

# Bare Nouns and Qualitative Abstract Representation

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## 0. Introduction

The term 'noun' is used to describe the class of lexical items whose prototypical members refer to entities (e.g. *chair, film, leg*), substances (e.g. *butter, concrete, blood*), abstract concepts (e.g. *information, idea, poetry*), and named individuals or locations (e.g. *John, Paris, France*). Nouns, in general, can be divided into a number of important subclasses based on their grammatical and semantic properties. In English, for instance, there are two basic distinctions: the countable/uncountable distinction and the concrete/abstract distinction. Each subclass has its own language-specific syntactic characteristics. Thus, countable nouns in English are usually accompanied by an article and/or plural morphology (e.g. *a book, the book, books, the books*). But under certain conditions, a countable noun takes bare form, constituting a noun phrase by itself<sup>1</sup>.

There are four types of 'bare nouns' in English, i.e. proper names (e.g. *Bill, London*); uncountable concrete nouns (e.g. *water, furniture*); uncountable abstract nouns (e.g. *music, tennis*); 'countable nouns in bare form'. This last type 'countable nouns in bare form', which does not make up a formal lexical set of their own, is the one I would like to focus on in this paper. Unlike the other three types, which present the unmarked syntactic form of their own set, this type manifests a marked usage of countable nouns. Let us look at the following examples:

- (1) a. *Car* is the best mode of transport.  
b. All our six children are in *bed* at the moment.

Both *car* and *bed* are prototypical countable concrete nouns, yet they appear in bare form in (1).

In the remainder of this paper, I will restrict the use of the term 'bare nouns' to 'countable nouns in bare form', and examine their status, distribution and functions in grammar and discourse. I will argue that the alternation of the type observed in the following pair is the result of two different uses of the same noun, not of two different classes of nouns:

- (2) a. The house is built of *brick*.  
b. He used *bricks* to build the house.

I will propose that *brick* in (2a) represents an abstract quality, whereas *bricks* in (2b) make reference to individuated concrete objects that exist outside the world of language.

## 1. Dual class membership and reclassification

The phenomenon of bare noun usage often goes unrecognized. Quirk et al. (1985: 247) is among the few grammar books that discuss it. It suggests that, although the division of nouns according to countability into countable and uncountable nouns is basic in English, the language makes it possible to look upon some objects from the point of view of both countable and uncountable. That is why discourses like the following occur:

- (3) A: Would you like *a cake*?  
B: No, I don't like *cake*.

Notice that *cake* behaves as countable in (3A), and as uncountable in (3B). Quirk et al.'s suggestion is that such a noun may be said to have 'dual class membership'. Other examples follow:

- (4) a. She was *a beauty* in her youth.  
b. She had great *beauty* in her youth.  
(5) a. She's had many *difficulties*.

- b. She's not had much *difficulty*.
- (6) a. She will give *a talk* on Chinese art.  
b. That's foolish *talk*.

Consider, next, the following discourse:

(7) A: What kind of *cheeses* have you got today?

B: Well, we have Cheddar, Gorgonzola, and Danish Blue.

In explaining the countable use of normally uncountable *cheese* in (7), Quirk et al. (1985: 248) proposes another concept, namely 'reclassification'. Thus, nouns may be shifted from one class to another by means of conversion. An uncountable noun like *cheese* can be 'reclassified' as a countable noun involving a semantic shift so as to denote quality partition 'kind/type/form of'. Similarly, a noun like *coffee*, which is normally uncountable, can be reclassified as a countable noun to mean an 'appropriate unit of', or 'a kind/sort/brand of':

- (8) a. Do you want tea or *coffee*?  
b. Can I have *a coffee*, please ['a cup of coffee']  
c. *Two coffees*, please. ['two cups of coffee']  
d. This is *a nice coffee*.  
e. I like *Brazilian coffees* best.

Quirk et al.'s concepts of dual class membership and reclassification are attractive and may be useful to a certain extent in explaining limited cases, as those in (3)–(8). But it fails to account for many if not most instances of bare nouns. The simple fact that prototypical countable nouns such as *car* and *bed*, are used in bare form, as we saw in (1), would mean that most common nouns in English have dual class membership. Such an analysis would undermine the actuality of the distinction between countable and uncountable. As we will see below, the use of countable nouns in bare form is observed in a variety of syntactic positions, and is highly productive. If bare nouns were the result of reclassification, noun classes would be shifting from one class to another every time a discourse like (2) or (8) takes place. It would increase complexity of mental lexicon and would put too much burden on the human cognitive process.

