

# Nonfamiliarity and indefinite descriptions<sup>1</sup>

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In “Referring expressions and conversational implicature”, Andrew Kehler and Gregory Ward (2006; henceforth KW) introduce NONFAMILIARITY IMPLICATURES, cases in which **“a speaker’s failure to use a referring expression that indicates hearer-familiarity conversationally implicates that the referent is in fact nonfamiliar to the hearer”** (KW 177). KW’s implicature might be thought to replace or subsume the scalar implicature of NONUNIQUENESS postulated by Hawkins (1991).<sup>2</sup> The main purpose of this paper is to argue that this is not the case.

We note first that KW’s implicature needs modification, in view of several kinds of counterexamples. First, there are “arch” uses, as in (1).

- (1) **Someone** got up on the wrong side of the bed!

Second are SUMMARY USES (cf. Lewis 2010).

- (2) a. ...he saw **a team** start out hot (7-0) and then he saw **a team** relax,... [Danny Ainge describing the Celtics, in the Boston Globe on line edition, 11/17/05]  
b. I went to see Star Trek on Sunday. That’s pretty much all I did all weekend: I saw **a movie**. [= Lewis 2010: ex. 7]

Third are cases of FRAME SHIFT (from Passonneau 1994, (1)-(6)).

- (3) My neighbor Mary needed some of my garden tools. I left **the hoe** out on the lawn for her to borrow. Before she had a chance to get it, my husband came home. He saw **a hoe** out on our lawn. He put it in the garage. Unfortunately it was the hoe I’d left out, so Mary was out of luck.

Finally, there are cases when the identity of an entity alluded to is simply not relevant; any of (4) could be used without an implicature of nonfamiliarity.

- (4) a. I spoke with **several members of the board** yesterday.  
b. I’ve seen **three movies** in the past week!  
c. I’m sorry I’m late – **a grad student** came to see me at the last minute.

It seems that the KW implicature needs a qualification, e.g “the implicature is present because the speaker has failed to be specific **in a way in which he might have been expected to be specific**” (Grice 1975: 38, boldface added).

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<sup>1</sup> The complete paper is available at <https://www.msu.edu/~abbottb/vita.htm>. We would like to thank David Beaver, Andy Kehler, Karen Lewis, Rebecca Passonneau, Craige Roberts, Carol Slater, and Ken Taylor, for helpful comments. We dedicate this paper to the fond memory of Ellen Prince.

<sup>2</sup> KW also discuss the relation between their implicature and those of Gundel, et al. (1993). We will not be concerned here with that portion of their paper.

Turning to the main point, we consider what consequences the KW implicature might have for Hawkins' (1991) scalar implicature of nonuniqueness. The latter arises from the "Horn scale" <*the, a*>; *the* and *a* are in paradigmatic opposition with *the* resulting in stronger propositions.<sup>3</sup> Thus use of *a* conveys that the descriptive content of the NP is not satisfied uniquely (in context), as illustrated below.

- (5) a. Over the nineteenth century, Britain became **a, if not the**, world power.
- b. Decision making is **a, but not the**, fundamental construct in design.
- c. [P]arenting is **not only a, but the** supreme religious act.

KW seem at times to be claiming that their nonfamiliarity implicature supplants Hawkins' implicature. Their abstract states that the Hawkins analysis makes "predictions that are not borne out. **Instead**, the observed pattern reflects the existence of NONFAMILIARITY IMPLICATURES..." (KW: 177; small caps in original, boldface added). Later they say that Hawkins predicts implicatures for "only a subset" of the cases analyzed by KW (191). On the other hand, and somewhat inconsistently, they do acknowledge the correctness of the Hawkins' analysis for the examples in (5), which are **not** predicted by KW.

KW's case against Hawkins is based on three cases. The first of these is given in (6a) (KW's (2) & (4); Hawkins' (12)). The second occurrence of *a student* does convey novelty here, as seen from the contrast between *a* and *the* in this frame, as seen in (6b).

- (6) a. I met *a student* before class. *A student* came to see me after class as well – in fact it was the same student I had seen before.
- b. I met *a student* before class. *The student* came to see me after class as well.

