Discourse vs. syntax: The interpretation of ungrammatical bare nouns in L2 English

Michael C. Stern\textsuperscript{a}, Ming Chen\textsuperscript{b}, Veneeta Dayal\textsuperscript{a}, and Gita Martohardjono\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Yale University
\textsuperscript{b}The Graduate Center, City University of New York
Definiteness and number in nominal systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English:</th>
<th>Mandarin:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definite</td>
<td>Indefinite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Singular</strong></td>
<td>the dog</td>
<td>a dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plural</strong></td>
<td>the dogs</td>
<td>some dogs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bare nouns = *kind terms* (Carlson 1977)

- *dogs/gou* $\Rightarrow$ narrow scope indefinite via $\exists$
- *dogs/gou* $\Rightarrow$ definite via iota
Bare nouns in Mandarin

Subjects = [+DEF]  Objects = [+/- DEF]

1. Syntax or discourse?
   a. Null indefinite determiner only licensed in object position (Li 1998), or
   b. Kind-derived indefinite reading blocked in subject position by topicality (Yang 2001)

2. Weak or strong definites?
   a. Bare nouns are weak or non-anaphoric definites, except in subject/topic position (Jenks 2018), or
   b. Bare nouns can be weak or strong definites in any position (Dayal and Jiang 2020)
This study: L2 English bare nouns

Ungrammatical bare nouns are often produced in L2 English (‘Dog is playing’)

RQ: Is the interpretation of ungrammatical bare nouns in L2 English constrained by the L1 grammar with respect to definiteness and number?

1. Acceptability judgment task (AJT) comparing bare nouns in definite and indefinite contexts in subject and object position
2. Picture selection tasks testing interpretations of number and definiteness in subject and object position

Participants = intermediate L2 English learners (L1 Mandarin)
**L2 English: AJT* (n = 52)**

**ANA-D:** A student and a teacher are talking. **Student** is holding a pen.

**DRI-I:** The beach is sunny today. **Child** is wearing a hat.

**PAS-I:** There are many cats in the house. **Cat** is scratching a couch.

**ANA-D:** A necklace and a bracelet are on sale. A woman is buying **necklace**.

**DRI-I:** The lawn needs more plants. A worker is planting **tree**.

**PAS-I:** There are many shirts in the store. A girl is buying **shirt**.
L2 English: Picture selection 1 \((n = 29)\)

Boy wore gloves.

The girl fed squirrel.
L2 English: Picture selection 2 ($n = 29$)

**Bare subjects**

- Proportion
- $a$ vs some vs all of the

**Bare objects**

- Proportion
- $a$ vs some vs all of the

---

Dog ate meat.

The girl flew kite.
Summary of findings

1. With respect to definiteness:
   Subjects = [+DEF]    Objects = [+/- DEF]

2. With respect to number:
   Preference for [+SG], especially in Picture Selection 2
Next step: Topicality

Is the subject/object asymmetry driven by syntax or discourse topicality?

Next AJT will test bare nouns that are neither topical subjects nor direct objects:

e.g. ‘A boy and a dog are in the living room.
     1. Subject with explicit topic: On the couch, dog is biting a toy.’
     2. Indirect object: The boy is giving dog a treat.’
References


