The third person is present: An argument from determiners in generic statements*

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1. Introduction

The representation of 3rd person is a matter of vibrant debate in the literature. While it is generally considered to be the absence of any person specification (Kayne 2000, Adger and Harbour 2007, Béjar and Řezáč 2003, Benveniste 1956, Harley and Ritter 2002, Kratzer 2009), recent proposals provide both syntactic and semantic evidence for the need to represent the third person in the system of ϕ-features (Nevins 2007, 2011, Harbour 2016, Ackema and Neeleman 2018, Grishin 2023). Here, we present an argument in favor of this view based on a recently noted effect of an alternation between the presence/absence of a definite determiner in generic statements (Acton 2019, Driemel et al. 2022, 2024). In a nutshell, we argue that the presence of the determiner reflects the presence of a 3rd person feature while its absence indicates the absence of any person specification.

2. Generic expressions in Romance and Germanic languages

Romance languages (Chierchia 1998) and Greek (Alexiadou et al. 2007, Lazaridou-Chatzi goga and Alexiadou 2019) express kinds and generics with a definite determiner (1).

(1) *Definite plural with generics in Romance and Greek*

a. *(Las) linguistas aman los idiomas.
the linguists love.3PL the languages
'Linguists love languages.' *Spanish*

b. *(Oi) glossológoi agapáne tis glósses.
the linguists love.3PL the languages
'Linguists love languages.' *Greek*

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In contrast, in Germanic languages, an overt definite determiner is generally not used in these contexts but a bare plural appears instead:

(2) *Bare plural with generics in Germanic*

a. Linguistinnen lieben Sprachen.
linguists love.PL languages
'Linguists love languages.' *German*

b. Linguists love languages. *English*

However, it has been reported for German that an overt determiner is optionally possible (3) (Brugger 1994, Longobardi 1994, Krifka et al. 1995, Dayal 2004, Schaden 2012).

(3) (Die) Bieber bauen Dämme.
the beavers build dams
'Beavers build dams.' (*German*, Longobardi 1994:653)

Results from experimental investigations of this optionality are however inconclusive. While Barton et al. (2015) seem to support the optionality, Czypionka and Kupisch (2019), Driemel et al. (2022) point towards bare plurals as the single option.

For English, it has likewise been claimed that the definite article is an option that even becomes obligatory under certain conditions (Farkas and De Swart 2007, Alexiadou 2022), for example with de-adjectival nouns such as *the poor*.

3. The 'distance' effect with definite plurals

Recently, Acton (2019) observed for English that the use of an otherwise optional or even dispreferred definite plural noun in a generic expression triggers a pragmatic effect. The speaker conveys that they "deemphasiz[e] their membership in the group" denoted by that noun or "emphasiz[e] their nonmembership" (Acton 2019:38). In (4b), the definite article therefore seems to trigger an additional inference that the speaker is not or wishes to distance themself from Americans.

(4) *The distance effect with definite plurals* (Acton 2019:37, 51)

a. Americans love cars. $\rightsquigarrow$ *The speaker may or may not consider themself to be an American.*

b. The Americans love cars. $\rightsquigarrow$ *The speaker is not an American or wishes to express distance from Americans.*

Acton (2019) supports the existence of this effect with a corpus study of speeches in The US House of Representatives, showing that speakers of either party significantly more often use the definite plural when talking about the respective other party than about their own.

For German, Driemel et al. (2022, 2024) tested speakers' preference for different DPs (definite plurals, bare plurals, definite singulars, indefinite singulars) in a variety of generic

contexts. Only in the context that suggests that the speaker may want to express distance to the kind, the definite plural and the bare plural are equally good candidates (5). In all other contexts, however, bare plurals are considered the single best option.

(5) *Generic, speaker distance context:*
There is a place in town where people meet for a drink and a chat after work. As there are federal elections coming up soon, a lot of the discussions and debates revolve around politics. Yesterday, one guest seemed very upset and continuously complained that "voting is meaningless because ...

a. Politiker tun doch sowieso, was sie wollen nach der Wahl.
politicians do PRT anyway what they want after the election
'Politicians do whatever they want after the election anyway.'
⇝ *The speaker may or may not consider themself a politican.*

b. Die Politiker tun doch sowieso, was sie wollen nach der Wahl.
the politicians do PRT anyway what they want after the election
'The politicians do whatever they want after the election anyway.'
⇝ *The speaker is not a politician or wants to express distance from politicians.*

This indicates that while, generally, bare plurals are used in generic utterances (contra Barton et al. 2015 and pro Czypionka and Kupisch 2019's findings) definite plurals are an option but trigger a distance inference similar to the one observed in English.

