

Outline of talk: Interpretation of some determinerless noun phrases

0. I focus here on the syntax and semantics of English determinerless singular count nouns. The background for this work includes an examination of the syntax and semantics of bare singulars in several languages--Norwegian (Borthen 1998), Albanian (Kallulli 1999), Brazilian Portuguese (Munn and Schmidt 1999), Hindi (Dayal 1999), English (Heycock and Zamparelli, 2000; Roeper, 2000), and the incorporated noun form in West Greenlandic (van Geenhoven, 1996). I am not examining bare singular forms in languages without a singular/plural distinction and without articles, such as Mandarin, Korean, Latin, etc etc., though it would be nice if what I say here has some bearing on those languages as well.

1. I take the point of view that English bare singulars are, in general, not idioms (though doubtless some are, e.g. "fight tooth and nail" to be "in hock"): they are too productive, combine with too many different verbs and prepositions. I give a vague but serviceable characterization of what an "idiom" is, and use examples such as the following to illustrate:

Adjuncts:

Hat in hand,
Mop in mind,
Hat on head,
Glove in pocket, he entered the kitchen.

Conjunctions:

The relationship between doctor and patient
parent and child
supervisor and worker
mentor and student

Argument positions:

Listen to
Watch

Look at
Turn on
Find...boring
Pay attention to television

Go to
Be in
Learn a lot from
Hate
Enjoy
Find...boring
Write letters from
Escape prison

2. Now I differentiate the adjunct and conjunction cases from the argument cases, in order to focus solely on the latter. The argument cases apply only to a limited number of nouns, the majority of which are of Germanic origin, e.g.:

The ship sailed to sea/*ocean
I did not enjoy prison/*penitentiary
I dropped my son off at college/*university (American English)
Bed/*couch is a good place to just lie and think.
Let's see what's on television/*radio (AmEng)

On the other hand, the conjunctive and adjunct cases are NOT selective:

The ship sailed from ocean to ocean.
Penitentiary or no penitentiary, he wasn't going to tell on his friends.
Body now firmly on couch, he went to sleep.
High school and university are both demanding places to study.
Radio strapped to his back, he took off for his hike.

Further, there is a register difference between the argument and the conjunction/adjunct sentences. The argument cases are all perfectly everyday English, whereas the other cases are not all that way, especially the more novel forms--they belong to a higher register of speech. Some are lower register:

time after time,
man to man,
month after month...

(NOTE: I need to work more on the "sea" example, it's a little different)

3. At this point, I'm going to take it that a distinction has been established between the argument and adjunct/conjunctive cases (note: I need to find an alternative to my inaccurate "adjunct" terminology here). A couple more differences will be pointed out as we proceed. I am going to focus on the argument cases for the remainder of the talk.

Two immediate questions confront us: why can certain nouns (and not others) appear as bare singulars. And second, why can the bare singulars appear only in certain environments and not others:

- *Bed is usually made of wood.
- *I gave college \$1,000.
- *Annie looked across sea.
- *Acme Construction Company built prison.
- *When housecleaning, Fred dusted television.

Let's look at the first question in some detail.

4. Here, I review the semantics of bare singulars from other languages (those cited above). The conclusion is that bare singulars are interpreted as narrow-scope, non-specific indefinites. They have limited distribution, and not every noun can appear in this form.

From there, we move to examining English argument bare singulars. We note the following properties:

i) they cannot be modified in any way

- *Bob went to soft bed
- *I took my son to small college
- *Prison that is crowded is not a good place to make friends.
- *I think I'll watch [television on the bookshelf]

ii) they cannot be pluralized, not even by "dependent pluralization", e.g. "All the ships approached their ports" (where each ship approaches just one port)

(*)All the people went to beds. (cf: to bed)

(*)All the ships are now at seas. (cf: at sea)

(*) All the men made boats by hands. (cf by hand)

iii) Bare singulars contrast in meaning with pluralized/determined counterparts.

If I say, "John went to prison", it means something like, John is IN prison, a prisoner. if I say "John went to a prison", he might have become a prisoner, but he might have also been delivering laundry, just looking at it, etc.

Or, if I say "I stumbled into class", it means the class I was somehow a member of--as teacher, student, TA, or whatever. If I say "I stumbled into a class", it might have been "my" class, but it sounds like I'm going into someone else's classroom, e.g. by accident.

Or, if I say "I enjoyed college", it means, as a student, a participant in the institution; if I say "I enjoyed a college", it might have been as a student, but it sounds like I drove by and enjoyed the scenery, or attended parties and liked the social life, or I used the library, but not necessarily as a student.

