A note on Kehler & Ward (2006)

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In their interesting paper “Referring expressions and conversational implicature”, Andrew Kehler and Gregory Ward (2006; henceforth KW) argue for “the existence of NONFAMILIARITY IMPLICATURES, by which a speaker’s failure to use a referring expression that indicates hearer-familiarity conversationally implicates that the referent is in fact nonfamiliar to the hearer” (KW 177, emphasis in original, footnote added). The purpose of this note is two-fold: first, to look more closely at the proposed implicature; and second, to clarify its relation to a different implicature – a scalar implicature of nonuniqueness resulting from use of the indefinite rather than the definite article, which was proposed by Hawkins (1991). In the first section below we distinguish explicit from implicit indications of familiarity. In §2 we look specifically at definite NPs from this perspective. In §3 we consider KW’s evidence for the familiarity implicature, and in §4 we argue that the existence of such an implicature does not cast doubt on the existence of Hawkins’ nonuniqueness implicature. The final section contains some concluding remarks.

We should make clear that we may ultimately have little or no disagreement with KW on the issues here. (We have had some indication from one of the authors that that is the case.) Rather, our main purpose is clarificatory. Most importantly, we fear that a reader of KW may come away with the conclusion that their nonfamiliarity implicature in some way supplants or supersedes the Hawkins implicature, and we would like to ward off any such conclusion.

1. Indicating familiarity

We need to look first at how an NP might indicate an assumption of familiarity on the part of the addressee. We’ll start by reviewing the KW characterization (which follows that of Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski (1993 – henceforth GHZ)) of what it means to be familiar. This is reproduced below (KW: 183).

FAMILIAR: The addressee is able to uniquely identify the intended referent because he already has a representation of it in memory (in long-term memory if it has not been recently mentioned or perceived, or in short-term memory if it has).

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1 I would like to thank Larry Horn for many helpful comments and suggestions on previous drafts of this paper. This paper is intended to form part of Horn & Abbott (to appear); hence the first person plural for the author in what follows. Andy Kehler has also provided us with helpful comments which have improved the contents of the current draft.

2 Or writer – hereinafter “speaker” is intended to cover both, and likewise, mutatis mutandis, for “hearer”, “speak”, and “utterance”.

3 KW also consider at some length the relation between their implicature and some implicatures proposed Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski (1993). We will not be concerned here with that portion of their paper.

4 Compare the “Hearer-old” category of Prince 1992: 301-3.
According to this conception, a denoted entity is familiar if the addressee of the utterance is able to identify it as someone or something they already know about.

Assuming something like this notion, we turn to the question of how referring expressions might indicate an assumption of familiarity. Here we wish to make clear the difference between an explicit indication of (an assumption of – we may occasionally omit this qualifier) familiarity, and NPs which indicate such an assumption only indirectly. When it comes to explicit indications, there are only two types that we know of. The first type is indication by determiner: there are nondemonstrative uses of that which indicate an assumption of addressee familiarity, as shown by the contrast between (1a) and (1b) (assumed to be discourse initial utterances).

(1)    a.  I’m really tired today – the dog next door kept me awake all night.
    b.  I’m really tired today – that dog next door kept me awake all night.

Use of (1b) is only felicitous if the speaker believes that the addressee knows about the dog in question. However (1a) would not be in felicitous under these circumstances, so the functional load of this use of that is not very heavy at all. And we know of no other determiners whose function it is to indicate addressee familiarity.

Another explicit way in which an assumption that the addressee is familiar with a referent can be indicated is in the descriptive content of an NP. The NPs in (2) give some examples.

(2)    a.  the salesperson I told you about last week
    b.  our neighbors – you know, the ones with the horse
    c.  someone you know well

Each of these NPs spells out a relation between the addressee and the intended denotation which shows that the speaker is assuming that the addressee is familiar with that entity. Note that (2c) shows that such NPs need not give sufficient information for the addressee to actually make the identification.