For Romance languages and Greek, no comparable effect is observed. Generic statements with definite plurals do not trigger any inference of speaker distance (6).

(6) a. Oi glossológoi agapáne tis glósses.
the linguists love.3PL the languages
'Linguists love languages.'
⇝ *The speaker may or may not consider themself a linguist.* *Greek*

b. Las linguistas aman los idiomas.
the linguists love.3PL the languages
'Linguists love languages.'
⇝ *The speaker may or may not consider themself a linguist.* *Spanish*

We thus observe that in languages that generally show bare plurals in generic expressions, the use of the definite article gives rise to the implication that the speaker is not or does not wish to identify themself as a member of the kind denoted by the noun.

4. Syntactic Analysis

4.1 The distance effect in Germanic

We suggest that the distance inference in Germanic languages arises from the presence of a 3rd person feature in the underlying structure that has two consequences: (i) it triggers the insertion of the definite determiner at PF, whose form is a realization of this 3rd person

feature among others (for English *the*, see Bernstein 2008a) (7), and (ii) it leads to the negation of alternative person interpretations at LF (cf. Section 5).

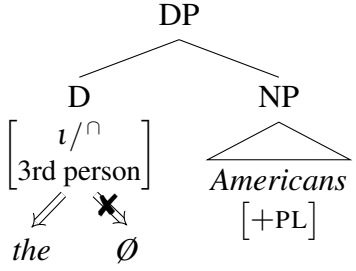
(7) *Vocabulary entries for some determiners in German and English*

a. *der, die, das, ...* $\leftrightarrow$ [$\iota/\cap$, 3rd person, NUMBER, GENDER]
b. *the* $\leftrightarrow$ [$\iota/\cap$, 3rd person]
c. *Ø* $\leftrightarrow$ [$\cap$]

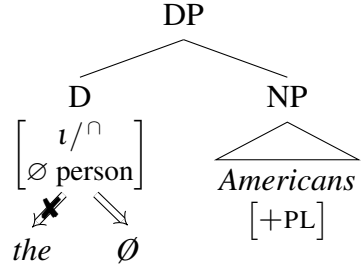
We assume here that person information in Germanic is encoded on the D-head (Bernstein 2008a,b, Longobardi 2008). Specifically, Bernstein (2008a) argued that in English *th-* is a (3rd) person marker unspecified for gender and number, which displays the person of an associated noun or noun phrase, or that of a DP external referent. We generalize this to German *d-* (*contra* Leu 2008). We further take D to also host the definiteness operator ι (for regular definite NPs) or the kind operator $\cap$ (for kinds). Following Dayal (2004) the latter is combined with plural nouns to form kinds in Germanic and Romance languages alike (*pace* Chierchia 1998 for whom kinds in Romance languages are formed by an intensionalized version of ι). We depart from Dayal (2004) in assuming that across both language types, the definite determiner can realize both ι and $\cap$. While, in order to form kinds and be used in generic expressions (since generic predication involves semantically a kind as its argument; Chierchia 1998, Longobardi 1994), nouns have to combine with a D-head that bears a $\cap$ operator, this D-head may or may not bear a person feature.

In the first case (8), the competition between the definite determiner *the* and the zero-determiner *Ø* will be resolved in favor of the former, which is more specific than the latter as it realizes not only the operator but also the 3rd person feature. The definite determiner will thus block the zero-determiner due to specificity.

(8) *N combines w/ 3rd person D-head*



(9) *N combines w/ personless D-head*



In the second case (9), where no person feature is present on D, insertion of the definite determiner will be blocked as its feature set does not constitute a subset of that of the D-head. In a retreat to the general case, the zero-determiner will be selected instead. Here, the definite determiner is blocked on account of the Subset Principle. The definite determiner thus unambiguously indicates the presence of a 3rd person specification in the structure.

