

# Weak (in)definites, familiarity and reference to kinds: the view from italian

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DPs definidos fracos têm sido caracterizados como DPs que não carregam a pressuposição de unicidade usualmente associada ao determinante definido. Este artigo propõe uma análise unificada do determinante definido. Mostro que, associando à semântica do determinante definido ‘fraco’ a noção de familiaridade fraca (Roberts 2003), a unicidade pode ser garantida e também que é possível explicar a condição de prototipicalidade postulada em trabalhos recentes sobre o uso dos definidos fracos em inglês. Discutirei em particular o caso do italiano que possui, vou argumentar, uma classe de DPs definidos que análises prévias não conseguem explicar.

## Introduction

‘Weak’ definite DPs have been minimally characterized as definite DPs that lack the presupposition of uniqueness generally associated with the definite determiner. Carlson and Sussman (2005); Carlson et alii (2005) discuss the case of the definite expressions in italics in the sentences (1) - (3) and argue that these DPs are ‘weak’, with respect to ‘regular’ definite DPs, precisely in this sense.

(1) Lola is reading *the newspaper*.

(2) My husband is at *the hospital*.

(3) John was feeling sick and he called *the doctor*.

The main piece of empirical evidence provided by the authors is the availability of sloppy readings in coordinated elliptical sentences. The sentence (4-b) is a felicitous utterance in a context where (4-a) is also true: for (4-b) to be true, it is not necessary that Lola and Alice read the same newspaper, nor different tokens of the same newspaper issue. That is, the definite DP in (4-b) does not behave like a rigid designator, but allows for a plurality of referents in discourse.

(4) a. Lola is reading *The Times*, and Alice is reading *The Star*

b. Lola is reading the newspaper and Alice too.

The ‘weakness’ of definite DPs raises at least two questions, that I will try to summarize below while pointing, at the same time, to the solutions offered by the most recent previous accounts.

**(i) Uniqueness and definite DPs.** On the one hand, it questions the interpretation of the definite

determiner. Why and how does the definite determiner lose the uniqueness presupposition that, since Russell (1905), is associated to its semantic content? In fact, most analyses of the semantics of 'weak' definite DPs try to reconcile the existential interpretation of these expressions with the original Russellian definition. In this respect, uniqueness has been accounted for in two ways.

One account found in the literature, going back to Löbner (1985) but defended more recently also by Corblin (2011), maintains that the uniqueness of the referent of the definite expression is inferred through the existence of a unique situation of which it is the participant. Weak interpretations are due to the possibility of referring to unique individuals that are participants of distinct minimal situations or events.

Pursuing a different line of analysis, the presupposition of uniqueness can be maintained also if the unique referent of definite DPs is not an object-level entity, but rather a unique abstract individual. Specifically, weak DPs may refer to a unique *intensional* entity. This line of analysis, which is grounded on theories that associate weak reference to reference to kinds (Carlson 1977), has been recently advocated by Aguilar & Zwarts (2010), who analyze the definite DP in (1)-(3) as denoting the name of the kind (Krifka, 2003; Dayal, 2004). Assuming that the domain of individuals is sorted into kinds and objects, the definite determiner in (1)-(3) refers to unique individuals of the kind sort (see also sec. 3).[1](#)

**(ii) Prototypicality and semantic enrichment** The second issue raised by weak DPs concerns their restriction to NPs belonging to specific lexical classes and their interpretive constraints. Let's consider, as an example, the sentence (5-b). Contrary to *the newspaper* in (4-b), *the book* in (5-b) cannot receive a weak interpretation and, accordingly, it does not allow for a sloppy reading. (5-b) entails that Lola and Alice are reading the same book or different tokens of the same book, and the sentence cannot describe the situation depicted by (5-a), where Alice and Lola are reading different books.

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(5) a. Lola is reading *Animal Farm*, and Alice is reading *1984*.

b. Lola is reading the book and Alice too.  
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This apparently incongruous distributional constraint has been explained, both by Carlson & Sussman (2005) and Aguilar & Zwarts (2011), by imposing a 'prototypicality' condition on the event in the denotation of the VP within which the definite expressions appear. According to this condition, only 'prototypical' participants to the event denoted by the verb allow for 'weak' definite reference. Prototypicality has then been linked, *via* the stereotypical usages associated with the NP, to a third salient semantic property of definite DPs, defined as a 'semantic enrichment' of the compositional meaning of the VP (Carlson and Sussman, 2005). In most cases the VP in which weak DPs appear receives an interpretation that goes beyond its strict compositional meaning. As observed also by Aguilar and Zwarts (2011), the sentence in (1) means not only that Lola read the newspaper, but, additionally, that she read the newspaper in order to read the news. Therefore, (4-b) does not allow for a sloppy reading, and thus a 'weak' definite interpretation, if Alice and Lola are reading the newspaper for some other purpose. Thus, (7) would be infelicitous in a context where (6) is true.

