Existentials and (in)definiteness in Pirahã

Pirahã is a Brazilian Amazonian language spoken by around 400 people who live mainly along the river Maici (Amazonas, Brazil). It is an isolate from the Mura family (which consisted of only Pirahã and Mura, the latter being unfortunately already extinct). As an articleless language, it is not straightforward whether Pirahã’s bare NPs are definite or indefinite, and no study has been conducted so far regarding (in)definiteness in Pirahã. This is a preliminary attempt to address the issue. All data presented are from the first author’s original fieldwork in one of the Pirahã villages, conducted from October to December, 2014.

One possible diagnostic for (in)definiteness in bare NPs is Milsark’s (1977) definiteness effect. According to this diagnostic, there be existentials do not accept strong NPs (definite NPs) as their complements, only weak NPs (indefinite NPs). If Milsark’s proposal is correct, the bare NP in (1) is indefinite, since it occurs within an existential construction. The reason we gloss xaagaha as a locative has to do with the fact that Pirahãs usually point when they use the expression, and translate it as aqui ‘here’ when speaking Brazilian Portuguese. Following Hornstein, Rosen & Uriagereka (1996), we assume that existential predicates are semantically related to locative predicates and possessive predicates, and use the umbrella term locative following Freeze (1992).

(1) Context: Showing a picture of a bee.
moisai xaagaha
bee LOCATIVE
‘(There is a) bee here.’

Interestingly, however, some examples involve an existential with a possessive NP (2)-(3).

(2) ti hoih-aaga
1 son-LOCATIVE
‘(There is) my son here.’

(3) ti kaai xaagaha
1 house LOCATIVE
‘(There is) my house here.’

If possessives are definite NPs (cf. Abbott (2004)), they pattern with Milsark’s strong NPs, and should not be the complement of an existential.

We consider three potential solutions to the puzzle raised by these data: (a) the locative xaagaha is not in fact an existential predicate; (b) existential sentences can contain strong NPs in Pirahã, contrary to Milsark’s generalization; (c) possessives are not necessarily strong NPs. We propose that (c) is correct. Thus, we argue that xaagaha is a true existential predicate, and Milsark’s generalization holds in Pirahã as in other languages. The examples in (2) and (3) are acceptable because possessive NPs in Pirahã are not strong NPs, but on the contrary are indefinites.
First, consider Heim’s (1991) and Hawkins’s (1991) hypothesis that indefinites are not inherently non-familiar and non-unique, being rather restricted to these interpretations only when in contrast with definites, which are inherently familiar and unique. As noted by Matthewson (1999), this predicts that in languages that lack definites, indefinites will allow both familiar/unique and novel/non-unique interpretations. Hence, since Pirahã lacks a definite determiner, indefinites in this language are predicated to allow both familiar/unique and novel/non-unique interpretations. Examples (2) and (3) are then licensed because they can be interpreted as parallel to English constructions containing indefinites, such as There is a son of mine here or There is a house of mine here. Thus, possessives in Pirahã are weak NPs and therefore accepted as complements of existentials.

There is a difference between Pirahã and English: in English, the constructions containing overt indefinites (a son of mine, a house of mine) imply non-uniqueness, but in Pirahã they are perfectly neutral with respect to uniqueness. This is because in English, the definites my son and my house are the unique and familiar counterpart option, and should therefore be employed whenever their felicity conditions are satisfied, according to Heim’s (1991) ‘Maximize Presupposition’. However, in Pirahã there is no contrasting definite option, and the bare NP equally allows (non)-familiar and (non)-unique readings.

Concretely, we propose that there is no article inside the NPs in (1-3), and nominals such as moisai ‘bee’ in (1) or ti hoih ‘my son’ in (2) straightforwardly denote properties, as McNally (1997) proposes for existential pivots. Future research will investigate the predictions of this analysis for bare NPs in other (non-existential) constructions in Pirahã, as well as the status of overt demonstratives, which according to preliminary investigation also pattern as weak (cf. Matthewson 1999 on indefinite determiners in Salish which nevertheless encode deictic features).

References