Other than these two kinds of cases – use of the familiarity-indicating that, and including familiarity-indicating content – we would argue that no NP in English explicitly indicates an assumption that the addressee is familiar with referent. However many uses of definite NPs do indirectly indicate an assumption of familiarity, so let us turn to those.

2. Definite NPs

A speaker who uses a definite NP – a definite or demonstrative description, a proper name, a pronoun, or a universally quantified NP – intends to speak of a particular entity.\(^5\)

Crucially (assuming the use of the NP is felicitous) that entity must have the predicated properties and/or relations for the utterance in question to be true, in the case of a declarative statement, or satisfied, in the case of a directive. (We’ll sometimes ignore this alternative in what follows.) Use of a corresponding indefinite NP would result in a

\(^5\) We assume the existence of plural entities (mereological sums), as in Link 1983.
more general statement or directive, with more easily achieved truth or satisfaction conditions: no particular entity need have the relevant properties or relations, but only one (or a sufficient number) satisfying the descriptive content of the NP.

As noted above, in many cases use of a definite NP will indirectly reflect a speaker’s assumption that their addressee is familiar with, and can identify, its referent. When one uses a proper name by itself, for example, one typically assumes that one’s addressee knows of the named individual by that name. When that assumption is believed not to be warranted, it is common to introduce a proper name in conjunction with explanatory information: e.g. my neighbor Don Steffens; Anne Kelly – the ShareCare nurse. Use of a personal pronoun carries with it the assumption that one’s addressee can figure out the referent (or binder, in the case of bound pronouns), and use of a demonstrative pronoun or a demonstrative description comes with a similar assumption. Presumably it is intended that these kinds of cases are to count as familiar under the characterization given above.

Other definite NPs need not indicate such familiarity. At least a subset of definite descriptions – those called “semantic” by Löbner (1985) and “role-type” by Rothschild (2004) – have descriptive content which uniquely determines a referent without the need of contextual supplementation. Examples are given in (3).

(3) a. the first person to walk on the moon
   b. the president of the US
   c. the lead role in Evita

Use of this kind of definite description does not reflect any assumption about one’s addressee’s acquaintance with the referent. The remaining definite descriptions, which Löbner called “pragmatic” and Rothschild “particularized”, only determine a unique referent relative to a contextually narrowed universe of discourse.

(4) a. the person Bill had lunch with yesterday
   b. the guy wearing a hat
   c. the book on the hall table

It might be thought that felicitous use of one of these would require familiarity on the part of the addressee. The reasoning would be that, since the speaker has used a definite description (requiring a unique denotation), but has not given sufficient content to determine such a denotation, it must be that the addressee is expected to be able to find a unique denotation within the common ground, or the salient circumstances, or something along those lines. However that is not true. Rather, whether or not the use of a pragmatic/particularized definite description conveys an assumption that the addressee is familiar with the referent depends on contextual factors, such as the purpose of the utterance. So, consider (5).

6 This description needs modification, of course. Example (3b) only determines a referent relative to the time of utterance. And embedded descriptions may require contextual information, as in, e.g., the tallest student in the class.

7 This fact was pointed out by Löbner, in countering Heim’s familiarity theory of definiteness (Löbner 1985: 298).
The teacher handed out review lists when I wasn’t in class, but fortunately the person who runs them off got one for me.

Use of the underlined pragmatic/particularized definite description here is not associated with any assumption that the addressee is familiar with the person in question. It simply isn’t relevant whether or not the addressee knows this individual.

Given the distinction between definite and indefinite NPs noted at the beginning of this section, we must ask what the use of an indefinite might convey pragmatically. It would not be correct to say that it conveys that there is no corresponding definite whose substitution for the indefinite NP would result in a true utterance. Sentences with indefinite NPs convey general propositions, but facts concern particulars. Hence it must always be assumed that there is, in principle, some way to characterize the situation more precisely with a definite NP. It would not even be correct to say that use of an indefinite conveys that the speaker does not know or cannot uniquely describe which particulars make their general proposition true. Consider (6), for example:

(6) My lecture was pretty opaque, I thought, but at the end only one person raised their hand.