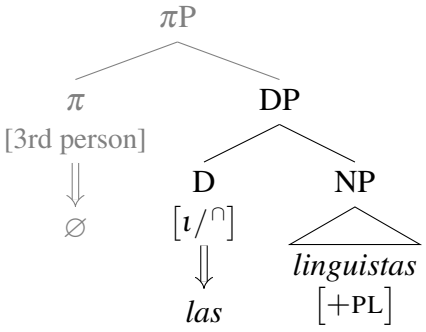
4.2 Spanish, Greek and cross-linguistic variation

Let us now turn to languages that consistently require definite plurals in kinds and generic expressions, like Spanish and Greek. We propose that the definite determiner is underspecified for person features in these languages (10).

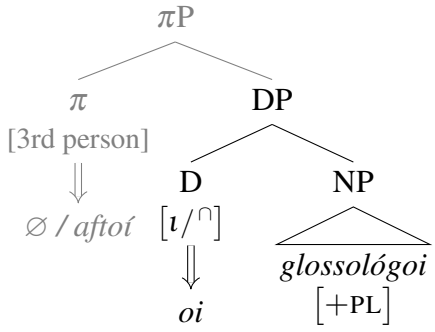
(10) a. *las, los, …* ↔ [ι/∩, NUMBER, GENDER]
b. *oi, …* ↔ [ι/∩, NUMBER, GENDER]

This leads to a surface neutralization of the person-containing (including the grey branches) and person-less structures in (11), both contain the definite determiner in D (cf. (1)). The determiner does not unambiguously indicate the presence of 3rd person, thus a distance inference is absent. This underspecification might seem somewhat random. However, we contend that there is a deeper reason for this. We take it that the determiner can never realize person features in these languages because these are hosted on a higher head π which is distinct from D and are therefore not accessible for a D-realizing element like a determiner.

(11) a. *Spanish*



b. *Greek*



This structural difference between the two language types has independently been argued for by Höhn (2016) based on their different behavior wrt. adnominal pronoun constructions (APCs) and so-called unagreement. As with kinds and generic expressions, the definite article is also obligatory in APCs in Spanish and Greek (12a, b) while it is in complementary distribution with personal pronouns in German and English (12c, d).

(12) *Adnominal pronoun constructions*

a. Emeís *(oi) glossológoi agapáme tis glósses.
we the linguists love.1PL the languages
'We linguists love languages.' *Greek*

b. Vosotras *(las) linguistas amáis las idiomas.
you the linguists love.2PL the languages
'You linguists love languages.' *Spanish*

c. Ihr (#die) Linguistinnen liebt Sprachen.
you the linguists love.2PL languages
'You linguists love languages.' *German*

d. We (#the) linguists love languages. *English*

This receives a straightforward explanation if pronouns, as realizations of person features, compete for insertion into D in Germanic languages but not in Spanish and Greek.[1]

Another domain where person features and definite determiners interact is unagreement. While a noun with a definite determiner may trigger 1st, 2nd or 3rd person agreement in Greek and Spanish (13a, b) it can only control 3rd person agreement in German (13c).

(13) *Unagreement*

a. Oi glossológoi agapáme tis glósses.
the linguists love.1PL the languages
'We linguists love languages.' *Greek*

b. Las linguistas amáis las idiomas.
the linguists love.2PL the languages
'You linguists love languages.' *Spanish*

c. *Die Linguistinnen liebt Sprachen.
the linguists love.2PL languages
'You linguists love languages.' *German*

This is accounted for if the independent (1st/2nd) person features on π may enter an agreement relation with the verb in Spanish and Greek. In German, the definite determiner only appears when the D-head bears 3rd person features. In the presence of 1st/2nd person features, only a pronoun can occur. Definite nouns hence cannot control 1st/2nd person agreement, only APCs with a 1st/2nd person pronoun can. Our approach to definite determiners in kinds and generic expressions thus readily extends to APCs and unagreement.

The observed cross-linguistic patterns of definite determiners in kinds/generics, APCs, and unagreement is captured by the interaction between two factors: (i) whether a language bundles person features and operators on D or not, and (ii) whether the lexical items for definite determiners are specified for 3rd person or not. Crucially, the latter factor requires that 3rd person has some representation other than the absence of any person features.

4.3 Completing the picture: Italian

These two points of variation give rise to four possible language types in (14). The upper left type is instantiated by Greek and Spanish, the lower right one by English and German.