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(6) Lola is reading *The Times*, and Alice is reading *The Star*

(7) ??Lola is reading the newspaper to look for job announcements, and Alice too.

Intensional accounts such as Carlson and Sussman (2005)'s and Aguilar & Zwarts (2011)'s take for granted that a discourse external, non-compositional principle supersedes the availability of 'well-established' or 'prototypical' situations to which weak expressions may refer.<sup>2</sup> Corblin (2011), on the other hand, makes the possibility of weak interpretations dependent on the information stored in the lexicon. The association of an entity to a stereotypical activity is mapped explicitly into the functional *qualia* structure of the NP (Pustejovsky, 1995). Enriched meanings are due, in both cases, to pragmatic inferences conventionally associated to the content of the compositional expression.

The description in terms of prototypicality, which is in some sense common to all previous proposals, indeed captures an important generalization. The fact that only NPs which are related to the verb as participants of prototypical events allow for weak readings suggests that their weak interpretation should rely on a specific inferential mechanism. While I do agree with this important intuition, I would like to explore the possibility of a more principled explanation for the restriction of weak DPs to prototypical situations. Namely, my aim here is to explore the possibility that the accessibility of referents is determined by the compositional meaning of the DP, that is, by the semantics of the definite determiner. I thus rejoin the proposals outlined above in assuming that the definite determiner preserves its uniqueness presupposition also in its 'weak' interpretation. Besides a presupposition of uniqueness, however, I will assume that the definite determiner conveys also a presupposition of familiarity (Roberts, 2003), and I will show that enforcing pragmatic principles on the presupposition of familiarity may suffice to explain prototypicality constraints on weak readings.

I will argue, in particular, that the relevance of semantic enrichment can be questioned. My argument will rely partly on the evidence provided by weak definite descriptions in Italian. As I will show in section 1, weak definite DPs in Italian can be grouped into (at least) two distinct subclasses on the basis of their interpretation, and, despite being in all cases subjects to prototypicality restrictions, only a subclass of weak DPs in this language conveys a semantically enriched meaning. The observation that semantic enrichment is not a mandatory property of these structures, by weakening the arguments of the analyses assumed by both Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2011) and Corblin (2011), prompts to adopt a broader notion of prototypicality, which encompasses also the cases where the interpretation is not directly guided by the information stored in the lexical entry of the NP. I will suggest, in section 2, to ground prototypicality on the notion of 'weak' familiarity (Heim 1982, Roberts 2003), and discuss in the following section the implications of my analysis for previous proposals.

## 1 Weak definite DPs in Italian and (the lack of) semantic enrichment

### 1.1 Weak readings of Italian definite DPs

It is well known that in Italian, as in most Romance languages, definite DPs can receive distinct interpretations, from object-level definite expressions (8) to kinds and names of kinds (9, 10). In the episodic sentence in (8), the definite DP *il leone* 'the lion' may be interpreted only as referring to a previously mentioned, unique individual in context.

(8) Gli spari hanno fatto fuggire il leone

*the shots made.PF escape the lion*

‘The shots have made the lion run away.’

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On the other hand, in the generic statements in (9) and (10) below, both the singular and the plural definite DP refer to the kind LION, and not to a specific individual or group of individuals (Dobrovie-Sorin and Laca, 2003; Chierchia, 1998). The definite singular refers to the name of the kind, whereas the plural DP in (10) refers to the kind as the maximal individual represented by all its actual instances (Krifka et alii, 1995).

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(9) Il leone ha una folta criniera

*the lion have.PRES a thick mane*

‘The lion has a thick mane.’

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(10) I leoni hanno una folta criniera *the lions have.PRES a thick mane* ‘Lions have a thick mane.’

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In this paper, I will discuss the case in which definite DPs receive a weak indefinite reading, which can be found more frequently with singular DPs.<sup>3</sup> A first relevant example is the singular definite DP *il giornale* ‘the newspaper’ in (11).<sup>4</sup>

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(11) In questi giorni, non ho letto *il giornale*.

*in these days NEG read.PF the newspaper*

‘These days, I did not read the newspaper.’

