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The indefiniteness effect

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It is well known that the existential 'there-be' construction (cf. Milsark 1977 and Keenan 1987) and the possessive 'have' construction (cf. Bach 1967 and Partee 1999) both exhibit what is called the 'definiteness effect.' One might expect the existence of a counterpart 'indefiniteness effect' that disallows indefinites in certain contexts. No such effect has yet been reported. We suggest that the construction 'what is wrong with ___' exhibits such an effect, in that 'what is wrong with ___' is compatible with definite DPs but not with indefinite DPs. This fact is exhibited in (1).

- (1) a. What is wrong with John/the student/every student/him
(the three students/most students/you/his students)?
b. *What is wrong with a student (/three students/no more than three students/
at least three students/no students)?

The readers can test the 'what is wrong with ___' construction with other definite DPs, such as complex demonstratives, to confirm our characterization of the phenomenon. It should be noted, though, that the effect we point out is limited to indefinites that receive a true 'indefinite' interpretation. For instance, the infelicity of indefinites in the 'what is wrong with ___' construction does not extend to generically or referentially interpreted indefinites. For example, the indefinite in (2) receives a salient felicitous generic reading.

- (2) What is wrong with a professor going to his class drunk?

A similar indefiniteness effect also shows up in related constructions like 'what do you think about ___', 'are you ok with ___', etc.

To the knowledge of the authors, no theory of the definiteness effect accounts for the indefiniteness effect properly. While the notion of symmetric determiners may classify the indefinite determiners properly (cf. Keenan 1987), we do not see how 'being symmetric' plays a role in an explanation of the indefiniteness effect: why should symmetry matter here? Similarly, we do not see how the presuppositional account of the definiteness effect (cf. Diesing 1992) can account for our observation. We also find it hopeless to account for the indefiniteness effect by exploiting the 'triviality' and 'contradiction' account for the definiteness effect (cf. Barwise & Cooper 1981), since the examples in (1) are not declarative sentences and so triviality or contradiction of assertion is not an issue.

References

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