(14) *Possible language types by feature bundling and lexical specification*

	$\pi_{[\text{3rd person}]}$ $D_{[\iota/\cap]}$	$D_{[\iota/\cap,\ \text{3rd person}]}$
/DET/ $\leftrightarrow$ $[\iota/\cap]$	Greek, Spanish	Italian
/DET/ $\leftrightarrow$ $[\iota/\cap$, 3rd person$]$	—	English, German

[1] Our account also captures the ungrammaticality of 3rd person APCs like **they linguists* (cf. Höhn 2021) without further ado as the 3rd person pronoun is blocked by the more specific definite determiner *the*.

The lower left type is systematically excluded by the Subset Principle as discussed above. The determiner in this type will always have a superset of the features of the D-head that it would have to be inserted into. The upper right type, as we argue, is manifested by Italian.

Like Greek and Spanish, Italian requires an overt determiner in kinds and generic expressions (15a). No distance effect is observed. However, unlike Greek and Spanish, Italian lacks unagreement (15b) and does not allow a definite determiner in APCs (15c).

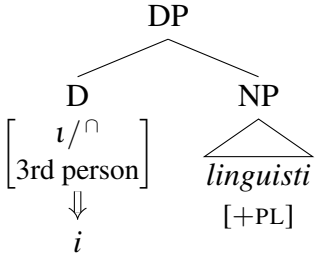
(15) a. *(I) linguisti amano le lingue.
the linguists love.3PL the languages
'Linguists love languages.'
b. *I linguisti amiamo le lingue.
the linguists love.1PL the languages
'We linguists love languages.'
c. Noi (#i) linguisti amiamo le lingue.
we the linguists love.1PL the languages
'We linguists love languages.' *Italian*

The data in (15) indicate that person features and the operator are bundled on D in Italian (17), like in German and English. We can then account for the data in (14) by assuming that the definite determiners *i/gli, le* are underspecified for person (16) like their Greek and Spanish counterparts in (10).

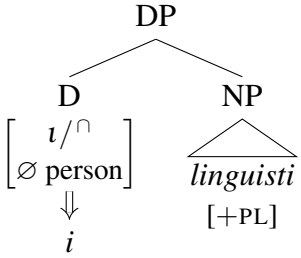
(16) *i/gli, le* $\leftrightarrow$ [$\iota/\cap$, NUMBER, GENDER]

Thus, while the underlying structures for definite DPs with 3rd person and personless D-heads in Italian in (17) and (18) are the same as for English in (8) and (9), their underlying difference is neutralized in the surface realization.

(17) *Noun with 3rd person D-head*



(18) *Noun with personless D-head*



5. Third person and absence of person: Semantic derivation

In the preceding section, we have shown how the cross-linguistic distribution of definite determiners in kinds and generic expressions can be captured as a result of the interaction between underlying structural differences and the distinction of an explicit 3rd person feature from its absence that lexical entries can be sensitive to. In this section, we discuss how the presence vs. absence of a 3rd person feature gives rise to the observed distance effect.

5.1 Presuppositional semantics of ϕ-features

We assume that ϕ-features, including person, are interpreted as a presupposition on the reference of an individual-denoting expression (Cooper 1983, Heim and Kratzer 1998, Sauerland 2003, 2008b, Schlenker 1999, 2003, Heim 2008, Chemla 2009, Sudo 2012).The choice of the feature specification is regulated by the competition principle *Maximize Presupposition* (Heim 1991, Sauerland 2002, 2008a, Singh 2011, Percus 2006, Schlenker 2012), which states that the feature with same truth-values but stronger presupposition is selected.

(19) **MAXIMIZE PRESUPPOSITION**
If ψ is a presuppositional alternative to ϕ in the context c and ψ triggers stronger presuppositions than ϕ choose ψ.

As we mentioned already, the correct representation of person features has been a matter of extensive debate in the literature (Zwicky 1977, Noyer 1992, Harley and Ritter 2002, Sauerland 2003, 2008b, McGinnis 2005, Ackema and Neeleman 2013, 2018, Harbour 2016). In the present work, we adopt the privative features AUTHOR and PARTICIPANT with the semantics in (20a, b), combined with the 'included in' ($\sqsubseteq$) relation (cf. Bobaljik and Sauerland 2023). We also assume an explicit representation of 3rd person by the PERSON feature in (20c).