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DPs like *il giornale* in (11) behave in all respects as weak indefinite DPs in English. As it is the case for the English example in (1), the definite DP in (11) need not refer to a specific newspaper for the sentence to be true. The meaning conveyed by the sentence is rather that the speaker did not read any (instance of) newspapers in the latest days. The weakness of the DP can be verified if we apply the test of sloppy readings (Carlson and Sussman (2005); see also section 1). The sentence in (12-b) can be uttered felicitously in a context where (12-a) is also true, and Maria and Lara did not read the same newspaper.

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(12) a. Maria ha letto *La Repubblica* e Lara ha letto *Il Corriere*

*Maria read.PF La Repubblica and Lara read.PF Il Corriere*

‘Maria read *La Repubblica* and Lara read *Il Corriere*.’

b. Maria ha letto il giornale, e anche Lara.

*Maria read.PF the newspaper and also Lara*

‘Maria read the newspaper and Lara did too.’

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Prototypicality restrictions are relevant for this group of definite expressions as well. In its weak interpretation, the definite DP in (11) contrasts with (13), where a weak reading is not available, as attested by (13-a)-(13-b) vs. (12-a)-(12b).

(13) In questi giorni, non ho letto #la rivista.

*in these days NEG read.PF the magazine*

‘These days, I did not read #the magazine.’

a. Maria ha letto *Oggi* e Lara ha letto *Gente*

*Maria read.PF Oggi and Lara read.PF Gente*

‘Maria read *Oggi* and Lara read *Gente*.’

b. #Maria ha letto la rivista, e anche Lara.

*Maria read.PF the magazine and also Lara*

‘Maria read the magazine and Lara too.’

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Finally, as it is the case in English, the VP *leggere il giornale* ‘to read the newspaper’ in (11)-(12) may also have a non-compositional, enriched meaning, by which Maria and Lara read the newspaper in order to read the news, and it entails this enriched meaning in its weak interpretation. What is interesting for the present purpose, however, is that VPs with weak DP arguments in Italian do not need to convey enriched meanings in all cases. Some relevant examples are given in sentences (14) - (16) below.<sup>5</sup>

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(14) Esco a bere il caffè al bar.

*go out to drink the coffee at-the bar*

‘I’m going out to have a coffee at the bar.’

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(15) Pietro ha guardato i cartoni animati tutto il pomeriggio.

*Pietro watch.PF the cartoons all the afternoon*

‘Pietro watched cartoons all the afternoon.’

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(16) Invece di studiare, Maria ha passato il pomeriggio a leggere i fumetti.

*Instead of study Maria spend.PF the afternoon to read the comics*

'Instead of studying Maria spent the afternoon readings comics.'

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The definite DPs in the sentences (14)-(16) behave like weak definite DPs in most respects. The definite DP *il caffè* 'the coffee', as the English translation also suggests, receives a count interpretation and it allows for sloppy readings in coordinated elliptical sentence, cf. (17), where Maria and Lara obviously cannot have drunk the same cup of coffee.

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(17) Maria ha bevuto il caffè al bar, e anche Lara. *Maria drink.PF the coffee at-the bar, and also Lara* 'Maria drunk a coffee at the bar and Lara as well.'

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Prototypicality is also at issue, since in the sentence (18), where coffee is replaced by herbal tea, the DP is not felicitous under a weak interpretation.

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(18) ??Maria ha bevuto la tisana al bar, e anche Lara.

*Maria drink.PF the herbal tea at-the bar, and also Lara*

'Maria drank the herbal at the bar and Lara as well.'

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However, contrary to what has been observed for DPs such as *il giornale* 'the newspaper' in (11), there is no salient functional or non-compositional meaning associated with the VP. When uttering (16), the speaker expresses nothing more than his/her intention to drink a coffee at the bar. Therefore, we may conclude that if Italian definite DPs can receive a weak reading that satisfy the standard tests established for weak DPs (they do not refer to unique entities and are subject to distributional restrictions), in this language we may have found a wider group of weak DPs, comprising definite expressions that, like *il caffè*, do not display salient enriched meanings.

## 1.2 About enriched meanings and the lack thereof

At this point, I would like to be more precise about what is intended as an enriched meaning of the VP and in what sense Italian weak DPs such as the ones in (14)-(16) do not display this meaning component in their interpretation. I will rely on the analysis by which enriched meanings are described as conventional implicatures (Stvan 1992, 1993), and I will show that, for the relevant weak DPs, the standard tests used to detect implicated meaning do not easily apply.