I'm going to call these readings for the bare singulars "situational" reading (Quirk et al), and the readings associated with the determined/pluralized/modified cases the "objective" reading.

Note that the conjunction/adjunct bare singulars can be modified:

Right arm resting on left knee, Bob looked relaxed.

In the civil war, it was younger brother against older brother.

Lonely month after long, lonely month, the time dragged by.

Note that bare singulars that allow for situational readings in argument position are ambiguous in conjunctive/adjunct structures:

Son at college, I went for a bite to eat.
She walked between bed and television
John went to prison after prison.

iv) they cannot have any article or quantifier associated with them on the unambiguously situational reading:

Bob went to several prisons
?That college is a good experience (cf: College is...)
?The ship is at some sea.

Summary: all this makes it look like the bare singulars "occupy" a full DP or NP, leaving no other room for any other types of constituents. Or, perhaps they are just N complements. They seem to have properties similar to proper names, in that modification or pluralization changes the meaning. I am going to present some reason to think they are full DP's.

5. Here, I note dialect differences:

He is in hospital (BE)
John went to university (BE)

In American English, the first is rendered: "He is in THE hospital", with a definite article. I note that the presence of the definite article in many, many cases appears to have the same sense as a corresponding bare singular. But not all nouns can participate in this (including, "university").

The chief diagnostic is the ability for something to scope over it. In most instances, a definite article does not allow for scoping over it by other operators within the same sentence: (I need to qualify this some but won't here)

Every woman looked at the dress.
Bob didn't open the toolbox.
Sam always chopped down the tree.

In these cases, each woman looked at the SAME dress, there was a toolbox that Bob didn't open (i.e. there must be a toolbox), and the last sentence sounds funny because it seems like Bob kept chopping down the same tree.

A second diagnostic is that you get identity of reference in anaphora, such as VP anaphora:

John heard about the riot, and Mary did, too (same riot)
Barb noticed the purse, and Max did too (same purse)
Jimmy fixed the antique automobile, and Fred did too (same car)

Bare singulars can be scoped over:

Everyone heard about the riot on television
Mary didn't go to bed
Sam always likes camp.

Here, everyone could be watching different TV's (different stations, too), there is no entailment that there was any bed Mary failed to go to, and the camps can change each summer for Sam. Similarly for VP anaphora cases:

Mike liked college, and Sue did too. (different colleges OK)
John hated prison, but Fred didn't. (can be different prisons)

However, in many cases NP's with definite articles can be scoped over, and do not retain identity of reference, on one salient reading:

Everyone heard about the riot on the radio. (can be different radios)
Mark didn't go to the bathroom (can be, there's none to go to)
Sam always reads the newspaper (can be different papers each time)

John was taken to the hospital, and Mary was too (different hospitals OK)
Gwen heard about the riot on the radio, and Sally did too (same riot, but can be different radios)

Sue is in the bathroom, and Bob is too (need not share the same room)

Other nouns admit so such readings (e.g. "riot" above).

Everyone went to the university/movie/picnic/warehouse/party
(cf: the bank, the store, the library, the park, the beach)

These include definite forms of bare singulars:

Everyone went to the prison/school/bed/dinner/college/camp

A few forms (low register) seem to have only the "bare singular" reading, e.g. "the pen"
(=prison), "the pokey" (also, =prison)

Prison/the pen/the pokey is a hard place to bust out of.
??Prison/?the pen/?the pokey is made of reinforced concrete.
(Possibly BE "the telly" (=television) works this way too)

The presence of restrictive modifiers removes the situational reading, leaving only the
object reading (note: must be read restrictively):

Everyone went to the renovated bank/the yellow bathroom/the crowded beach/the tall
library/the 4-acre park.

In these instances, everyone must have gone to the same beach, park, etc. Non-restrictive
modifiers, especially those of epithetic import, are more or entirely acceptable:

Each woman went to the ol' store.
Everydy's at the sunny beach again!
?Each accident victim was taken to the wonderful, wonderful hospital.
The ol' pokey is a great place to meet friends.

However, bare singulars do not allow even for this type of modification:

??My son is at wonderful, wonderful college.

*Ol' prison is a great place to meet friends.

*I walked into gloomy class.

This differentiates the bare singulars from proper names, which can take nonrestrictive modifiers just fine: "Wise old Solomon", "Poor George", etc.

