

Bare nouns, incorporation, and scope

The goal of this paper is to explore the connections between the syntax and the semantics of bare nouns. Chierchia (1998) connects the distribution of bare nouns cross-linguistically to variation in nominal interpretation: in a language like Chinese, where bare nouns are the norm, the basic denotation of a noun is mass. In French and English, on the other hand, there is a mass/count distinction and the distribution of bare nouns is restricted. Rullmann and You (2006), however, argue that bare nouns in Chinese are not mass, *per se*, but unmarked for number (“general number”). Moreover, they show that bare nouns take obligatory narrow scope, like English bare plurals – they conclude that there is a correlation between the syntax of bare nouns and their semantics, but that the correlation relates syntactic structure to scope. Their conclusion is backed up by data from a range of languages where bare nouns take narrow scope, including Turkish (Bliss 2003), Indonesian (Chung 2000), and Javanese (Sato 2008). Data from Malagasy, however, show that neither Chierchia nor Rullmann and You is correct: Malagasy allows bare noun arguments that have general number, but these bare nouns permit variable scope readings (and the language has a mass/count distinction). Thus the mapping from syntax to semantics is not as straightforward as previously assumed.

Malagasy has a definite determiner (*ny* in (1b) and other examples), but lacks an indefinite counterpart. Malagasy therefore allows bare (indefinite) noun arguments (1) much like Chinese, but it does not have a generalized classifier system (there is a mass/count distinction) (2). Like Chinese, Malagasy nouns have general number: they are morphologically unmarked for singular and plural, discourse anaphora can be singular or plural, and they show the pragmatic effects of general number discussed by Rullmann and You (3). Most importantly for this paper, however, bare nouns allow both wide and narrow scope readings (4). Thus there is no strict correlation between the internal syntax of nominals (presence vs. absence of a determiner) and their semantics (scope), *contra* Rullmann and You.

The variable scope behaviour of bare nouns in Malagasy is all the more puzzling when the external syntax of bare nouns is considered. Bare nouns in Malagasy appear to be pseudo-incorporated (Massam 2001): they must be adjacent to the verb and cannot undergo any movement, such as scrambling (5) or topicalization. In other words, Malagasy has syntactic pseudo-incorporation without so-called semantic incorporation (van Geenhoven 1999, Farkas and de Swart 2003). Once again, we see that the syntax does not map directly onto the semantics.

This paper concludes by exploring the possibility that Malagasy has a null indefinite determiner (the equivalent of ‘a’ or ‘some’), thus that bare nouns aren’t really bare at all. A null determiner would make the mapping between syntax and semantics more uniform: for Chierchia, Malagasy would then be a language like Italian; for Rullmann and You, the presence of the null determiner explains the scope facts. The null determiner could also explain the somewhat restricted distribution of bare nouns in Malagasy, in particular their inability to appear in the subject position (if the null head requires special licensing). On the other hand, positing a null determiner raises questions about learnability and the motivation for null heads in the syntax.

- (1) a. Manolotra penina izy. b. Rakofana kopy ny tsaramaso.
 AT.offer pen 3(NOM) TT.cover cup DET bean
 'She offers a pen.' 'The beans are covered with a cup.'
- (2) a. Novidiny ny boky enina.
 PST.TT.buy.3(GEN) DET book six
 'She bought six books.'
- b. Novidiny ny lafarina enina *(kilao).
 PST.TT.buy.3(GEN) DET flour six (kilo)
 'She bought six (kilos of) flour.'
- (3) a. # Tsy nividy boky aho, fa nividy dimy.
 NEG PST.AT.buy book 1SG(NOM) C PST.AT.buy five
 'I didn't buy one or more books, I bought five.'
- b. Tsy nividy boky iray aho, fa nividy dimy.
 NEG PST.AT.buy book one 1SG(NOM) C PST.AT.buy five
 'I didn't buy one book, I bought five.'
- (4) a. Mitady alika aho – na alika inona na alika inona.
 AT.look-for dog 1SG(NOM) or dog what or dog what
 'I'm looking for a dog – any dog.'
- b. Mitady alika aho – kely sy mainty ilay izy.
 AT.look-for dog 1SG(NOM) small and black DEF 3(NOM)
 'I'm looking for a dog – it's small and black.'
- (5) a. Mamitaka ankizy matetika Rabe.
 AT.trick child often Rabe
 'Rabe often tricks children.'
- b. * Mamitaka matetika ankizy Rabe.
 AT.trick often child Rabe

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