Typically a speaker of something like (6) would have had perceptual contact with the questioner, and presumably could pick them out of a lineup. They may even know their name. However any further information about that individual is simply not relevant to what the speaker wants to convey to their addressee.

Similarly we cannot say that in general the use of an indefinite NP automatically conveys an implicature to the effect that the speaker assumes that the addressee is not familiar with the entity being spoken of. The NP in (2c) above (someone you know well) is a relevant example. For a different kind of example, suppose a colleague asks us whether any of the students in our class passed a recent exam, and we reply with (7):

(7) Yes, three students passed.

It could be the case that this colleague knows all of the students in the class (it is a small seminar), and of course we know who the three successful students are, and know that our colleague knows them. Still, it is not relevant who the particular students are – we do not wish to implicate, with the utterance of (7), that our addressee is unfamiliar with the individuals involved, and certainly no such implicature would be taken. Thus whether or not the use of an indefinite implicates nonfamiliarity seems to depend on the context of an utterance – and specifically on whether or not the addressee’s acquaintance with any entities involved is relevant to the conversational purposes.

In light of the foregoing considerations we would like to try to clarify KW’s assertion that “a speaker’s failure to use a referring expression that indicates hearer-familiarity conversationally implicates that the referent is in fact nonfamiliar to the hearer”. Clearly failure to use an NP that explicitly encodes addressee familiarity does not result in a nonfamiliarity implicature; we have seen that proper names, pronouns, or demonstrative descriptions, which do not explicitly encode any familiarity implicature,
nevertheless do typically reflect indirectly an assumption that their denotation is familiar (in a broad sense) to the addressee. When we come to definite descriptions, we find that some of them – the semantic/role type descriptions – do not convey anything about addressee familiarity, while the pragmatic/particularized descriptions may or may not, depending on the context. Finally, it might be thought that use of an indefinite which does not contain any indication (direct or indirect) of familiarity would automatically convey an assumption of nonfamiliarity, but (as we have just seen), that is not the case either. In view of the foregoing, we might suggest the following restatement of a nonfamiliarity implicature (NFI):  

(NFI) In a context in which it is believed to be potentially relevant whether or not an addressee can identify an entity referred to, or alluded to, in an utterance as one already known to them, use of an NP which does not (as far as the speaker knows) provide sufficient information for said addressee to make this identification will convey an implicature to the effect that the entity in question is not one which the speaker believes the addressee to be acquainted with.

Let us now take a look at the evidence which led KW to the postulation of this implicature.

3. A, in fact B

All of the examples introduced by KW to argue for the existence of the nonfamiliarity implicature are of the form A, in fact B. For instance KW’s (14) and (16) are given below in (8) and (9).

(8) A: Did any students bother you during office hours today?  
    B: Yes, a student came by. In fact, it was that weird guy who sits at the back of the class.

(9) A: Has John read any good books lately?  
    B: Yes, the book that John is currently reading – in fact the one I showed you yesterday when we were at the bookstore – is reportedly a real page-turner.

This is the same form of words used by Hawkins, and like Hawkins, KW may seem to assume that this form of words is invariably used for cancellation of a conversational implicature. At any rate neither he nor they specifically discuss the possibility that it might not be.

8 Example (2c) above (someone you know well) is a counterexample to this formulation.
9 Indefinite NPs cannot properly be said to refer. Kent Bach (2006: 532f) suggests allude as a suitable verb for the relation between indefinite NPs and the entities which inspire their specific use and, in the typical case, help to make containing declarative utterances true.
10 Although we must note that KW’s discussion of the in fact examples in their n. 5 (p. 187) indicates that they do not make this assumption. We are grateful to Andy Kehler for pointing this out (p.c.).
Let us look more closely at the *A, in fact B* construction. On the face of it, this form of words is simply used to add more, presumably relevant, information to an utterance. Many times the purpose is to make the original statement more specific, but not always, as shown by (10).

