

# A new kind of definite: Uniqueness, salience, and the Bulu determiner *-tè*

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## Introduction: Bulu (Bantu, Cameroon) *-tè* is a definite determiner that encodes a novel type of uniqueness

NPs with *-tè* are definite, as suggested by (1)-(1') (see also Bates (1926); Barlew, Yasavul, and Clem (2014)). However, NPs with *tè* display a different pattern of acceptability across contexts than any kind of English definite. These data support the claim that cross-linguistically definites encode uniqueness in different domains.

(1) *Context: Last night, Abondo was reading a book. Earlier today, he told Andung about it. Later, he notices that it is gone and says:*  
#kálátè tè ànò ndzàján      Intended: 'The book is missing.'  
book DEF COP missing

(1') *Context: Minimally different from (1) in that Abondo first says "Do you remember the book I was reading last night?"*  
kálátè tè ànò ndzàján      'The book is missing.'  
book DEF COP missing

## 1 Bulu NPs with *-tè* vs. English definites

### A. ✓ *the* | ?DEM | #Pronoun | #*-tè*

An NP with *-tè* is not necessarily felicitous even if its referent is semantically or situationally unique (Hawkins 1978) and weakly familiar (Roberts 2003).

(2) *Context: Abondo is sitting on a bus when a stranger sits down beside him and says*

a. {The sun/?that sun/#it} is bright today.      b. vián (#tè) wáfàj dón  
(where *it* is interpreted as the sun)      sun DEF shines today

(3) *Context: My cousin Dave likes white and dark meat turkey. At Thanksgiving dinner, I see him picking out pieces of turkey to eat.*

a. I already have      b. móm̀bìlì      m-á-bò (#m-á-tè)  
{the legs/??those legs/#them}.      1s.already.have CL<sub>6</sub>-leg AGR<sub>6</sub>-DEF

(4) *Context: Bela and Abondo live in a small village with one chief. One day, Abondo and Bela are sitting in their house looking out the window and watching people walk by. They see the chief walking toward their house. Bela says.*

a. {The chief/?that chief/#he}      b. ànkúkúimá (#tè) àzù ndá ʔdzájgán  
is coming to our house.      chief DEF is.coming house 1PL.POSS

### B. ?*the* | ✓DEM | ✓Pronoun | #*-tè*

An NP with *-tè* is not felicitous when its referent fails to be unique among the salient DRs, even if it is maximally salient (Roberts 2005) or indicated deictically.

(5) *Context: I say to you: Yesterday I saw two men and a woman at the farm. One of the men had black hair. The other man had white hair. The man that had black hair was white. The man that had white hair was black.*

a. {?The man/that man/he} was      b. #fám tè èmbó èkóbò fúlàsí  
speaking French.      man DEF AUX speaking French.

## 2 Acceptable NPs with *-tè*: Saliency plus uniqueness

### A. ✓ *the* | ?DEM | #Pronoun | ✓*-tè*

An NP with *-tè* is felicitous if its referent is semantically or situationally unique, weakly familiar, and **perceptually prominent or task/goal relevant**.

(2') *Context: minimally different from (2): the stranger opens a curtain to let in sunlight*

b'. vián tè wáfàj dón      The sun is more  
sun DEF shines today      **perceptually prominent**  
'The sun is bright today.'      than in (1).

(3') *Context: Minimally different from (3): Dave prefers only dark meat every year:*

b'. m-á-m-bìlì      m-á-bò      m-á-tè      The legs are more  
1s.already.have CL<sub>6</sub>-leg AGR<sub>6</sub>-DEF      **task/goal relevant**  
'I already have the legs.'      than in (2).

(4') *Context: Abondo and Andung live in the big village where the market is held. The chief of their village is planning to host the chiefs of several smaller nearby villages. He asks Abondo and Andung to house and take care of and cook for one of these chiefs. They go to the market to get food and then go home to clean and prepare. Later, they are sitting on the porch waiting, and they see a man coming toward their house.*

b'. èḡkúkúimá tè àzù ndá ʔdzájgán      This particular chief is more  
chief DEF is.coming house our      **task/goal relevant**  
'The chief is coming to our house.'      than in (3).

