

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

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## This talk

### The debate on third person:

Third person is the absence of person features (Kayne 2000, Adger & Harbour 2007, Béjar & Řezáč 2003, Harley & Ritter 2002, Kratzer 2009).

vs.

Third person is fully represented (Nevins 2007, 2011, Harbour 2016, Ackema & Neeleman 2018, Grishin 2023)

**Our point:** A “distance” effect with determiners in generic expressions in languages that allow bare plural kinds supports the view that third person differs from the absence of any person specification. The presence vs. absence of the determiner reflects the underlying presence of a third person feature vs. the absence of the person specification.

## 1 Some background on generic expressions

- Generic predication involves semantically a kind as its argument. Kind readings are compositionally constructed by applying an intensionalized  $\iota$ -operator to a plural nominal (Chierchia 1998, Dayal 2004, Longobardi 1994).

### 1.1 Romance and Greek

- In Romance (Chierchia 1998), but also Greek (Alexiadou et al. 2007, Lazaridou-Chatzigoga & Alexiadou 2019), kinds/generics are expressed with an overt 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*

### 1.2 Germanic

- In contrast, in Germanic, an overt definite determiner is generally not used to express genericity (but cf. Farkas & De Swart 2007, Alexiadou 2022) (2).

#### (2) *Bare plural with generics in Germanic*

- a. Linguistinnen lieben Sprachen.  
linguists love.PL languages  
'Linguists love languages.'

*German*

- b. Linguists love languages.

*English*

- For German, it is reported that an overt determiner is optionally possible in generic expressions (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 are however inconclusive: Barton et al. (2015) seem to support the optionality; Cypionka & 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 becomes obligatory under certain conditions (Farkas & De Swart 2007, Alexiadou 2022), like with de-adjectival nouns (4).

- (4) \*(The) slow are left behind.

(Alexiadou 2022: 34)

## 2 The ‘distance’ effect with definite plurals in Germanic

### English

- Acton (2019) observes for English (supported by a corpus study of speeches in The US House of Representatives) that definite plurals trigger a “distance” effect where the speaker “deemphasiz[es] their membership in the group” or “emphasiz[es] their nonmembership” (Acton 2019: 38). In (5b), the definite article therefore seems to trigger an additional inference distancing the speaker from the kind.

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

- Americans love cars.  $\rightsquigarrow$  *The speaker may or may not consider themselves to be an American.*
- The Americans love cars.  $\rightsquigarrow$  *The speaker is not an American or wishes to express distance from Americans.*

### German

- For German, Driemel et al. (2022) tested speakers’ preference for different DPs (definite plurals, bare plurals, definite singulars, indefinite singulars) in a variety of generic contexts.
- In the context that suggests speaker distance, the definite plural and the bare plural are equally good candidates (6), while in all other contexts bare plurals are considered the best option (contra Barton et al. 2015 and pro Czypionka & Kupisch 2019’s findings).

(6) *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 ...

- 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.’  
 $\rightsquigarrow$  *The speaker may or may not consider themselves a politician.*
- 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.’  
 $\rightsquigarrow$  *The speaker is not a politician or wants to express distance from politicians.*

### Spanish and Greek

- No comparable ‘distance’ effect is observed. Generic statements with definite plurals trigger no inference of speaker distance.

- Oi glossológoi agapáne tis glósses. *Greek*  
the linguists love.3PL the languages  
‘Linguists love languages.’  
 $\rightsquigarrow$  *The speaker may or may not consider herself a linguist.*
  - Las linguistas aman los idiomas. *Spanish*  
the linguists love.3PL the languages  
‘Linguists love languages.’  
 $\rightsquigarrow$  *The speaker may or may not consider herself a linguist.*

**Summary:** In languages that generally employ 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 themselves as a member of the kind.

