

Definite Bare Noun Subjects in English

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Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 A problem for Chierchia's theory of noun phrase interpretation
- 3 Properties of bare subjects
- 4 Analysis
- 5 Summary



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Warning: there are a few examples with swear words in the talk.



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Chierchia on noun phrase interpretation

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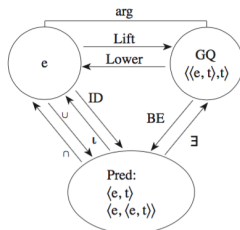
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 - $[\pm\text{arg}]$: Ns can(not) be mapped onto arg type things
 - $[\pm\text{pred}]$: Ns can(not) be mapped onto pred type things
 - Three language types
- (3)

- (2)
- a. $[+\text{arg}, -\text{pred}]$: Mandarin Chinese, Japanese.
 - b. $[-\text{arg}, +\text{pred}]$: French, Italian (with constraints on null D).
 - c. $[+\text{arg}, +\text{pred}]$: English, most Germanic languages.

- Partee (1986)'s type-shifters
(+Chierchia's \cap, \cup)

Type shifting in general



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$*\tau(X)$

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- Since English has a definite determiner, iota type-shifting is blocked, and so we expect definite bare nouns to be impossible in the language.



Predictions for English

A summary of how we expect noun phrase interpretation to work in English (adapted from Deal and Nee 2018, based on Chierchia 1998):

(5)

	Bare mass noun	Bare plural	Bare singular
Kind-level reading	Available N is kind denoting	Available □ type shift	Unavailable □ undefined
Narrow scope existential reading	Available N denotation + DKP	Available □ type shift + DKP	Unavailable □ undefined
Definite reading	Unavailable ι blocked by <i>the</i> and outranked by □	Unavailable ι blocked by <i>the</i> and outranked by □	Unavailable ι blocked by <i>the</i>
Wide scope existential reading (\exists GQ interpretation)	Unavailable \exists outranked by □; available only if □ is undefined	Unavailable \exists outranked by □; available only if □ is undefined	Unavailable \exists blocked by <i>a</i>



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- Pronominal possessors appear to be droppable too.



Only left-edge subjects

- Not possible following topicalised constituent (6a), or in embedded clauses (6b).

- (6) a. *This morning cats didn't wanna come in.
b. *I heard (that) cats don't wanna come in.



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Author's a dickhead, though.
- Not indefinite
- (11) *Car's broken down.* = the/*a car's broken down.



Pronominal Possessors

Thanks to an LAGB abstract reviewer for this data point!

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Could potentially be *the shampoo*, but the following example is equivalent for me, and forces the possessive reading (*#the fly's undone*):

- (13) *Fly's undone, mate.*



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Against radical absence and N-to-D

- No explanation for impossibility of definite bare nouns in certain positions:
 - * embedded subject position
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- Important characteristics of SPD:
 - ▶ Only possible at the left edge: not possible with embedded subjects, or matrix subjects preceded by preposed material.
 - ▶ Focused subjects may not be dropped.
- Weir (2012) develops an Optimality Theoretic approach to this phenomenon.



Components of an OT approach

- Prosodic hierarchy (Selkirk 1978 et seq):
 - ▶ Utterance
 - ▶ Intonational Phrase (ι)
 - ▶ Phonological Phrase (ϕ)
 - ▶ Prosodic Word (ω)
 - ▶ Foot (Ft)
 - ▶ Syllable (σ)
- Faithfulness constraints mapping syntax to phon:
 - ▶ MATCH(Clause, ι)
 - ▶ MATCH(Phrase, ϕ)
 - ▶ MATCH(Word, ω)



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- **MAX**: penalise deletion.



Constraints responsible for SPD

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[CP [TP [D He] [TP [T is] [VP [v going]]]]]	STRST	MATCH (ω , LEX)	MAX	MATCH (S, P)
a. [_i [_{ϕ} (_{σ} He) [_{ϕ} (_{σ} is) [_{ϕ} [_{ω} going]]]]]	*!*			
b. [_i [_{ϕ} [_{ϕ} [_{ω} He]] [_{ϕ} [_{ϕ} [_{ω} is]] [_{ϕ} [_{ω} going]]]]]		*!*		
c. [_i [_{ϕ} (_{σ} He's) [_{ϕ} [_{ω} going]]]]	*!			*
d. [_i [_{ϕ} [_{ω} (_{σ} He's) (_{Ft} going)]]]	*!			**
 e. [_i [_{ϕ} [_{ω} 's going]]]			he	*
f. [_i [_{ϕ} [_{ω} going]]]			he, is!	



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- Also explains why a deleted definite article/possessor with a full auxiliary in these cases sounds odd:

- (15) a. # *Car has broken down.*
 b. # *Shampoo is fucked, mate.*



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 - ▶ **Indefinite articles are therefore expected to resist deletion.**



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 - ▶ Russian: topicalised bare nouns are obligatorily definite (Erteschik-Shir 2014)
 - ▶ Lango: clause initial bare noun subjects must be definite, although non-initial subjects need not be (Lyons 1999)



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- This definiteness effect is perhaps unsurprising when viewed from a cross-linguistic perspective.
- Where definiteness has to be interpreted based on context alone, it's typical to see an effect of syntactic (or perhaps linear) position across languages:
 - ▶ Mandarin Chinese: bare noun subjects are definite (Li and Thompson 1981; Matthews and Yip 1994; Huang et al. 2009; Lyons 1999)
 - ▶ Japanese: topic marked bare nouns are definite/generic (Kuno 1973; Portner and Yabushita 1998)
 - ▶ Russian: topicalised bare nouns are obligatorily definite (Erteschik-Shir 2014)
 - ▶ Lango: clause initial bare noun subjects must be definite, although non-initial subjects need not be (Lyons 1999)
- Where an overt article is lacking in English, the meaning is similarly constrained.



Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 A problem for Chierchia's theory of noun phrase interpretation
- 3 Properties of bare subjects
- 4 Analysis
- 5 Summary



Summary

- Definite bare noun subjects in English involve a syntactically represented (and semantically interpreted) D head which is deleted in the mapping from syntax to prosodic structure.
- This deletion process applies strictly in definite contexts because of the prosodically weak nature of discourse-given material, and its recoverability from context.
- Ultimately, this means that definite bare nouns do not represent a challenge to the theory of definiteness developed in Chierchia (1998) and subsequent work.



Thank you!

Slides available at my website:
<https://sites.google.com/view/david-hall>



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