

General number in Malagasy

Chierchia (1998) connects the distribution of bare nouns to 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. In fact, they suggest that bare nouns in many languages show “general number”. Moreover, they point out that bare nouns also take obligatory narrow scope, much like English bare plurals.

This paper explores the correlations between bare noun arguments, general number, narrow scope, and the mass/count distinction, drawing mainly on data from Malagasy. These data show that neither Chierchia nor Rullmann and You are 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.

The variable scope behaviour of bare nouns in Malagasy is all the more puzzling when the syntax of bare nouns is considered. Bare nouns in Malagasy pattern with “pseudo noun incorporated” nouns: they must be adjacent to the verb and cannot undergo any movement, such as scrambling or topicalization.

The paper concludes by exploring the possibility that Malagasy has a null indefinite determiner, thus that bare nouns aren’t really bare at all.