## 3 Analysis

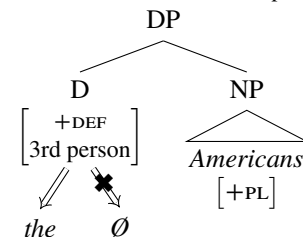
### 3.1 The distance effect in Germanic

- We suggest that the distance inference arises from a third person feature in the structure that has two consequences:
  - it triggers insertion of the definite determiner at PF (8).
  - it leads to the negation of alternative person interpretations at LF

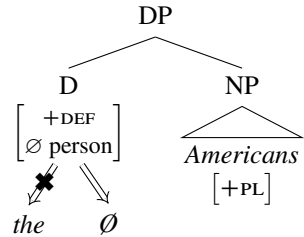
- der, die, das, ...*  $\leftrightarrow$  [+DEF, 3rd person, NUMBER, GENDER]
  - the*  $\leftrightarrow$  [+DEF, 3rd person]
  - $\emptyset$   $\leftrightarrow$  [+DEF]

- Person information is encoded on the D-head. Kinds can freely combine with Ds that bear a person feature (9) or not (10).

(9) *Kind combines with 3rd person D-head*



(10) *Kind combines with personless D-head*

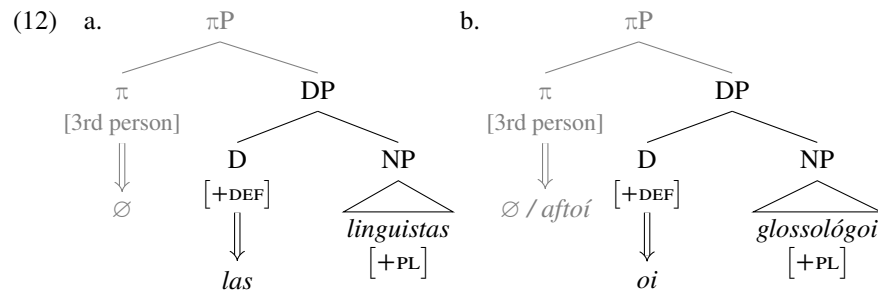


### 3.2 Spanish, Greek and cross-linguistic variation

- The overt definite determiner in Spanish and Greek is underspecified for person features (11).

(11) a. *las, los, ...* ↔ [+DEF, NUMBER, GENDER]  
 b. *oi, ...* ↔ [+DEF, NUMBER, GENDER]

- This leads to a neutralization of the person-containing and personless derivations (12), an obligatory overt determiner on the PF side (cf. (1)) and the absence of a distance inference.
- We suggest that the determiner cannot realize person features in these languages because, if present in the structure, these are hosted outside of D and are therefore not accessible for a D-element (cf. Höhn 2016).



- The split in the use of determiners with generics (and the concomitant distance inference) between Germanic on one side and Spanish/Greek on the other aligns with a split in adnominal pronoun constructions (APCs) as in (13) and unagreement as in (14).
- Spanish and Greek require a definite article in APCs (13a, b) and allow unagreement (14a, b), German and English show a complementary distribution of definite determiner and personal pronoun in APCs (13c, d) and lack unagreement (14c).

(13) *Adnominal pronoun constructions*

- a. Emeís \*(oi) glossológoi agapáme tis glósses. Greek  
 we the linguists love.1PL the languages  
 ‘We linguists love languages.’
- b. Vosotras \*(las) linguistas amáis las idiomas. Spanish  
 you the linguists love.2PL the languages  
 ‘You linguists love languages.’
- c. Ihr (#die) Linguistinnen liebt Sprachen. German  
 you the linguists love.2PL languages  
 ‘You linguists love languages.’
- d. We (#the) linguists love languages. English

(14) *Unagreement*

- a. Oi glossológoi agapáme tis glósses. Greek  
 the linguists love.1PL the languages  
 ‘We linguists love languages.’
- b. Las linguistas amáis las idiomas. Spanish  
 the linguists love.2PL the languages  
 ‘You linguists love languages.’
- c. \*Die Linguistinnen liebt Sprachen. German  
 the linguists love.2PL languages  
 ‘You linguists love languages.’