Enriched meanings and prototypicality restrictions have first been discussed extensively in the literature about incorporation and pseudo-incorporation. Various authors noticed that bare NPs complements of verbs or prepositions usually convey a non-compositional, additional meaning across languages. For expressions like *to be in prison*, for instance, it has been suggested to describe enriched meanings as pragmatic inferences attached to the conventional meaning associated with the bare NP. In other words, if prisons are places conventionally associated with

the function of holding prisoners, the fact that John is in prison triggers the pragmatic inference that he is there as a prisoner.

In her paper, Stvan (1992) is particularly careful in determining the type of implicated meaning that bare NPs convey and she concludes that it should be described as a *conventional* rather than a *conversational* implicature (Levinson 2000). Some of her arguments can be applied also to weak DPs. First, like conventional implicatures and unlike conversational ones, the meaning attached to weak DPs cannot be negated in a subsequent sentence. An example is given below: if (19), under a weak reading of the DP, conventionally implicates (a), then a weak reading in (b) should be infelicitous, and indeed it is.

(19) Oggi Maria ha letto il giornale.

*today Maria read.PF the newspaper*

‘Today Maria read the newspaper.’

a. Maria read the news.

b. Oggi Maria ha letto #il giornale, ma non ha letto le notizie.

‘Today Maria read #the newspaper, but she did not read the news.’

Furthermore, conventional implicatures are non-detachable, in the sense that an utterance with the same conventional force cannot replace the original one without losing the implicated meaning. This property is attested by the fact that, as has been shown extensively in the previous sections, weak DPs are constrained to specific lexical NPs, and they cannot be freely substituted by synonymous words. However, it is also a meaning that depends from the denotation of the whole DP, since ‘weak’ DPs contrast with indefinite and ‘strong’ ones in this respect.

Now I will apply the tests to weak definite DPs such as those in (14)-(16) above. To start with, let’s consider now *bere il caffè* ‘drink the coffee’ in sentences like (14) and (17). I argued, in section 1.1, that no salient enriched meanings are associated with this VP. However, it may also be argued that drinking a coffee can be seen as an activity charged with some conventional meaning in a particular social background; for most Italian speakers, drinking a coffee is a daily activity often associated with breakfast or, more generally, with the intent of getting awake when sleepy.<sup>6</sup> Is this inference strong enough, however, to be a pragmatic inference conventionally associated with the meaning of the VP? Testing the inference shows that this is not the case. Even if we suppose that the sentence in (20) implicates (a), the weak reading of the DP is not affected in (b), where (a) is negated.

(20) Esco a bere il caffè al bar.

*go out to drink the coffee at-the bar*

‘I’m going out to have a coffee at the bar.’

a. I am sleepy and I need to get awake

b. Esco a bere il caffè al bar, ma non perché ho bisogno di svegliarmi

'I'm going to have a coffee at the bar, but not because I want to wake up.'

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Therefore, even if one may argue that drinking a coffee and watching cartoons (15) also implicate an additional meaning (coffee is drunk as breakfast or to wake up, cartoons are watched for leisure etc.), this enriched meaning can be characterized, at best, only as a *conversational* implicature.

On a descriptive ground we may thus attempt at dividing weak definites in Italian into two groups. Group1 is made of NPs which can be arguments of VPs that have a non-strictly compositional, enriched meaning. NPs of this group most frequently denote media (newspaper, radio), institutions (*school, hospital, university*), professions (*doctor, lawyer, plumber*) or places (*beach, university*) that are conventionally related to a social routine which associates the place to an activity (Vandeloise, 1987). Indeed, these NPs have in common the property, captured by the analysis of Corblin (2011), of including in their lexical entry an additional meaning, or *qualia*, which specifies a salient functional use or teleologic component. Thus, *reading the newspaper* is understood as *reading the news* in virtue of the fact that a newspaper is defined, conventionally, *qua* the daily vehicle of news. However, weak readings in Italian are also attested for NPs that denote a more heterogeneous set of entities. These Group2 NPs may also be associated to standard functions, but their functional component is less salient. For instance, magazines and comics are primarily designed to be read, and probably their function is to inform or entertain the reader, but these functional *qualia* are not salient enough to surface as conventional meanings associated to them. Accordingly, these NPs, when interpreted as weak definites, do not contribute enriched meanings to the VP. But then, where do their restrictions come from? And how is the referent of the NP made accessible to the hearer in this case?

## 2 Familiarity constraints on weak readings

I have shown in section 1 that not all Italian weak definite DPs display the whole set of defining properties outlined in the introduction. In the remainder of the paper, I will suggest that the common property of Italian weak definite DPs can still be defined in terms of prototypicality, once the definition of this latter notion is made suitable to cover also the case of Group2 weak DPs.