6. A proposal. I am going to propose that two features distinguish bare singulars from other types of DP's.

i) a [+sit] parameter, for "situational", which in the semantics is represented as a variable over situations. This feature is assigned to nouns in the lexicon, which in most cases have a form that is not assigned this variable. The semantics is that these are timesplaces (not objects) at which one is expected to do typical things associated with the situation induced by being that place, e.g. sleep or rest in bed, be incarcerated in prison, travel at sea, take classes in college, etc. This feature is also assigned to those nouns, like "beach", "bank", etc which may appear with definite articles on the situational reading.

College/prison/lunch/bed/class/ is a good time (OR: place) to relax.

The newspaper//television/the radio (*the book) is a good place (?time) to get information.

ii) a [+def] feature, which ensures that the N must move into (an empty) D position at S-structure. This feature is not assigned to "beach", "store", etc., nor other nouns. This feature is uninterpretable at the N level, it is only interpretable if it becomes a constituent of D. The semantic function of the [+def] feature is to lambda-abstract over the situational variable, thereby making it "visible" to the semantics. The definite article carries the [+def] feature, which makes the situational variable of words such as "beach", "store" etc available for interpretation.

The idea here is that any kind of extra material in the DP will block N to D movement, removing all possibility of modification, and the binding of the [+sit] variable from the D position with [+def] cannot bypass restrictive modifiers (which, in effect, create a NEW noun that is not marked [+sit]), so "the yellow store" cannot be situational (but only objective).

7. The "situational" variable. In order for the situational reading to become available, there must be someone or something that is associated with the situation. In sentences like:

Bill is at school.

Mary is at the beach.

Prof. Plum is in class.

The subject anchors the situational variable. Note that if we use inanimate objects instead, the result is typically strange:

?The pillow is in bed.

?The desks are at school.

?The message went to camp.

However, there are plenty of examples that can be constructed in which no animate NP appears as the subject or in the sentence at all, but the sentence is nevertheless acceptable:

Darn. That book must still be at school.

My glasses broke in class.

The message arrived in camp just in the nick of time

In the first example, there is a silly reading where books attend class available, but the more plausible reading is where I, the speaker, left my book at school. In the second, note that there is an understanding of the sentence that the ship is out at sea being used as a means of travel or transport. If, for instance, someone cut the anchor ropes and the ship drifted into the ocean, one would not say "the ship is at sea" to describe this situation. It needs to be anchored by something willful, that can control the ship (or, perhaps the metaphor of ships being called "she" comes into play here). In the last example it is my class that the glasses broke in; it must be understood as connected to me.

Somewhat more subtly, consider the following contrasts:

*Bed is made of wood.

Bed is very comfortable.

*Prison is large.

Prison is unpleasant.

Class was really boring.

Class was really hot today.

Class was very time-consuming.

*Class was really bright.

*Class was really intelligent.

*Class was very sleepy.

Adjectives like "comfortable, unpleasant, boring, hot, time-consuming" all are understood as evaluations by the speaker; non-evaluative adjectives like "large, bright, intelligent, sleepy" or expressions like "made of wood" do not depend on speaker evaluation. Note that the class was, for instance, boring to the speaker, the speaker was hot, or the speaker found it time-consuming; that is the opinion of the speaker and that is all there is to it. In these cases the evaluative adjective directs us to the experiencer that anchors the situation.

This seems to be a pragmatic matter; it does not appear that one can easily formulate any syntactic connection between a phrase in the sentence and the (apparent) necessity of having an appropriate experiencer to relativize the situation to.

8. To conclude. A question remains as to whether these situational DP's are really definite, that is, denote a unique object in a situation. The analysis here so far is to align situational readings with functional readings of DP's. For example:

Every man loves his mother.

Each boy took the prize that he liked best.

John always goes up in the tallest building.

However, if I say:

"Mom, I'm going to the store for a few minutes."

there need be any one unique store that I am going to in the situation. Myself, I might not even have made up my mind when I said it; it might only be that I need some masking

tape, and lots of places sell that, and I'll figure it out when I leave. On the other hand, if I say:

"Mom, I'm going to read the book"

there must be some unique, salient book in the situation, and it seems to me that I really had to have made up my mind which book I was going to read (on the other hand, if I said I was going to read the newspaper, there need be no such unique newspaper.) These facts are striking; note that in many cases the truth conditions are the same if indefinites are substituted:

I'm going to a store.

I'm going to read a newspaper.

However, these situational DP's cannot appear in environments selecting indefinites only:

*There is the newspaper on the couch.

*There is college next to downtown.

So I leave this simply as a puzzle for future work.

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