## 2. Form and status

### 2.1 Form

Bare nouns are distinctively marked with zero article and zero number morphology and are readily distinguished from other nouns by their membership in distinct form classes. The absence of articles, *the* and *a*, indicates that the identifiability contrast which they mark is not applicable to bare nouns. For the same reason, there is no pressure to keep singular/plural number distinction in the relevant context. Their formal characteristic has a direct bearing on their semantic function, as will be discussed in Section 3 below.

### 2.2 Grammatical status

A strong piece of evidence against Quirk et al. (1985)'s notions of dual class membership and reclassification is found in the omnipresence of bare nouns in English discourse. In this subsection, I shall present an outline of the major environments of bare noun occurrence, broken down by their grammatical status. Generally, bare nouns occur in core syntactic position as well as oblique position. We find examples of bare nouns occurring as sentential subject, direct object, object of preposition and noun-phrase premodifier. They are also found in various predicating expressions.

Let us look at some examples for each type, starting with subject bare nouns. In addition to (1a), we find instances such as the following:

- (9) a. *Spider* is shrike's favorite food.  
b. *Letter* was one means of communication he had.  
c. *Man* is mortal.

The reasons for the use of bare nouns in these and a host of other sentences will be our main topic in the subsequent sections. The following are examples of bare nouns in direct object position:

(10) I like to have *breakfast* in an English hotel.

(11) Here men from the planet Earth first set *foot* upon the Moon.

The use of bare nouns as objects of prepositions, as in (1b), is found everywhere in English discourse. Examples such as *go to school/church, travel by train/land/night* readily come to mind. To cite a few more examples:

(12) a. The president is in *town*.

b. He escaped from *prison*.

c. *Skill* comes with *practice*.

d. Enrich one's mind through *study*.

The following sentences exemplify bare nouns used as predicate nominals.

(13) a. The captain's word is *law*.

b. Are you *cosmetics*? ['selling cosmetics/from the cosmetics department']

c. Are you *103*? ['the occupant of room 103, as opposed to 104, etc.']

d. Are you *church* or *chapel*? ['a member of the Church of England or a nonconformist']<sup>2</sup>

The following (14a) exemplifies the use of bare noun in a performative sentence, and (14b) is an example of vocative use of a bare noun.

(14) a. I pronounce you *man and wife*.

b. Excuse me, *officer*, but could you show me the way to the station?

Evidently, the primary function of *man and wife* and *officer* in these sentences is not to refer to the addressee(s) but to attract their/his/her attention or index their/his/her social position. Bare nouns may also act as noun-phrase premodifiers, as in the following examples:

(15) *pear* tree, *glass* factory, *city* life, etc.

### 3. Qualitative abstract representation

In the previous section, we have looked at the distinctive formal characteristics and omnipresence of bare nouns in English. We have also observed the variety of grammatical positions that allow bare noun occurrence. In the remainder of the paper, I shall examine semantic and discourse-functional properties of bare nouns. Specifically, it will be argued that the absence of article and number marking reflects the fact that bare nouns do not introduce a denotatum into the discourse, i.e. they do not refer to any particular objects in the universe of discourse.

In this section, I will address the basic semantic function of bare nouns in general, namely qualitative abstract representation. The crucial point is that this abstract expresses no objective reality. Thus, in using bare nouns, the speaker has no intention to refer to or introduce a referent into the discourse. No object is introduced by a bare noun as a discrete entity and is traced through the evolving discourse.

#### 3.1 Nonreferentiality

Lacking an article and a number marking morphology, a bare noun possesses no referential capacity. It is not used to speak about an object as an object. Typically it is the quality defined by the noun rather than the potential of the noun for reference to an object which is exploited. Let us consider the following discourse examples cited from Allan (1986: 123):

(16) A: What kind of wood should we use for the paneling?

B: *Oak* would be good.

C: *An oak* would be good<sup>3</sup>.

In (16B), there is no intent to speak about a particular oak, not even an unspecified one. Nor is the speaker referring to generic oak as a whole. Rather, the attributes characteristic of being an oak are abstracted off from the potential concrete meaning. In contrast, (16C) refers to a kind of oak, suggesting "some kind of oak".

According to Du Bois (1980: 210), a nonreferential mention by bare noun establishes no mental "file" that can be referred to later. (16B), for instance, does not establish a new file, but (16C) does. On hearing (16C), the speaker of (16A) may anticipate specific information about the kind of oak suggested by his conversa-

tional partner. Consider, next, the following example:

(17) They went out *pear*-picking yesterday. But the pears were green and didn't sell.