I will endorse the notion of prototypicality of situations and events as defined in the literature on incorporation: prototypical situations are situations sufficiently established as recurrent and habitual routines to be considered part of the conventional knowledge shared by speaker and hearer (Mithun, 1984).<sup>7</sup> I will show that, in this specific sense, prototypicality can be associated to the notion of *familiarity*. Prototypical situations are also *familiar* situations in the common ground, that is, in the shared knowledge of speaker and hearer. More precisely, prototypical situations are entailed by the common ground which is established by the information conventionally shared by the participants to the conversation.

Familiarity, defined as a presupposition triggered by definite descriptions, has been first introduced in the work by Heim (1982) and it has been tied, also in more recent works (Corblin, 1987; Roberts, 2003), to the semantics of nominal expressions. My purpose here is to suggest that the presupposition of familiarity triggered by a definite description can be transferred, if conditions are met, up to the denotational domain of the VP of which the definite DPs are arguments. To this effect, I will assume that the relevant notion of familiarity is a 'weakened' familiarity condition (Roberts, 2003), and that the interpretation of weak DPs is driven by the two principles in (21).

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(21)



(i) Weak definite determiners share the semantics of 'strong' definite determiners: they convey a presupposition of uniqueness and of existence of their referent (Russell, 1905; Strawson, 1950), together with a strong presumption of familiarity (Corblin, 1987).

(ii) The presupposition of uniqueness cannot be satisfied without satisfying familiarity (Roberts, 2003)

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In the remainder of this section, I will discuss the relevance of each of the two assumptions outlined above.

## 2.1 From weakly familiar to prototypical situations

According to the definition by Roberts (2003), definite DPs convey a presupposition of familiarity and of uniqueness in a conversational context. Given a conversational context C, a definite DP presupposes that it has as antecedent a discourse referent x which is:

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(22) a. Weakly familiar in C (i.e. entailed by C)

b. Unique among discourse referents in C to satisfy the descriptive content of the NP.

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The condition of weak familiarity formulated in (22) is sufficient to explain the felicity of the definite DP *il giornale* 'the newspaper' in (23).

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(23) Oggi mi sono fermato all'edicola. Ma poi tornando ho dimenticato il giornale su una panchina al parco

*today CL stop.PF at-the newsstand but then come. back.GER forget.PF the newspaper on a bench at-the park*

'Today I stopped at the newsstand; but then, on my way back, I forgot the newspaper on a bench at the park'.

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In (23), the existence of the referent for the definite expression *il giornale* 'the newspaper', which has not been directly introduced in the discourse, is entailed by the context created by the first sentence. The newspaper refers to the sample of newspaper that I am supposed to have bought at the newsstand, that is, a weakly familiar entity entailed by the common ground C after the utterance of the first sentence.

On the other hand, when the presupposition of familiarity cannot be satisfied by entailment in C, the use of a definite DP is predicted to be infelicitous. Indeed, if (24) is uttered out of the blue, the use of the definite expression is not felicitous anymore. The hearer cannot recover a referent for the definite expression from the conversational context, since churches are not places where newspapers can be usually found or acquired.

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(24) Oggi mi sono fermato in chiesa. Ma poi tornando ho dimenticato #il giornale su una panchina al parco.

*today CL stop.PF in church but then come-back.GER forget.PF the newspaper on a bench at-the park.*

'Today I stopped at the church. But then, on my way back, I forgot #the newspaper on a bench at the park.'

However, the DP in (24) can still guarantee a felicitous use of the definite determiner if both speaker and hearer share the information that the speaker has the habit of going out in order to buy a newspaper every day. How would this conversational, non-conventional implicature be justified?

Familiarity, which, according to (22), is always relative to a conversational background, can also be seen as a more general conversational principle. This is one of the implications of the definition proposed by Corblin (1987) for the *présomption de familiarité*, by which «*en utilisant un défini, le locuteur indique que la description fournie par le GN est suffisante pour permettre à son interlocuteur d'identifier l'individu particulier dont il a l'intention de parler*». [8](#)

The hypothesis that I want to develop here is that the conventional meaning attached to the definite expression in (21), which is due to the semantics of the definite determiner, triggers the conversational principle evidenced by Corblin (1987). These two pieces of information are precisely what guide the interpretation of weak definite DPs and restrict them to VPs that denote prototypical situations.