(10) Mary is coming for a visit. In fact I got an e-mail from her about it last night.

In this case the speaker simply wants to add an additional relevant proposition to that expressed in their first utterance. Clearly in this case we would not want to say that this additional proposition cancels any kind of implicature – we would not want to say that *Mary is coming for a visit* implicates that the speaker has not received an e-mail from Mary recently.11

In the common kind of case where the *in fact* continuation does result in a more specific statement, it would still not be accurate to say that it necessarily cancels an implicature from the first utterance. Consider (11), for example.

(11) I gave them a number of arguments – five, in fact.

Certainly use of the NP *a number of arguments* does not implicate that the actual number is not five. And note that the *Not only A, in fact B* construction, which *does* seem to be restricted to implicature canceling, is infelicitous here, as shown in (11').

(11') # Not only did I give them a number of arguments – in fact I gave them five.

So even when the (simple) *in fact* construction is used to substitute a more specific proposition for the more general one first expressed, it does not necessarily cancel a conversational implicature of that first utterance.

Turning to KW’s examples in (8) and (9) above, it is not clear to us whether or not we should say that an implicature of nonfamiliarity has been cancelled. What would differentiate that kind of case from one in which a speaker is simply adding some additional information which they deem relevant to their story? This is a question that we are not prepared to answer at this time, but which should be addressed eventually.

4. Relevance of a nonfamiliarity implicature to <the, a> scalar implicatures

Finally, we need to consider what the implications of the existence of a nonfamiliarity implicature of the type proposed by KW would be for the scalar implicature of nonuniqueness proposed by Hawkins (1991) (and others following him, e.g. Horn 2007, Abbott 2010). Hawkins’ implicature is derived from the fact that the definite and indefinite article form the “Horn scale” <the, a>: a sentence containing the unilaterally

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11 Of course *Mary is coming for a visit* could convey a particularized implicature to that effect, in a carefully devised context. (Indeed, given careful enough devising, *any* utterance could convey *any* particularized implicature.) However no such context is provided for (10).
entails the corresponding sentence with a;\textsuperscript{12} thus use of a conveys that the corresponding sentence with the is not appropriate – that the descriptive content of the NP is not satisfied uniquely (in context). This scalar implicature is illustrated in the examples below (= KW’s (13), minus the internet sources).

(12)  
\begin{itemize}
  \item a. Over the nineteenth century, Britain became a, if not the, world power.
  \item b. Decision making is a, but not the, fundamental construct in design.
  \item c. I find it humbling that the Torah, uniquely in the religious literature of mankind, begins by setting out these themes – insisting that parenting is not only a, but the supreme religious act.
\end{itemize}

In (12a) the implicature of nonuniqueness is suspended, in (12b) it is reinforced, and in (12c) it is cancelled.

KW seem at times to be claiming that their nonfamiliarity implicature supplants Hawkins’ implicature – that the latter does not exist, as such. Thus they say that the Hawkins’ analysis makes “predictions that are not borne out” (KW: 177), and that it predicts implicatures for “only a subset” of the cases analyzed by KW. On the other hand they do acknowledge the correctness of the Hawkins’ analysis for the examples in (12), which are not predicted by KW’s nonfamiliarity implicature – the examples in (12) have nothing to do with addressee familiarity. So we should definitely not conclude that the Hawkins implicature does not exist, or that it is supplanted by a nonfamiliarity implicature.

Much of KW’s discussion of Hawkins’ analysis centers on example (13) below (KW’s (2) & (4); Hawkins’ (12)).

(13) I met a student before class. A student came to see me after class as well – in fact it was the same student I had seen before.