(20) a. $[\![\text{AUTHOR}]\!]^c = \lambda x$. author$(c) \sqsubseteq x$
b. $[\![\text{PARTICIPANT}]\!]^c = \lambda x$. author$(c) \sqsubseteq x \vee$ addressee$(c) \sqsubseteq x$
c. $[\![\text{PERSON}]\!]^c = \lambda x$. x

5.2 Presuppositionality via Exhaustification

Following recent work, we further adopt the view that an exhaustivity operator (**exh**) is encoded in the grammar (Chierchia, Fox, and Spector 2012, Fox 2007, Katzir 2007, Fox and Katzir 2011). This operator has the effect of negating all relevant, non-weaker alternatives. As noted above, Maximize Presupposition is a principle that crucially relies on the competition driven by the strength of participating alternatives. We propose that MP at the pragmatic level is a reflex of the syntactically encoded **exh** (cf. Magri 2009, Marty 2017).

The semantic derivation of the final meaning of these person features proceeds as follows. When **exh** takes AUTHOR as its argument it applies vacuously, as there is no stronger alternative person specification. As a consequence, it returns *author* as being included in the referent x (21a). In contrast, when **exh** takes PARTICIPANT as its argument, there is a non-weaker alternative, namely AUTHOR, to take into consideration. As AUTHOR has the stronger meaning, the effect of **exh** is to negate its meaning thereby excluding *author* from the referent x (21b) leaving only *participant*. Following the same logic, when PERSON figures as an argument of **exh**, all alternatives that are stronger than *person*, i.e., AUTHOR and ADDRESSEE, are negated and their meanings excluded from the referent x (21c).

(21) a. $[\![\textbf{exh}\ \text{AUTHOR}]\!]^c = \lambda x\ .\ \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x$
b. $[\![\textbf{exh}\ \text{PARTCP.}]\!]^c = \lambda x\ .\ \big[[\text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x \vee \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq x] \wedge \neg\ \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x\big]$
$= \lambda x\ .\ \big[\ \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq x \wedge \neg\ \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x\big]$
c. $[\![\textbf{exh}\ \text{PERSON}]\!]^c = \lambda x\ .\ \neg\ \big[\text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x \vee \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq x\big]$

The proposed derivations are consistent with the constraint on computing alternatives (22), according to which alternatives cannot be more complex than the scope of **exh**.[2]

(22) *Algorithm for computing alternatives* (Katzir 2007, 2014)
Alternatives for a structure Φ are at most as complex as Φ.

If PERSON is represented as a vacuous feature, as we argue it is, it can enter structural complexity considerations for computing alternatives, as outlined above. If PERSON was not present, it would not be able to show any interactions with AUTHOR and ADDRESSEE, contrary to fact. In (23), **exh** applies to PERSON, triggers the negation of AUTHOR and ADDRESSEE, and yields the correct inferences that the *author* and the *addressee* do not belong to the relevant group *x* who likes languages.

(23) They like languages.
exh PERSON like languages
$\Rightarrow \neg$ author $\wedge \neg$ addressee like languages

5.3 Third person vs. absence of person: Deriving the distance effect

As we have discussed in section 4, PERSON may or may not be present on the D-head that combines with a noun. If it is, it will be realized by the definite determiner at PF, e.g. *the* in English in (24a, cf. 8). If it is not, the D-head will receive spell-out as the zero-determiner as in (24b, cf. 9), i.e. the definite determiner is blocked from occurring.

(24) a. the Americans b. Americans

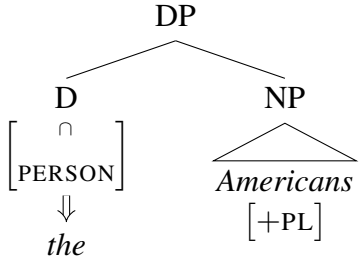
On the LF side, the PERSON feature on D serves as the argument of **exh**. As described above, this will lead to negation of the non-weaker alternatives AUTHOR and PARTICIPANT. The resulting interpretation is one where it is presupposed that neither *author* nor *addressee* are included in the referent *x*, i.e. neither the *author* nor the addresse is an American in (25).