Let's see how this works in a stepwise fashion. Suppose that hearer and speaker also share the conversational principle triggered by the presumption of familiarity of the definite determiner, by which the hearer expects that the definite expression is used efficiently and the information given is sufficient in order to identify a referent for it. After extending the common ground to a conversational context C, in cases where there is no referent for the DP in C the hearer makes a further move and opens up the common ground also to the set of habitual activities, to which he has access, where the existence of a unique, definite DP can be entailed.

We may now take a step further, and suppose that familiarity is not necessarily restricted to the shared knowledge of individual habits or routines. It may be entailed by a more conventionalized knowledge. Let's consider now the sentence in (25). Contrary to the definite DP in (23) and (24), the definite DP *the newspaper* in (25) is easily interpreted as a weak definite DP independently of a specific conversational background.

(25) Oggi mi sono fermato al parco e ho letto il giornale seduto su una panchina

*today CL stop.PF at-the park and read.PF the newspaper sit on a bench*

'Today I stopped at the park and I read the newspaper sitting on a bench.'

Why is it so? An explanation in terms of familiarity presupposition would say that, since the possibility of attributing to the newspaper a referent directly or indirectly introduced in the discourse is not given, the definite DP in (25) is understood as the participant of a conventionally

familiar situation. To read the newspaper is indeed a familiar, quite standard situation in the shared knowledge of English and Italian speakers. The fact that it is the familiarity of situations which is relevant can be appreciated also if we put the situation in context. The acceptability of the definite DP is degraded in (26): while a park is one of the standard frames for prototypical situations of reading the newspaper, a church is arguably less so.

(26) Oggi mi sono fermato in chiesa e ho letto #il giornale seduto su un banco

*today CL stop.PF in church and read.PF the newspaper sit on a bench* 'Today I stopped at the church and I read the newspaper sitting on a bench.'

The definition in (22) may thus be revised as in (27).

(27) If the condition of familiarity in C fails, then widen the common ground to C', which is a proper superset of C comprising also familiar situations, and find a referent x to NP which is:

- a. Weakly familiar in C' (i.e. entailed by C')
- b. Unique among discourse referents in C' to satisfy the descriptive content of the NP.

The instruction in (27) maintains that the definite determiner has both a familiarity and a uniqueness presupposition. Moreover, it takes the pragmatic reasoning triggered by the presumption of familiarity as a last resort strategy, which entails the widening of the context C only when possible referents are not accessible among the set of referents entailed by C.

It is easy to show that this definition is sufficient to account for all the occurrences of weak DPs discussed up to now, which share the minimal common property of denoting the participants of familiar situations in a shared background of habits, dispositions and conventions. Let me point out another welcome consequence. While the extension of the background is enough in order to cover the prototypicality restrictions observed for both Group1 and Group2 weak definite DPs, the semantic enrichment proper to Group1 DPs can still be treated as part of the lexical meaning of the NPs of this group. This analysis in terms of familiarity, in other words, turns out to be compatible with the explanation of enriched meanings in terms of functional *qualia* proposed by Corblin (2011). I will not follow Corblin, however, when functional *qualia* become the triggers of the inference that allows recovering the referent of the DP. In my mind, it is the presumption of familiarity associated to the definite article that is responsible for this. The advantage of the proposal outlined here is precisely that the extension of the background, which ensures the interpretations of weak DPs in familiar situations, is prompted by the semantics associated with the definite article, which is the other common feature of these nominal expressions.

### 3 Uniqueness and sloppy readings

It is worth noticing, at this point, that Roberts (2003) herself suggested that the shared conversational background C which satisfies weak familiarity presuppositions should include knowledge of habitual or recurrent activities. The point is made with respect to the sentence (28) (from Birner and Ward (1994)).

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(28) Johnny, go stand in the corner.

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In (28), as argued by Roberts, the felicity of the definite expression is obviously not due to the presence of a unique corner in the room, but rather to the existence of a unique corner *where kids usually stand when they are bad*. In other words, there is just one relevant entity in the context that is the referent of the DP, and its identity can be recovered by shared knowledge about habitual situations.

I will take this example as a start to make two observations, which have both to do with the uniqueness presupposition associated with the definite expression.

The first point concerns the relevance of familiarity in satisfying the presupposition of existence. The account for the interpretation of the definite expression in (28) makes use of an enriched meaning attached to it. This enriched meaning is not derived from a functional use conventionally associated to corners, but rather from the existence of familiar situations of standing in a corner, where standing in a corner is associated with a punishment. Why is this reading so salient, however? Why cannot (28) just mean that Johnny has to stand in the corner where he is going to stand, or (29) mean that John stood in the corner where he actually stood?

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(29) Johnny stood in the corner [in which he stood].