### B. ?*the* | ✓DEM | ✓Pronoun | ✓*-tè*

An NP with *-tè* is felicitous when its referent is unique among the salient DRs (including those **under discussion**), even when it is not unique in the context.

(5') *Context: I say to you: Yesterday I saw two men and a woman at the farm. One of the men had black hair.*

b'. fám tè èmbó èkóbò fúlàsí      Unlike in (5), only one man  
man DEF was speaking French.      is the **topic under dis-**  
'The [black haired] man was speaking French.'      **ussion** and thus salient.

## 3 Saliency as attention

The acceptability of an NP with *-tè* depends on the saliency of its antecedent to the addressee. I define saliency in terms of attention capture. Attention capture depends on **perceptual prominence and task/goal relevance**, including being the **topic under discussion**.

- **Perceptual prominence in (2) and (2')**: The perceptual prominence and contrast of a stimulus correlates with its bottom-up attention capture (Awh et. al. 2012, Chen et. al. 2013, Inukai et. al. 2010, Nordfang et. al. 2013, Parmentier 2008).
- **Relevance to current tasks/goals in (3), (4), (3'), and (4')**: A stimulus's relevance to an individual's current and past tasks and goals correlates with its top-down attention capture (Awh et. al. 2012, Nordfang et. al. 2013, Tanenhaus et. al. 2004, Zehetleitner et. al. 2012).
- **Topic under discussion in (5) and (5')**: Being under discussion is a special kind of saliency due to top-down attention capture. Chiarcos 2011, Grosz et. al. 1995, Gundel et. al. 1993, *inter alia*, have argued that the choice of referential expression partially depends on the attentional state of the addressee.

## Attention tracking in discourse

**Facts about the interlocutors' attentional states are in the common ground.** Interlocutors track each other's gaze, often for reference resolution (Böckler et. al. 2011, Liebal et. al. 2009, Rohde and Frank (2011), Staudte and Crocker 2011).

## 4 Analysis

Following Stalnaker (1978), Lewis (1979), Kamp (1981), and Heim (1982):

- (6) a context  $c =_{def} \langle I, C, D, t \rangle$ , where
- $I =_{def}$  the set of interlocutors, including speaker,  $s$ , and addressee,  $a$
  - $C =_{def}$  the common ground
  - $D =_{def}$  the set of weakly familiar DRs
  - $t =_{def}$  the utterance time
- (7)  $Sal =_{def}$  a relation between an interlocutor,  $\alpha \in I_c$ , and a DR,  $i \in D_c$  s.t.  $Sal(i, \alpha)$  just in case  $C_c$  entails that  $\alpha$  is attending to  $i$  at  $t_c$
- (8) a.  $-tè =_{def} \lambda c. \lambda P. \lambda i. i \in D_c [P(i) \wedge Sal(i, a_c)]$   
b. The use of an NP with *-tè* is felicitous in  $c$  iff  
 $\exists i \in D_c [P(i) \wedge Sal(i, a_c) \wedge \forall j \in D_c [(P(j) \wedge Sal(j, a_c)) \rightarrow j = i]]$

### Parallel analyses involving evident mental states of individual interlocutors:

- Roberts (2010) argues that the retrievability of the intended referents of definite NPs in English depends in part on the addressee's attentional state.
- Gunlogson (2002) argues that interlocutors track each other's public "discourse commitments."
  - Used by Gunlogson (2002) to account for declaratives with rising intonation.
  - Appealed to by Farkas (2002) for an account of epistemic specificity.

## Conclusions

- Bulu NPs with *-tè* display a different pattern of acceptability than any kind of English definite.
- NPs with *-tè* are felicitous in contexts that entail that the referent of the NP is unique among the DRs that are salient to the addressee, in the sense of being attended to.
- An NP with *-tè* is more likely to be acceptable if its referent is perceptually prominent or task/goal relevant, as predicted by a saliency account.
- The cross-linguistically common feature of definites is uniqueness. However, definites differ cross-linguistically in their uniqueness domains.

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