive interpretation has an effect of turning non-relational nouns into relational ones (cf. Barker’s (1995) type raising rule). Thus, even a non-relational noun can be assumed to contain a variable when the possessive interpretation is obtained. In this sense, the distinction between inalienable and alienable possession has nothing to do with the distribution of the definiteness effect.

However, it should be noticed here that we cannot tell whether or not the object noun phrase contains a variable unless we identify the interpretation obtained by the construction as a whole.

Interpretation of Constructions	Definiteness Effect
Possessive Interpretation	✓
Holding Interpretation	NA

Table. Distribution of the Definiteness Effect in Terms of the Interpretation of the Construction

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we argued that the previous analyses are insufficient to account for the distribution of the definiteness effect. We showed that the occurrence of the effect in possessive constructions and constructions with verbs of acquisition is not predictable from the inalienability of the object alone. Rather, we claimed that the effect essentially depends on the type of interpretation obtained by the construction as a whole. More precisely, we introduced two different interpretations, i.e. the possessive interpretation and the holding interpretation. Accordingly, the effect arises only when the possessive interpretation is obtained, while it does not when the holding interpretation is relevant.

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