

## What sort of a thing is life?

or

### \*The life is a bitch

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No, this is not going to be reflections on life as such, or *das Leben an und für sich*. It is a short note on a divergence in use between the definite determiner in English and German in generic sentences.

When a speaker of English says *Life is a bitch*, or simply *Life is hard*, and a German speaker says *Das Leben ist schwer*, we may safely suppose that both are intending to say pretty much the same thing and are talking about the same abstract object, namely life in general or life as such. Presumably they are making a generic statement, either a *characterizing statement* or a statement that involves *kind reference* (Krifka 1995). Exceptions that one may want to bring up, like "except in California", or "außer in Baden", would not matter to the truth of the claim made. And a pretty similar situation, even though not quite identical, we find in sentences like *Das Leben auf der Erde entstand vor etwa 3,5 Milliarden Jahren*. Here the issue of possible exceptions is irrelevant and we are less likely concerned with a characterizing statement, but with a straightforward reference to a kind. Also here German requires the definite article and English would certainly much prefer the bare NP: *Life on earth originated about 3,500 Million years ago*.

But what sort of a kind, or what kind of a sort, is life? What is so special about it that leads to this divergence in determiner use between English and German? There are more sorts that show this unkind behaviour: When German philosophers write about *die Schönheit (beauty)*, *die Liebe (love)*, or *die Wahrheit (truth)*, the translation into English will normally lack the definite article, and where the English historian talks about *industrialization*, *globalization*, or certain other historical developments, the translator will almost always have to add the definite article for German: *Die Industrialisierung*, *die Globalisierung*, etc. Also academic disciplines or other crafts that are referred to in English by bare nominals, such as *linguistics*, *physiology*, *surgery*, or *carpentry* come out in German as *die Linguistik*, *die Physiologie*, *die Chirurgie*, and *die Schreinerei*. – What do these kinds have in common that makes them behave this way? How do they differ from natural kinds, which are more commonly discussed in linguistic and philosophical papers on generics, like the beaver (that builds dams), the dodo (unfortunately extinct), or the elm tree (for which we all feel some pity because even some of our best philosophers, notably Hilary Putnam, openly confess that they can't distinguish it from the beech tree)? – Reference to natural kinds does not show up, as far as I can see, any such differences between English and German in the use of the definite determiner as we find them with the kinds just mentioned.

So why are we not allowed to use the definite article in English, where German does not bear its omission? – There does not seem to be any difference with respect to definiteness between *Life is hard* and *das Leben ist schwer*. And clearly we are not concerned with a difference between the referents. At least I don't suppose that anybody would want to offer the hypothesis that speakers of English and German maintain different concepts of life.

What is this class of nouns – or is it a class of kinds? – that shows up the difference in the use of definite determiners between English and German?

Do we have analogous differences between other languages with respect to determiner behaviour? For instance, can we find any parallel to the English-German difference when we look at definiteness marking in languages that don't mark definiteness by determiners?

Supposing we are actually concerned with reference to kinds in the cases mentioned, what sort of kinds are *life, love, beauty, truth, linguistics*? What are their instances? How do they differ from natural kinds?

And finally, how does this English-German difference fit in with Manfred Krifka's (2003) ideas about bare NPs and reference to kinds?

## References

Krifka, Manfred, F.J. Pelletier, G.N. Carlson, A. ter Meulen, G. Chierchia, & G. Link (1995) Genericity: An introduction. In Gregory N. Carlson & Francis J. Pelletier (eds.) *The Generic book*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. Pp. 1-124.

Krifka, Manfred (2003): Bare NPs: Kind-referring, Indefinites, Both, or Neither? In *Semantics and Linguistic Theory* (SALT) 13.