In Hawkins' view, *the* is required in (6b) because the student in question is unique in the given context. In this case, uniqueness in context is tantamount to familiarity, so the choice of *a* which conveys nonuniqueness also conveys nonfamiliarity. Second, KW cite an example where familiarity varies, but not uniqueness.

- (7) A: Has John read any good books lately?
- B: Yes, **the book that John is currently reading** – in fact **the one I showed you yesterday when we were at the bookstore** – is reportedly a real page-turner.

Since this is a contrast in descriptive content and not determiner choice, it does not really present a problem for a scalar implicature involving *the* and *a*.

A more serious problem appears to be presented by the third example, where KW say uniqueness varies, but not familiarity.

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<sup>3</sup> Hawkins and others speak in terms of unilateral entailment but there are difficulties with this aspect of his theory. These are dealt with at length in Horn & Abbott (to appear). We note as well some issues that have arisen following Heim's (1991) suggestion of a principle "Maximize Presupposition", said to be not reducible to the theory of scalar implicatures. (Cf., e.g., Magri 2009, Singh 2009, and the works cited there.) We hope to discuss these issues in future work.

- (8) I met a student before class. #A student came to see me after class as well – in fact it was **the student I met with three days ago**. [= KW ex. 17, boldface added.]

KW point out that this example is anomalous under the assumption that the addressee doesn't know about the student that the speaker met with three days ago. In that case, according to KW, we have an attempted cancellation of nonuniqueness, but not nonfamiliarity.

We have several comments to make in reply. First, it is not clear that we even have cancellation of an implicature in these examples. They are of the form *A, in fact B*, but this construction may also be used simply to add more information, as in (9).

- (9) I gave them a number of arguments – five, in fact.

*A number of arguments* does not implicate that the actual number is not five. Second, we note acceptable examples where an indefinite is supplemented with a definite description which **does** convey unique identifiability and does **not** convey addressee familiarity, as in (10).

- (10) I met a student before class. A student came to see me after class as well...  
a. – in fact it was **the student I had least expected**.  
b. – in fact it was **the boyfriend of the first student**.

So it is clear that **in general** there is no problem with varying uniqueness but not familiarity. Third, we think that the oddness of (8) is traceable to the definite description itself, regardless of the purported function of canceling implicatures. So (11) is similarly odd (again assuming addressee nonfamiliarity with the student).

- (11) # **The student I met with three days ago** came to see me after class.

The anomaly of (8) is not the result of a failure to cancel an implicature of nonfamiliarity, but rather the **stipulated** failure of the context to satisfy an implicature of familiarity of the definite description.

We hope to have shown that Hawkins' implicature of nonuniqueness is not replaced by the KW implicature, which was our main goal. There remains the issue of explaining why a definite description like *the student I met with three days ago* conveys an assumption of addressee familiarity. Hawkins noted that an example like (12) (his (16)) conveys nothing about number.

- (12) A movie that Mary was watching last night was really interesting.

Hawkins describes this case as one in which an indefinite is “neutral” with respect to uniqueness: the movie alluded to in (12) could easily have been the only one Mary watched last night, or not. (Cf. Hawkins 1991: 422.) Notice that if we replace the indefinite with a definite description, we have an implicature of familiarity:

- (13) The movie that Mary was watching last night was really interesting.

We suggest that the occurrences of definite descriptions that implicate addressee familiarity are those which could have been replaced with the corresponding indefinite description with no implication that there is more than one such entity – that is, where the corresponding indefinite description is UNIQUENESS-NEUTRAL. In such a context, to flag an entity as uniquely identifiable instructs the addressee to search for a relevant shared domain within which this entity is unique. Note that if we construct a context in which uniqueness is important, the definite description in (8) and (11) no longer conveys addressee familiarity. We need not assume from the utterance of (14a) that the addressee has prior acquaintance with the student in question, but only that they can determine in some way (say from the speaker’s appointment book) who that individual is.

- (14) a. Please get me more information about **the** student I met with three days ago.  
b. Please get me more information about **a** student I met with three days ago.

Indeed, the indefinite version in (14b) is only felicitous if it does not matter to the speaker which of several possible students the information is about (= *Please get me some information about a student—ANY student—I met with*). If this line of explanation is correct, it reinforces the account of the *the/a* alternation put forward by Hawkins.

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