- Höhn (2016) argues that the source of this split is exactly that person and definiteness are realized on distinct heads in Spanish and Greek (and similar languages) while these features must be realized in the same head in German and English (and similar languages).

- Summary:** Kinds are person-free. They combine with person feature bearing heads in the syntax. Languages may vary (i) in whether they bundle person and definiteness on D or not, and (ii) whether the lexical item(s) for the determiner is specified for (third) person or not.

### 3.3 Completing the picture: Italian

- The two points of variation give rise to the four possible combinations in (15).

(15) Possible combinations of feature bundling and lexical specification

	$\pi_{[3rd\ person]}$	$D_{[+DEF]}$	$D_{[+DEF, 3rd\ person]}$
$DET \leftrightarrow [+DEF]$	Greek, Spanish	Italian	
$DET \leftrightarrow [+DEF, 3rd\ person]$	—	English, German	

- The lower left cell is systematically excluded by the Subset Principle. The determiner will always have a superset of the features of the D-head that it would have to be inserted into.
- We argue that Italian instantiates the upper right cell.
- Like Greek and Spanish, Italian requires an overt determiner in generic expressions (16) whose presence does not trigger a distancing effect.

(16) \*(I) linguisti amano le lingue. Italian  
 the linguists love.3PL the languages  
 ‘Linguists love languages.’

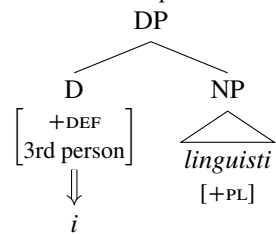
- Like English and German, Italian lacks unagreement (17a) and does not allow pronouns and the definite determiner to co-occur in APCs (17b).

(17) a. \*I linguisti amiamo le lingue. Italian  
 the linguists love.1PL the languages  
 ‘We linguists love languages.’

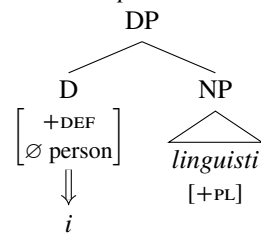
b. Noi \*(i) linguisti amiamo le lingue. Italian  
 we the linguists love.1PL the languages  
 ‘We linguists love languages.’

- (16) and (17) indicate that person and definiteness are bundled on D in Italian, like in German and English. We can then account for the genericity data by assuming that the definite determiners *i/gli, le* are underspecified for person (18).

(18) *Kind with 3rd person D-head*



(19) *Kind with personless D-head*



(20) *i/gli, le*  $\leftrightarrow [+DEF, NUMBER, GENDER]$

## 4 Third person and absence of person: Semantic derivation

### 4.1 Presuppositional semantics of $\varphi$ -features

- $\varphi$ -features, including person, are interpreted as a presupposition on the reference of an individual-denoting expression (Cooper 1983, Heim & Kratzer 1998, Sauerland 2003, 2008b, Schlenker 1999, 2003b, 2003a, Heim 1994, 2008, Chemla 2009, Sudo 2012).
- The choice of the feature specification is regulated by the competition principle *Maximize Presupposition* (Heim 1991, Sauerland 2008a, Singh 2011, Percus 2006, Schlenker 2012)

(21) **MAXIMIZE PRESUPPOSITION**

If  $\psi$  is a presuppositional alternative to  $\varphi$  in the context  $c$  and  $\psi$  triggers stronger presuppositions than  $\varphi$  choose  $\psi$ .

- Featural representation of person (Zwicky 1977, Noyer 1992, Harley & Ritter 2002, Sauerland 2003, 2008b, McGinnis 2005, Ackema & Neeleman 2013, 2018, Harbour 2016)
- We will adopt the privative features **AUTHOR** and **PARTICIPANT** with the semantics in (22), where ‘ $\sqsubseteq$ ’ encodes the relation ‘included in’ (cf. Sauerland & Bobaljik 2022).

(22) a.  $\llbracket \text{AUTHOR} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x . \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{PARTICIPANT} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x . \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x \vee \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq x$   
 c.  $\llbracket \text{PERSON} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x . x$

- The absence of any person marking is furthermore available as an alternative representation of 3rd person.