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In other words, we may object that, given that there is only one relevant corner involved in the event, bridging from situations should in principle be possible. Yet, this is clearly not the case, and it should not be the case indeed, since it would predict that definite DPs would be allowed in almost all contexts. An answer to this objection, and to its undesirable consequences, is given by the second principle assumed under (21) in section 2, which subordinates the presupposition of uniqueness to contextual entailment. This condition ensures that bridging from events and situations is not a freely available mechanism, but that it is restrained to *contextually accessible* events and situations, where contextually accessible events and situations are those that are entailed by the shared knowledge of speaker and hearer about recurrent, habitual or prototypical situations. [9](#)

The second point about (28) has to do with uniqueness and sloppy readings. So far, the account given by Roberts says that there is a unique corner which is concerned with kid's punishment in C. Under this interpretation, sloppy readings would not be possible, contrary to fact: (30) would be true only in a situation where both John and Mary stood in the same corner (a), but in fact the sentence is a felicitous utterance also in the context provided by (b), where Mary and John actually stood in two different corners.

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(30) John stood in the corner the whole morning, and Mary as well.

a. Mary and John stood in the corner where kids usually stand when they are bad

b. Mary was sent to the corner by her teacher for the whole morning, and John was sent to the corner by his mom for the whole morning.

The problem, at this point, is to combine the presupposition of uniqueness with the emergence of sloppy readings.

In the following, I will discuss the hypothesis that sloppy readings are in fact due to the existence of a plurality of situations involving unique participants, and that, once familiarity is satisfied, bridging from events may still be part of the interpretational mechanism. The essence of this proposal is known to the literature at least since the work of Löbner (1985), but it has been explicitly criticized by Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2011) and Schwarz (2012), whose arguments rely on the data of sloppy readings or on the ‘co-varying’ reading of definite expressions, respectively. In the following, I will try to make a contribution to the debate by considering anaphora resolution.

### **3.1 Anaphora and the incorporation hypothesis**

As recalled in the introductory section, in their recent analysis of English weak DPs Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2011) assume that weak definite DPs refer to names of kinds, and propose that the definite expression undergoes a process of semantic incorporation into the VP. In order to obtain a compositional meaning, the authors implement their analysis with some additional assumptions, the most salient being that, since the kind cannot be instantiated existentially in episodic sentences, the DP is introduced as argument of a realization relation *R* (McNally and Espinal, 2011), which prevents existential binding for the argument variable of the event. I will not take up again here the empirical and theoretical problems that arise from the treatment of enriched meanings in the authors’ proposal, but I will point out some problems following, more generally, from the hypothesis of semantic incorporation.

The first theoretical problem is evidenced by considering the resolution of anaphora in sentences (31) and (32).

(31) (i) Alice did a solo on the saxophone.

(ii) ?She did not realize that it was out of tune.

The first sentence in (31) is an episodic sentence where the DP may receive a weak or a strong interpretation. If the DP is interpreted as referring to an object-level entity, in its ‘strong’ reading, an anaphoric relation can be easily established with the pronoun in the second sentence. Under the weak reading of the DP, however, an anaphoric relation should be ruled out, since the relation *R* prevents individual instances of the kind to be directly accessible as discourse referents. The low acceptability of (31ii), reported by Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2011), thus shows that, when the sentence is uttered out-of-the-blue, the weak interpretation of the DP is indeed the default one.

However, if, as in (32), possible antecedents are provided even indirectly in the context, the strong reading of the DP is clearly preferred, and the anaphoric relation is straightforward.

(32) (Every kid picked an instrument to play at the recital.)

(i) Alice did a solo on the saxophone<sub>i</sub>.

(ii) She did not realize that it was out of tune.

.

It appears then that kind readings are only a default, and reference to an individual is preferred whenever an antecedent is available in the context. As observed also by Beyssade (2012), a principled explanation accounting for this empirical fact would be a welcome consequence of any theory of weak reference.

Upon a close scrutiny, we may see that the interpretation of *the saxophone* in (32) relies on the same familiarity principle that justifies the interpretation of the weak DP *the newspaper* in the example (23) in section 2, in which, as I argued, the weak reading of the DP should be accounted for by appealing to the presupposition of familiarity conveyed by the definite determiner. It appears then that an account in terms of familiarity presupposition can indeed offer a principled explanation. If the widening of the conversational context is a move prompted by the non-availability of directly accessible discourse referents, this predicts that the referential interpretation of the DP is preferred when an antecedent is accessible in the linguistic or conversational context, and habitual or conventional situations are evoked only when the existence of a unique referent is more difficult to accommodate.