KW describe Hawkins’ analysis of this example as follows:

In his analysis, the use of the second occurrence of a student conversationally implicates that the student is not unique within any P-set that is mutually manifest to the speaker and hearer. This implicature is cancelled by the in fact clause, in light of its uniqueness in the P-set that includes those entities that have been previously mentioned in the discourse. (KW: 180)

This description stresses a nonuniqueness implicature, but in fact Hawkins introduced the example as one implicating non-P-membership – non-membership in a “pragmatic set”, or P-set, which is (roughly) a set of entities mutually manifest to speaker and addressee. He contrasted (13) with (14) below (Hawkins’ (11)).

(14) I met some students before class. A student came to see me after class as well.

\textsuperscript{12} More properly we should be speaking of entailment holding between the propositions expressed by such sentences. And there are more serious complications with the preceding statement of Hawkins’ position that we are skipping over here. These will be dealt with at length in Horn & Abbott (to appear).
In this case, Hawkins asserted, the student alluded to in the second sentence could be one of those introduced in the first. He described the situation as follows:

> These examples show that when the potential referents of P-sets are unique [as in 13], the must be used and indefinite descriptions cannot refer to them and so implicate non-P-membership. For the remaining non-unique potential referents, indefinite reference to members of P is possible, and the alone cannot be used. (Hawkins 1991: 419, boldface added.)

Looked at in this way, the implicature postulated by Hawkins is basically the same as that proposed by KW. That is, an implicature of non-P-membership is very similar, if not identical, to an implicature that the entity in question is not assumed to be familiar to the addressee.

Turning to KW’s claim of incorrect predictions for Hawkins’ analysis, they give the example in (15) (KW’s (17)).

(15) I met a student before class. #A student came to see me after class as well – in fact it was the student I met with three days ago.

KW point out that this example is anomalous under the assumption that the addressee doesn’t know about the student that the speaker met with three days ago. In that case we have (in their view) an attempted cancellation of nonuniqueness, but not nonfamiliarity, and the fact that the result is anomalous presents a problem for the Hawkins’ analysis.

Hawkins would have to say that the anomaly of (15) arises because there is no evident P-set within which this student is unique. However there are other instances of definite descriptions without such P-sets; our example above in (5), repeated below as (16a) contains one such. The subject NP of (16b) was suggested by Hawkins (410).

(16) a. The teacher handed out review lists when I wasn’t in class, but fortunately the person who runs them off got one for me.

b. The problem with Bill is that he’s never gotten over the death of his cat.

Hawkins suggests that these are cases in which accommodation takes place: “these definite descriptions are extending the members of otherwise mutually known P-sets to include a novel entity, whose existence within the set is none the less accepted by the hearer” (Hawkins 1991: 411). (Hawkins does not use the term “accommodation”, but it is often used by those who believe that definite descriptions require reference to an entity in the common ground, for what happens when there is no such entity (cf. e.g. Heim 1983, Stalnaker 1974; the term is from Lewis 1979). See Abbott 2008 and the works cited there for criticism of this use of accommodation.) So Hawkins needs to explain why such accommodation is not possible in (15).

First of all we need to be clear that acceptable examples can be constructed which are similar to (15), where an indefinite is supplemented with a definite description not implicating addressee familiarity. Some examples are in (17).
I met a student before class. A student came to see me after class as well...

a. – in fact it was the student I had least expected.
b. – in fact it was the boyfriend of the first student.
c. – in fact it was just the student I had wanted to talk with.

So it is clear that identifying the introduced entity as one the addressee is familiar with is not the only reason for adding more information to an utterance with an indefinite. But that still leaves us with explaining the oddness of (15). One thing that differentiates these examples from (15) is that, in each case, the descriptive information introduced in the re-description of the newly introduced entity is easily seen as relevant to the issue at hand.

We think that the oddness of (15) is traceable to the definite description itself, regardless of the context or purported function of canceling implicatures. So (18) is similarly odd – again, under the assumption that one’s addressee is not acquainted with this student.