### 4.2 Presuppositionality via Exhaustification

- Exhaustivity operator (**exh**) encoded in the grammar (Chierchia, Fox, & Spector 2012, Fox 2007, Katzir 2007, Fox & Katzir 2011)
- **exh** negates relevant, non-weaker alternatives
- MP as a reflex of **exh** (cf. Magri 2009, Marty 2017)

(23) a.  $\llbracket \text{exh AUTHOR} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x . \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{exh PARTICIPANT} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x . (\text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x \vee \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq x) \wedge \neg \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x$   
 c.  $\llbracket \text{exh PERSON} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x . \neg \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x \wedge \neg \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq x$

### 4.3 Competition algorithm

(24) *Algorithm for computing alternatives* (Katzir 2007, 2014)  
 Alternatives for a structure  $\Phi$  are at most as complex as  $\Phi$ .

- PERSON as a vacuous feature  $\Rightarrow$  It can enter structural complexity considerations for computing alternatives.
- This is consistent with the constraint that alternatives cannot be more complex than the scope of **exh**.

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

### 4.4 Effects of exh in pronouns and determiners

(26) a. *we* (*Americans*)  $\leftrightarrow$  [+DEF, AUTHOR]  $\neg$  author  
 b. *you* (*Americans*)  $\leftrightarrow$  [+DEF, PARTICIPANT]  $\neg$  author  
 c. *the(y)* (*Americans*)  $\leftrightarrow$  [+DEF, PERSON]  $\neg$ author $\wedge$  $\neg$ addressee  
 d.  $\emptyset$  (*Americans*)  $\leftrightarrow$  [+DEF]

- In 26 (a-c), PERSON inferences are always present as a consequence of **exh** applying to AUTHOR, PARTICIPANT OF PERSON.

### 4.5 Third person vs. absence of person

#### Proposal

Both PERSON and its absence are possible in the natural language.

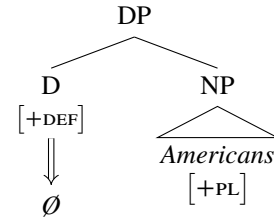
(27) a. the Americans **exh** PERSON  
 b. Americans

- The “distance” effect with definite plurals is a consequence of the explicit specification of the definite determiner for 3rd person.

### 4.6 Absence of person

- **exh** does not take PERSON as its argument  $\Rightarrow$  the absence of any person inferences.
- We argue that this explains the person-free semantics of **kinds**.
- The absence of [PERSON] blocks insertion of the definite determiner and pronouns on the PF side of the derivation.

(28) *Kind-denoting DP in English*



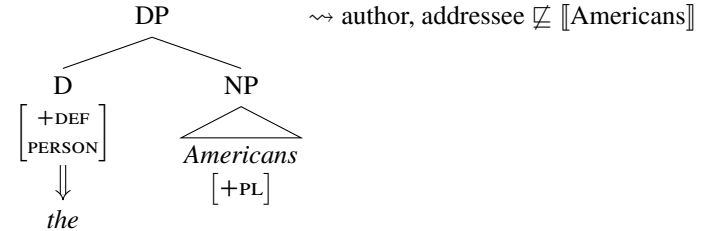
### 4.7 Third person

- In contrast to kinds, third person inference arises as a consequence of **exh** taking PERSON as its argument.

(29)  $\llbracket \mathbf{exh} \text{ PERSON} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x . \neg \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x \wedge \neg \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq x$

- **exh** applying to PERSON rules out non-weaker alternatives, thus pronouns (*we*, *you*) cannot be inserted.

(30) *3rd person DP in English*



### 4.8 Cross-linguistic differences: Greek

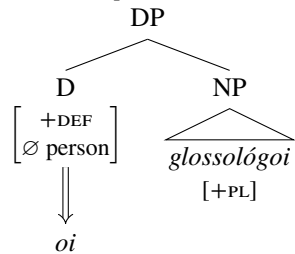
- In Greek, the overt definite article does not compete with the silent one as bare plurals are not an option for the expression of genericity.

