The Interpretation of the German Specificity Markers *Bestimmt* and *Gewiss*

German has two markers that indicate specificity in the sense of a strong tendency to scope over intensional operators contained within the same sentence: *bestimmt* and *gewiss*. Both items can be used in DPs headed by either the indefinite article *ein* or by a numeral, and with bare plurals, but not in DPs headed by other quantificational determiners. This paper concentrates on sentences with singular indefinites. We will argue that while the contribution of both items consists in the added information that some individual is able to identify the discourse referent introduced by the indefinite article via some non-trivial additional description (cf. [3] on *certain*), they differ with respect to the level at which this information is interpreted: in the case of *bestimmt* it is part of the at-issue content of the sentence, while in the case of *gewiss* it is interpreted at the separate level where conventional implicatures are processed ([5]). This conclusion is based on the following empirical observations:

I. The presence of *gewiss* in an indefinite requires the speaker to be able to give some further, non-trivial specification concerning the discourse referent introduced by the indefinite article. This is shown by the oddity of the continuation in (1a) as well as by the fact that *gewiss* is incompatible with the item *irgend-* ('whatever'), which signals speaker ignorance. In the case of *bestimmt*-indefinites, in contrast, the ability to give the required specification may be attributed to some other salient individual:

(1) a. Peter sucht schon seit Stunden nach (*irgend)einer gewissen CD
  Peter searches already since hours after a-FEM.DAT gewiss-FEM.DAT CD
  – #keine Ahnung, welche genau er sucht
   no idea which-one exactly he searches.

 b. Peter sucht schon seit Stunden nach (irgend)einer bestimmten CD
  Peter searches already since hours after a-FEM.DAT bestimmt-FEM.DAT CD
  – keine Ahnung, welche genau er sucht
   no idea which-one exactly he searches.

  'Peter has been looking for a particular/certain CD for hours now
  – I have no idea which one exactly he is looking for.'

II. While in sentences with intensional operators, both *bestimmt*-indefinites (henceforth: BIs) and *gewiss*-indefinites (henceforth: GIs) must take scope over at least one such operator, GIs must necessarily take *widest scope* w.r.t. to *all* intensional operators:

(2) Peter glaubt, dass Paula einen bestimmten/gewissen Mann heiraten muss.
  Peter believes that Paula a-MASC.ACC bestimmt/gewiss-MASC.ACC man marry must
  'Peter believes that Paula has to marry a particular/certain man'.

In the version with the BI, a *de dicto* reading is available according to which the indefinite receives narrow scope with respect to the propositional attitude verb *glauben* (believe), i.e. it does not have to be the case that there is a particular man of whom Peter believes that Paula has to marry him. The only thing that is required for the sentence to be true is that Peter believes such a man to exist, i.e. the indefinite has to take scope over *muss* (must). In the case with the GI, in contrast, there has to be a man (about whom the speaker knows something else) such that Peter believes of this man that Paula has to marry him, i.e. the only available reading is the *de re* reading w.r.t. *glauben* (believe) where the indefinite takes widest scope.

III. While GIs always have to take widest scope, BIs may also scope under operators like negation and other quantificational DPs, and they can be interpreted inside conditionals.

(3) Ich habe keine bestimmte/*gewisse Person für die Stelle im Kopf.
  I have not-a FEM-ACC person for the position in-the head
  'I don't have a particular person in mind for the position.'

(4)   Wenn morgen   alle Kinder ein bestimmtes/gewisses   Pferd reiten wollen,
      If   tomorrow all children a   bestimmt/gewiss-NEUT.ACC horse ride   want
      haben wir ein Problem
      have   we   a   problem.
      'If tomorrow all children want to ride a particular/certain horse, we will have a problem.'

Keine(e) has been argued to be the phonetic spellout of the combination of *nicht* ('not') and the indefinite article ([4]), where the former has scope over the latter. Its incompatibility with *gewiss* in (3a) thus shows that *gewiss* cannot scope under negation. Concerning (4), the version with the GI can only be interpreted as saying that there is a horse (which can be further specified by the speaker) such that there will be a problem if all children want to ride that horse. The version with the BI, in contrast, also has two additional readings: one according to which there is trouble if all children want to ride the same horse (no matter, which one it is) and one according to which there is already trouble if all children are picky with respect to the horses they want to ride, i.e. if for each child there is one and only one horse that s/he wants to ride.

   IV. In contrast to BIs, GIs must be interpreted with scope over speech acts like questions:

(5)   Geht Paul immer in eine bestimmte/gewisse   Kneipe?
      Goes Paul always in a   bestimmt/gewiss-FEM.ACC pub
      'Does Paul always go to a particular/certain pub?'

According to the most salient reading of the version with the BI, the speaker asks whether there is a pub such that Paul regularly goes there, i.e. the speaker does not have a particular pub in mind and the existence of any pub whatsoever that is regularly visited by Paul would be enough to answer the question affirmatively. In the GI case, in contrast, the speaker not only indicates that s/he has a particular pub in mind, but furthermore, in order for the question to be felicitous, the hearer has to know which pub the speaker means. The question thus can be paraphrased as "Does Paul go regularly to this special pub that we both know?"

   We propose a formal analysis which argues that the properties in (**I. –IV.**) can all be accounted for by assuming that both *bestimmt* and *gewiss* contribute the information that some individual α knows the identity of the individual denoted by the discourse referent of the indefinite under some salient conceptual cover (where conceptual covers are sets of individual concepts which exhaustively and exclusively cover the domain of individuals, see [1]), and where α is a free variable that can either be resolved to a salient individual or be turned into a variable bound by a c-commanding quantifier. In other words, both items add the information that some individual α knows the answer to the concealed identity question *What/who is x?* with respect to some salient conceptual cover, where *x* is the variable bound by the existential quantifier of the indefinite. The crucial difference between the two is that in the case of BIs, this information is part of the at-issue content and is therefore interpreted wherever the indefinite takes scope (including the option of island-violating scope, which is empirically well-attested for indefinites in general). In the case of GIs, in contrast, the information is a conventional implicature in the sense of [5], which means that it is processed at an independent level of meaning. This, however, is only compatible with (a) α being resolved to the speaker and (b) the indefinite taking widest scope (including functional widest scope in the sense of [2]).

References:
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