# The student I met with three days ago came to see me after class.

It would be much more natural here to introduce the student with an indefinite description. Data like this might incline one towards resuscitating the familiarity theory of definiteness, but we have seen too many counterexamples to be content with that direction. (See also, e.g., Birner & Ward 1994; Abbott 1999, 2000.)

Some comments of Hawkins suggest a more promising approach. He noted that an example like (19) (his (16)) conveys nothing about number.

A movie that Mary was watching last night was really interesting.

Hawkins describes this case as one which illustrates the “neutrality” of indefinites to uniqueness – the movie alluded to in (19) could easily have been the only one Mary watched last night, or not. (Cf. Hawkins 1991: 422.) Notice that if we replace the indefinite with a definite description, as in (20)

The movie that Mary was watching last night was really interesting.

we now have a suggestion that the addressee is already acquainted with the movie in question.

We would like to suggest that the occurrences of definite descriptions which seem to be accompanied by an assumption of addressee familiarity are those which could have been replaced with the corresponding indefinite description with no implication that there is more than one such entity – that is, where the corresponding indefinite description is uniqueness-neutral. Note that if we construct a context in which uniqueness is important, the definite description in (18) no longer conveys addressee familiarity. This is illustrated in (21).

Please get me more information about the student I met with three days ago.
We need not assume, from the utterance of (21), that the addressee has prior acquaintance with the student in question, but only that they can determine in some way (say from the speaker’s files) who that individual is. Use of the corresponding indefinite here would be infelicitous, as shown in (22).

(22) #Please get me more information about a student I met with three days ago.

This is because it is now relevant whether there is one such student or more than one; the request does not seem sensible if it does not matter which of several students the information is about.\(^\text{13}\) If something like this line of explanation is correct, it reinforces the the/a alternation put forward by Hawkins.

5. Conclusion

In this note we have had two main goals. The first goal was to examine the claim by Kehler & Ward that use of an NP which does not signal addressee familiarity conveys an implicature of addressee nonfamiliarity. We have seen reason to want to clarify this claim – first, because which NPs signal addressee familiarity can be highly context dependent; and second, because even with some NPs that clearly do not signal addressee familiarity in the given context, no implicature of nonfamiliarity is conveyed. We offered a revised version (our NFI). The second goal of this paper was to disengage any such implicature from the nonuniqueness scalar implicature postulated by Hawkins (1991) resulting from a <the, a> Horn scale. The latter implicature has indeed been firmly established, and is not challenged by Kehler & Ward’s claims. Note that the two kinds of implicature (assuming both exist) are very different in nature from each other. Hawkins’ implicature is one of a fairly well-defined group, the scalar implicatures, and it depends on the existence of a small set of paradigmatic alternatives. On the other hand the presumed nonfamiliarity implicature is very general. It arises via natural assumptions concerning what kinds of information may be relevant to an addressee, and is not expression-related in the way that Hawkins’ implicature is. The two kinds of implicature can co-exist – each without casting doubt on the existence of the other. Finally, an unanticipated outcome of our explorations was the discovery of a subset of definite descriptions which seem to come with an assumption of addressee familiarity. We have suggested that these occur when a corresponding indefinite description would have been “uniqueness-neutral” – that is, when the exact number of entities meeting the descriptive content of the NP is not relevant. There is obviously much more to be said on this topic, but we hope to have at least achieved our two main goals.

References

\(^{13}\) Of course one can make (22) natural by adding factors which would make such a request sensible, e.g. as shown in (i) (due to Larry Horn, p.c.).

(i) Please get me more information about a student – ANY student – I met with three days ago. (I just have to prove I was on campus then, and not on the site of the terrorist act I’ve been charged with.)


Horn, Laurence R. & Barbara Abbott. To appear. <the, a>: (In)definiteness and implicature. To be presented at the 13th meeting of the Inland Northwest Philosophy Conference (INPC 13). This paper will appear in print in a conference volume to be published by MIT Press.


