Definiteness and uniqueness in languages with and without articles

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According to a predominant theory (Frege 1982, Strawson 1950, Elbourne 2013), a definite article presupposes that there is a single/maximal entity (in some reference situation s) with the property denoted by its NP-complement. If this uniqueness/maximality presupposition is satisfied, then the definite description denotes that entity. While there has been some (often processing-oriented) experimental investigation of uniqueness and maximality in relation to definite description in languages with articles (Bosch et al. 2011, Schwarz 2013, Ahern & Stevens 2014, Križ & Chemla 2015, a.o.), we are aware of no such work dealing with articleless languages. We adopt the common background assumption that bare NPs in articleless languages - the focus of the present talk - do sometimes (if not always) convey uniqueness/maximality (i.e., are definite).

In this talk, I will present two empirical investigations into the nature of definiteness in languages with and without articles. The first study (joint work with Christoph Demian) compares German (a language with articles) with Russian (a language without articles). Using the so-called Covered Box paradigm (e.g. Romoli, Sudo, and Snedeker 2011), considered suitable for testing not-at-issue meaning like presuppositions and implicatures, we aim to provide answers to the following research questions:

(1) Does the definite article in German convey uniqueness/maximality?
(2) Is there an asymmetry between singular and plural bare NPs in Russian when it comes to the expression of uniqueness/maximality, as predicted by Dayal (2004), who considers bare singulars definite (conveying uniqueness), but bare plurals not necessarily (allowing for existential quantification over kind instances)?
(3) Is bare NP definiteness in Russian dependent on the clausal position of the NP (as claimed/predicted by many; e.g. Chvany 1973, King 1995, Geist 2010)? More particularly, is it the case that clause-final bare NPs are underspecified for definiteness, but clause-initial bare NPs can only be definite?
(4) If clause-initiality gives rise to definiteness, is this effect due to topicality (e.g. Geist 2010)? We test this by manipulating the prosodic prominence of the clause-initial NP, giving rise to a condition that could be considered thetic (and hence topic-free; Sasse 1987).

The results give an affirmative answer to (1) (although - somewhat unexpectedly - the effect of uniqueness/maximality is less pronounced than the effect of other not-at-issue meanings, including conversational implicatures), but not to (2)-(4) (confirming previous pilot data on Czech). I will show how the results can be made compatible with a version of the classical Heimian approach to the semantics of nominal phrases (Heim 1982), combined with Heim’s more recent conjecture that bare NPs in languages without articles are always indefinite (Heim 2011).

Time allowing, I will compare the results of the experimental study with the results of a corpus study on Czech (joint work with Markéta Burianová), where we found an effect of clausal position on bare NP definiteness. More particularly, we found that clause-initial bare NPs are highly unlikely to be indefinite, in line with the predictions of Geist (2010). It is also of interest that the study proved no effect of pre/post-verbality on bare NP definiteness (contra work in the spirit of Diesing 1992), as well as no effect of syntactic function (subject vs. object). Finally, I will speculate on why the two different studies/methods gave rise to so different results.