(25) $[\![\textbf{exh}\ \text{PERSON}]\!]^c([\![\text{Americans}]\!]) = \neg\ \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq [\![\text{Americans}]\!] \wedge \neg\ \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq [\![\text{Americans}]\!]$

[2] We take the person features AUTHOR, PARTICIPANT, and PERSON to be standalone privative features that are not arranged in a morphological feature geometry (Harley and Ritter 2002). Hence, they are all simplex structures and therefore equally complex. In fact, our account is as it stands incompatible with such a feature geometry (also see Sichel and Toosarvandani 2024).

This is precisely the distance effect that we observed with definite plurals such as (26), where the speaker is not or does not wish to consider themself an American.

(26) the Americans

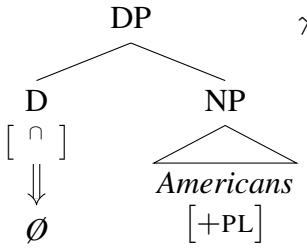


$\rightsquigarrow$ author, addressee $\not\sqsubseteq$ ⟦Americans⟧

In English, plural D with the feature AUTHOR is realized as *we* and with the feature PARTICIPANT as *you*. Consequently, the DP *we linguists* is interpreted as the kind of linguists and is presupposed to include the speaker/author. Similarly *you linguists* is presupposed to not include the speaker, but the addressee.

If PERSON is absent from the D-head, **exh** cannot exclude any person interpretations as all alternative structures (i.e. those including AUTHOR, PARTICIPANT, PERSON) are more complex, where we understand complexity in terms of the number of features that an otherwise identical syntactic structure has. As DPs without 3rd person features (in fact any person features) consistently map to bare nouns, this explains why DPs like (27) are compatible with an interpretation where *author*, *addressee*, or both are included in the group.

(27) Americans



$\not\rightsquigarrow$ author, addressee $\not\sqsubseteq$ ⟦Americans⟧

It is worth noting that our approach here is quite close to Acton's in that using the more complex definite plural *the Americans* as opposed to *Americans* leads to a comparison with and eventual exclusion of equally complex but stronger alternatives like *we Americans*.

Crucially, the distance inference can only be drawn in languages where the two distinct structures, the one with a PERSON feature and the one without it, map to distinct surface strings such that the featural difference is recoverable. In languages like Italian, Spanish, or Greek, where this is not the case, no distance inference can be drawn. This is because the surface string with the definite determiner is ambiguous between a structure that contains a PERSON feature and one that doesn't. That is, while the presence of PERSON in a structure that is realized as e.g. *las linguistas* 'the linguists' leads to the exclusion of AUTHOR and PARTICIPANT in the same way as it does in Germanic languages, there is an alternative parse for the string that does not contain PERSON and is therefore compatible with AUTHOR

and/or PARTICIPANT being included in the referent of the noun. Since the two structures are realized by the same form, only the more general meaning of the bare form can be detected in the types of sentences we have considered.[3]

6. Conclusion

We have argued that a recently observed distance effect with definite plurals in kinds and generic expressions in German and English can be captured if 3rd person is represented in the system of ϕ-features and therefore distinct from the absence of person information (Nevins 2007, 2011, Harbour 2016, Ackema and Neeleman 2018, Grishin 2023; *pace* (Kayne 2000, Adger and Harbour 2007, Béjar and Řezáč 2003, Harley and Ritter 2002, Kratzer 2009)). This 3rd person feature is lexicalized by the definite determiner at PF (Bernstein 2008a) and triggers via exhaustion the exclusion of *author* and *participant* from the meaning of the noun's referent at LF. In languages like Spanish, Italian, and Greek, that do not exhibit the distance effect, the definite determiner does not lexicalize 3rd person, but only a maximality operator like ι or $\cap$ on D. It therefore appears independent of the presence of 3rd person, thereby neutralizing the 3rd vs. no person distinction. That the determiner does not lexicalize 3rd person in those languages can be a consequence of a structural difference with Germanic languages. The latter bundle person and the operator on D, Spanish and Greek encode person on a higher π head. It can, however, also simply be an idiosyncratic fact about the determiner, as in Italian. The two distinct sources for the determiiner's underspecification have correlates in other domains. Languages with a separate π-head show cooccurrence of personal pronouns and definite determiners in APCs and allow unagreement, whereas languages that encode person on D do not.

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[3]We have to leave more sensitive ambiguity tests for future work. However, since the predicted ambiguity affects merely the presuppositional component, it may also be undetectable.

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