(31) \*(I) ghates ine aneksartita zoa. *Greek*  
 the cats are independent animals  
 ‘The cats are independent animals.’ (Alexiadou et al. 2007)

- **exh** does not take PERSON as its argument  $\Rightarrow$  the absence of any person inferences  $\Rightarrow$  **kinds**.

- In Greek, definite plurals do not participate in structural complexity considerations for computing PERSON alternatives.

(32) *Kind with personless D-head in Greek*



### No competition in Greek

- As kind-denoting nominal in Greek obligatorily surfaces with the definite article means that the article in Greek cannot be in the scope of **exh** ⇒ PERSON inference would arise, contrary to the fact.
- NO PERSON in Greek is compatible with definite determiners. This furthermore explains the absence of “distance” effects.

(33) a. the linguists **exh** PERSON  
 b. oi glossológoi

- This semantic prediction neatly correlates with syntax.
- Alternatives competing for the insertion in English: *the* and ∅.
- In Greek, however, such a competition does not emerge.
- This is precisely the stance of Alexiadou (2014) who, building on Alexopoulou & Folli (2019), provides syntactic evidence for availability of null Ds in English and obligatory overtness of D in Greek on the basis of the availability of multiple determiners.

## 5 Summary

### Main proposal

Third person crucially differs from the absence of the PERSON feature.

- Realization of determiners in generic statements provides evidence for the existence and representation of third person.

- No overt determiners in generic statements (English, German):
  - definite articles are specified for PERSON
  - an overt realization of the determiner in these languages triggers “distance” effects
- Overt determiners in generic statements (Greek, Spanish):
  - determiners are not specified for PERSON
  - the absence of PERSON leads the absence of “distance” effects.

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## Appendix

### Default third person: Pruning of alternatives

- If **exh** always applied in this way, person marking would end up to render certain meanings ineffable:

(34) Every person, including you and me, loves **their** mother.

- How can *their* be bound if third person excludes author and addressee?

(35) Alternatives can be pruned from an occurrence **exh** if a meaning is otherwise ineffable (Elliott & Sauerland 2019, Elliott et al. 2022).

- Lower **exh** in the scope of the higher one gets pruned.
- **Effect:** deactivation of **exh**, overrides presupposition failure.

(36) **exh** ... **exh**

(37) Every person  $\lambda x.x$  loves  $x$ ’s mother.  
 $\lambda x . \boxed{\neg \text{author}(c)} \sqsubseteq x \wedge \boxed{\neg \text{addressee}(c)} \sqsubseteq x$  loves  $x$ ’s mother  
 ⇒ presupposition failure, 1st and 2nd person blocked

(38) Every person, including you and me,  $\lambda x.x$  loves  $x$ ’s mother.  
 $\lambda x . \neg \text{author}(e) \sqsubseteq x \wedge \neg \text{addressee}(e) \sqsubseteq x$  loves  $x$ ’s mother  
 ⇒ pruning and deactivation of negated alternatives  
 ⇒ 1st and 2nd person available alongside 3rd

- Pruning of alternatives furthermore accounts for “distancing” in cases when the author or the addressee is still a member of the kind, i.e., it can apply to only one feature alternative:

- (39) The Americans love cars.  
 $\lambda x . \boxed{\neg \text{author}(c)} \sqsubseteq x \wedge \boxed{\neg \text{addressee}(c)} \sqsubseteq x \text{ love cars}$   
 $\Rightarrow$  1st and 2nd person blocked  
 ①  $\lambda x . \neg \text{author}(e) \sqsubseteq x \wedge \neg \text{addressee}(c) \sqsubseteq x \text{ love cars}$   
 $\rightsquigarrow$  the speaker is a member of the kind  
 ②  $\lambda x . \neg \text{author}(c) \sqsubseteq x \wedge \neg \text{addressee}(e) \sqsubseteq x \text{ love cars}$   
 $\rightsquigarrow$  the addressee is a member of the kind

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