### 3.2 Anaphora and existential instantiations

A second problematic issue is that the infelicity of weak DPs as antecedents of anaphors is not uncontroversial. The Italian episodic sentence (33) is, for most speakers, a perfectly acceptable utterance, whereas the contrast with (34), where the antecedent is found in a generic statement, is quite sharp.

.

(33) Maria ha bevuto il caffè al bar, ma non lei ha pagato. *Maria drink.PF the coffee at-the bar but NEG CL pay.PF* 'Maria drank the coffee at the bar, but she didn't pay it.'

.

(34) Maria beve il caffè, ma oggi non #lei ha pagato. *Maria drink.PRES the coffee but today NEG CL pay.PF* '#Maria drinks coffee, but today she didn't pay it.'

.

The problem of anaphoric binding has been brought up also in the analysis by Corblin (2011), which he develops focusing on French definite DPs in PPs, cf. (35).

.

(35) Marie est à l'hôpital/#à la librairie. *Marie is.PRES at the hospital/ at the bookshop* 'Marie is at the hospital/ #at the bookshop.'

.

If we apply the tests outlined in section 1, we can see that the definite DP in (35) displays the defining properties assumed for weak DPs. It allows for multiple referents in elliptical sentences (36), and the weak reading is available only for a restricted class of NPs, as seen in the contrast in (35). Moreover, they also display enriched meanings: (35) naturally entails that Marie is at the hospital in order to be healed.

.  
(36) Pierre est à l'hôpital, et Marie aussi

*Pierre is at the hospital and Mary also*

'Pierre is at the hospital, and Mary as well.'

.

Corblin (2011) argues explicitly against an intensional analysis for the DPs in the previous examples, and defines these weak definites as 'para-intensional' definites. He supports his claim with two main arguments, which are construed upon the evidence provided by anaphora resolution. First, he argues that the DP *l'hôpital* in (35) can easily be the antecedent of an anaphoric pronoun, cf. (37). As it is the case for the Italian weak definite in (33), the accessibility of the antecedent in an episodic sentence is definitely easier, according to the author, than that of a DP which is embedded in a generic or characterizing sentence.

.

(37) Marie est à l'hôpital. Comme il n'est pas loin, je vais la voir souvent.

*Marie is.PRES at the hospital since it is not far I go CL see often*

'Marie is at the hospital. Since it is not too far, I go to see her often.'

.

Another clue for the existence of object-level entities is the possibility of questioning the identity of the referent of the DP. As reported by the author, asking which the hospital where Marie is hospitalized is can be a felicitous follow-up to (35).

Examples of this kind suggest that episodic sentences may involve existential instantiation, be it either at the level of the individuals in the denotation of the DP or at the level of the whole VP, as suggested recently by Schwarz (2012). The solution outlined in Schwarz (2012) involves incorporation of the referent of the DP into the verb phrase, but crucially makes its existence guaranteed through the instantiation of the *situations* of which it is a participant. Without going into the details of Schwarz (2012)'s analysis, let me point out an empirical fact that may support it. In French is possible to co-index the antecedent in (37) not only with the masculine pronoun *il*, which agrees in gender with the NP *hôpital*, but also with the non-agreeing neutral pronoun *ce*, which may refer to a situation, cf. (38).[10](#)

.

(38) Marie est à l'hôpital. Comme ce n'est pas loin, je vais la voir souvent.

*Marie is.PRES at the hospital since it.NEUT is not far I go CL see often*

'Marie is at the hospital. Since it is not too far, I go to see her often.'

This analysis predicts that the referents of weak definite DPs are not directly accessible for anaphoric pronouns, but they are still unique as participants to the events in the situation denoted by the VP. The uniqueness presupposition is guaranteed as part of the semantics of the definite article also in this 'weakened' interpretation, in line with the definition (27).

## Conclusions and further issues

In this paper, I defended a unified analysis of weak and strong definite expressions, based on the claim that the definite article bears in both cases a presupposition of familiarity and of uniqueness. I have shown that familiarity, as a more general conversational principle, helps also to understand the choice of the interpretation of weak and strong DPs in context, and that uniqueness, if properly defined, can resist also to the empirical challenge of sloppy readings. In a more general perspective, my aim is not to defend a specific denotational domain for weak DPs. My contribution in this paper is rather to suggest that the unified analysis of the definite determiner in its strong and weak reading, which has been the concern of much of the previous literature, may be pushed further, by considering all of the semantic content associated to this functional item in its stronger interpretation.

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