Dislocating NPs to the right: anything goes? Evidence from generic indefinites

In our talk we are concerned with the German NP right dislocation (RD). This is a construction with an NP at the right end of the clause and a coreferent pronoun inside the clause that is used to mark the current topic referent (Averintseva-Klisch 2007), cf. (1):

(1) Sie geht jeden Tag joggen, die Anna / meine Schwester
    she goes every day jogging [the Anna]/[my sister]

In his seminal work on dislocation constructions, Altmann (1981) suggests that only definite particular NPs like in (1) are possible with RD. He supports this claim with ill-formed examples like (2):

(2) *Er ging vorbei, ein Student.¹
    he went along [a student]

However, particularity does not seem to be required, as also definite generic NPs do occur in an RD, cf. (3a). Genericity even seems to override the requirement of definiteness in the case of bare plurals, cf. (3b), but not in the case of indefinite singular NPs, cf. (3c):

(3) Moderne Frauen sind sehr gesundheitsbewusst. Sie essen kein Fett und nichts Süßes.
   Modern women are very conscious of their health. They eat nothing fat nor sweet.
   a. Sie geht jeden Tag joggen, die moderne Frau.
      she goes every day jogging [the modern woman]
   b. Sie gehen jeden Tag joggen, moderne Frauen.
      they go every day jogging [modern women]
   c. *Sie geht jeden Tag joggen, eine moderne Frau.
      she goes every day jogging [a modern woman]

We will explain the contrast between (3b) and (3c) exploiting the difference between quantificational genericity and generic reference to specific kinds. It will be shown that only specifically referring non-quantified RD-NPs are possible.

Following Krifka et al. (1995) we differentiate between kind-referring NPs and characterising sentences as two types of genericity in natural language. The sentences containing kind-referring NPs can be analysed as direct predication over a kind. In the case of characterising sentences, the generic interpretation arises due to a generic dyadic operator (GEN), hence involving some form of quantification over entities. While bare plurals and definite NPs are principally possible in both kind-referring and characterizing contexts, indefinite singular NPs are excluded as direct kind referring terms, e.g. (4) (see Krifka 1995 for details):

(4) a. Die Dronte ist ausgestorben / Dronten sind ausgestorben.
    the dodo is extinct / dodos are extinct
      a dodo is extinct

This might lead to a natural explanation of the contrast illustrated in (3b) vs. (3c) above. (3a) and (3b) are grammatical because the dislocated phrases as such can have generic force, being

¹ Note that we do not consider superficially similar Afterthoughts, that clarify or correct an insufficient pronominal reference. In contrast to RD, they are prosodically independent. Afterthought seems to be formally unrestricted, allowing all kinds of NPs, cf. (a):

(a) Er ging vorbei, ich meine der / ein Student. ([: pause; CAPITALS: main accent)
    he went along I mean the / a student
potentially kind-referring. (3c) is ruled out since the dislocated indefinite singular NP in itself lacks generic potential. Hence we claim that in general the indefinite dislocated phrase has to be generically interpretable as such, i.e. it has to be a kind-referring term.

Note that indefinite singular NPs are possible in generic sentences without RD, cf. (5):

(5) Eine moderne Frau geht jeden Tag joggen.
    a modern woman goes every day jogging

Recalling that the generic reading in this case arises due to the generic quantifier GEN, we hypothesize that in general quantifying in dislocated NPs is ruled out. This suits well data like (6), where NPs with explicit quantifiers are also ill-formed:

(6) Sie gehen jeden Tag joggen, alle / manche / viele Frauen.
    they, go every day jogging [all / some / many women],

It can be shown that whilst clause-internal NPs are able to restrict the domain for quantifiers, RD-NPs loose this ability: semantically, RD-NPs are not open formulas, but specific individual entities (particular objects or kinds). Since RD is an explicit topicality-marking device, we will investigate whether this affinity of RD to specific individual entities can be traced back to topicality (cf. the analysis of bare plurals vs. singular indefinites in Cohen 2001).

Summing up: it is not primarily the formal distinction between definite and indefinite NPs that is relevant for the possibility of having an NP dislocated. In fact, semantic properties of the NP are crucial. In case of particular reference, NPs have to be definite. In case of generic reference, NPs have to be kind-referring terms. Both have in common a notion of specificity, particular NPs referring to a specific individual, and generic NPs referring to a specific kind as a whole. The fact that RD-NPs cannot act as restrictors corresponds to the more general requirement of specificity.

References:


