

Bare nouns in Inuktitut: Referential properties or just properties?

The structure of bare nouns has long been controversial. While many argue that bare nouns are associated with unpronounced (covert) determiners (e.g., Longobardi 1994, Progovac 1998), many others argue that bare nouns are in fact bare, and are not associated with covert determiners (e.g., Compton 2004, Trenkic 2004, Zlatic 1999). In this paper, we argue that bare nouns in Inuktitut are associated with covert determiners (contra Compton 2004). We show that the arguments for the absence of D in Inuktitut do not hold up to close scrutiny. Compton (2004) ties the lack of a D position to 3 facts: (i) Inuktitut lacks overt determiners, including “no” or “every” quantifiers; (ii) Nouns in Inuktitut cannot behave as predicates without functional superstructure; and (iii) Singular nouns in Inuktitut cannot be interpreted generically. There are a number of problems with these arguments. (i) “No” and “every” are absent in Salish languages as well – most Salish languages are known for their obligatory (and overt) determiners (Matthewson 1998):

- (1) Haw_k mix_{al}h na₇ ta lam₇.
 be._{not} bear realis D house
 ‘There are no bears in the house.’

The presence/absence of these types of quantifiers have no bearing on the presence/absence of determiners, overt or otherwise. (ii) Nouns in English (a language known for having overt determiners) also require functional superstructure to behave as predicates:

- (2) a. *Mary teacher. b. Mary **is a** teacher.

We show that in Inuktitut, the “predicativizer” *-u-* is necessary to carry the mood/tense information. Languages which lack obligatory (overt) tense marking allow nouns to act as predicates, but this has nothing to do with presence or absence of D. (iii) Singular nouns of type *e* are precisely the types of nouns that are predicted to receive kind interpretations (Chierchia 1998). If, on the other hand, bare nouns are of type $\langle e, t \rangle$, then kind readings are more difficult to obtain.

So, while the claimed lack of the syntactic head D in Inuktitut is shown in this talk to be problematic, we also examine the theoretical assumption from which this “absence” of D is argued to follow, namely, that “nominals in Inuktitut are inherently referential” (Johns 2007:546). We show, first, that this proposal makes the wrong empirical predictions with respect to the possible interpretations of apparent greater-than-narrowest-scope nominals. That is, referential elements, of type *e*, are not scope-bearing elements, always having the appearance of widest scope (Fodor & Sag 1982, and much subsequent work). But this is not always the case for Inuktitut bare nominals, and we discuss at least one context in which intermediate readings are possible (in the presence of a bound variable pronoun) and what sort of approach to nominals can account for the observed facts (one that takes nouns to be universally property-denoting, and includes a choice-function mechanism of the Kratzer 1998 or Matthewson 1999 type). Second, we examine the claim that “the accusative *-mik* case in Inuktitut seems to dampen the inherent specificity of nouns” (Compton 2004:43; see also Johns 2005,2007). This is necessary under an approach taking bare nouns to be inherently referential, in order to capture the narrow-scope readings of objects of antipassivised verbs. We show that (a) *-mik* case does not always entail an obligatory narrow-scope reading, and that (b) the full range of obliquely case-marked nominals in Inuktitut, in fact, generally have available to them a narrow-scope interpretation. Thus, we show that tying the relevant semantic properties to the *-mik* case marker makes predictions that are contrary to the observable Inuktitut facts.

References:

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