

Semantic incorporation as an account for some bare singular count noun uses in English

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Abstract

This work investigates inter-related syntactic and semantic issues concerning bare singular count nouns (BSCNs) in English. I explore differences in interpretation, distribution, and possible underlying nominal structure to investigate how BSCNs fall out when considered as semantically incorporated nominals. By examining their interaction with discourse anaphora, number neutrality, and modification, I conclude that some uses of English bare singulars show the behavior of full referential DPs, while others are best explained as semantically incorporated nominals fused with a preposition or intransitive verb.

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1. Introduction

This paper develops an account for the odd behavior of an English nominal form that can be found with neither an article nor a plural marker. Bare occurrences of words such as *town*, *school*, *prison*, *church* are unusual for ostensible count nouns. Not surprisingly, then, despite being referred to as nouns, such Bare Singular Count Nouns (BSCNs) might be better considered as some larger constituent type. If so, several underlying syntactic forms for the nominal could be suggested (e.g., a full DP, an NP complement, as well as simply a lexical noun). We then might look to differences in the syntactic distribution or semantic interpretation of BSCNs to reveal distinctions hidden by their similar surface forms.

Previous work on these nominals has focused on three aspects. First, research has either looked only briefly and non-theoretically at their overt syntactic form as nouns (Quirk et al., 1985; Soja,

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1994), while theoretical work on the structure within DPs has omitted English bare singular count forms from the data to be explained (Longobardi, 2003; Munn and Schmitt, 2002; Zamparelli, 2005). Second, at the distributional level, most work has focused on the occurrence of BSCNs in PPs (Stvan, 1991; Baldwin et al., 2006), while overlooking the use of the form in the grammatical positions of subjects and objects. As work emerges showing that these nominals do occur in other positions, questions then arise as to whether nominals in these positions function identically to those in PPs. Third, the most extensive previous work to focus on BSCN forms has probed the ambiguous semantic or pragmatic readings of the form (Stvan, 1998, 2007; Carlson, 2003).

Because disputed versions of bare nominal syntax exist, and the forms occur in both argument and predicate positions, and multiple readings are possible, English BSCNs are anomalous when viewed by form, distribution, and interpretation. This paper suggests ways in which it is revealing to look for alignments of these unexpected aspects; particularly as such alignments could confirm whether there are distinct subtypes of bare singular forms. In short, we might expect that, for example, different readings are due to there being more than one syntactic unit that falls under the label of BSCN; different readings are accounted for by uses in different positions; or an account might be made for a syntactic form based on whether the uses are identical in such referential aspects as terms as definiteness, co-referentiality, argument-hood, etc.

Crucially, the idea of nominal forms having a marked morpho-syntax along with limited functions within a predicate shows a parallel to the idea of nominal incorporation, another concept that ties marked nominal forms and positions to particular interpretations. I suggest here that some uses of BSCNs actually function in ways that qualify them as pseudo or semantic incorporation. By assessing incorporation as an option for viewing some English nominals, I hope to make more complex, but also more accurate, our understanding of the range of the structure and meaning of BSCNs.

Noun incorporation, originally viewed as a syntactic and morphological aspect of languages (Baker, 1988; Mithun, 1984, 1986; Rosen, 1989; Sadock, 1985), has lately been analogously interpreted as a semantic approach to types of marked indefinite nominals (Bittner, 1988, 1994; Dayal, 1999, 2003; de Hoop, 1992; Farkas and de Swart, 2003; Mathieu, 2006; McNally, 1998, 2004; Van Geenhoven, 1998, 2001). For example, approaching incorporation from the meaning of the nominal forms in Hungarian, Farkas and de Swart (2003:3) suggest that forms counting as incorporating nominals (INs) show the following cluster of features: (a) special morpho-syntax (in particular, lack of determiner and restriction to special positions); (b) with the special morpho-syntax correlating with special semantic readings; and (c) the INs often not being visible in discourse, that is, they show an inability to serve as antecedents in discourse anaphora, appearing instead only with narrow scope indefinite readings. This is similar to observations that semantically incorporated nominals often share with traditional incorporated nouns a meaning conveying institutional activity (Mithun, 1984). Other researchers have additionally suggested that semantically INs exhibit number neutrality (Dayal, 1999), and restricted modification (Massam, 2001).

Addressing each of the purported IN features in turn, we have a way to investigate English BSCNs as possible INs. Regarding their morpho-syntax and distribution, section 3 will show that bare singulars do indeed exhibit an unexpected lack of determiner, yet they are not restricted to special syntactic positions. Further, BSCNs do show special readings; in fact, there are three special readings which contrast with the unmarked, i.e., articulated nominal forms.¹ These are

¹ I consider the articulated form for English count nouns (even though it has more components) to be more expected, and thus to be the unmarked form. That definition is counter to many definitions of markedness (cf. Horn, 1984; de Swart and Zwarts, 2007), in which the more elaborate form, rather than the more minimal bare form, is marked.

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