The first sentence with a bare noun does not refer to pears, but it nevertheless evokes a frame which includes a slot for pears. This allows a subsequent definite reference to the frame-evoked pears, since, as discussed in Halliday and Hasan (1976: 62), the general nature of anaphoric reference items is such that they refer to the meanings and not to the forms that have gone before.

### 3.2 Conflation

A closer examination of cases where bare nouns occur as objects of verbs or prepositions reveals that a kind of semantic conflation is taking place between a verb or preposition and its object bare noun. Take sentence (10) and (11), which I repeat below:

(10) I like to have *breakfast* in an English hotel.

(11) Here men from the planet Earth first set *foot* upon the Moon.

In (10), the culturally relevant state of “having breakfast” is seen as a unitary predicate concept, so that *breakfast* does not refer to any specific breakfast the speaker has. The bare noun represents a qualitative abstract, or attributes characteristic, of having breakfast. The only purpose in mentioning this activity in the sentence is to characterize the speaker's preferences, so that recognition of a particular breakfast as an objective reality independent of the general activity of ‘having breakfast in an English hotel’ is not relevant. (11) is another example of predicate conflation. The noun phrase in this example is used in conjunction with a verb to express a unitary predicate concept rather than to refer to an actual object. “Setting foot” is expressed as a monolithic concept which does not allow its subsidiary components to reflect independently a sensitivity to the actual situation. The foot is not important in itself but are conflated into a unitary predicate concept of “setting foot”. Following Du Bois (1980: 209), I will use the term ‘conflated object’ in referring to this type of bare noun occurrence.

The conflation in (11) seems to be at a more advanced stage than in (10). It has become almost like an idiom. As Du Bois (1980: 215) argues, verb-plus-object confluations have a certain similarity to idioms and collocations in that their component parts do not vary with the usual degree of freedom. But the formation of verb-plus-object confluations is quite productive, and unlike idioms, their meaning is predictable from their component parts.

Object conflation is not the only type of predicate conflation. Prepositional object conflation also occurs. Let us look at (12) again:

(12) a. The president is in *town*.

b. He escaped from *prison*.

c. *Skill* comes with *practice*.

d. Enrich one's mind through *study*.

The bare nouns in (12) are each conflated with a preposition. Here again, recognition of a particular town, prison, skill, etc. as an objective reality independent of the state, action or process denoted by the verb phrase as a whole is irrelevant.

## 4. Type representation and contrastive implication

### 4.1 Type representation (Subcategorization)

This section is devoted to the exploration of discourse functional aspects of bare nouns. We have seen above that in noun phrases such as *a pear tree*, the first noun is a bare noun. It is true that the noun phrase *a pear tree* as a whole is referential, but the word *pear* serves only to subcategorize tree, not to speak about a pear or pears<sup>4</sup>. Let us consider a few more examples:

(18) a. *brick* garage

b. *reproduction* furniture

As to the grammatical status of the noun phrases in (18), there is disagreement among the scholars. They are treated as ‘compounds’ in Du Bois (1980) and ‘denominal adjective + noun’ in Quirk et al. (1985). If we consider

the high productivity of this type of collocation, it is difficult to subscribe to the compound theory.

At the same time, I find it difficult to accept the idea that the bare nouns in this type of construction are adjectives. In a noun phrase like *a glass factory*, the item *glass* is a bare noun rather than an adjective. The evidence for this is that *glass* can itself be modified by an adjective such as *stained* to give *a stained glass factory* (=a factory which makes stained glass). Adjectives themselves do not permit modification by adjectives, so there is no alternative but to consider *glass* as a bare noun. However, this subcategorizing function of bare nouns is nothing but what Bolinger (1967) called 'reference-modification', one of the two functions of attributive adjectives. There is no question that bare nouns and attributive adjectives share the function of type representation, or subcategorization. Look at the following sentences:

(19) a. She likes *suburban* life.

b. She dislikes *city* life.

(20) It was a funny story but not quite *drawing-room*.

(19a) exemplifies reference-modification with an adjective, (19b) is an example with a bare noun, and (20) has a reference-modifier noun in predicate position.

#### 4.2 Contrastive implication

We saw in the previous subsection that the semantic characteristic of bare nouns used at noun phrase level is that of type representation or subcategorization. If we turn our attention to sentence level, we notice a parallel function, i.e. the use of bare nouns for contrastive implication. Let us look at examples (1a), (2a) and (9) again:

(1) a. *Car* is the best mode of transport.

(2) a. The house is built of *brick*.

(9) a. *Spider* is shrike's favorite food.

b. *Letter* was one means of communication he had.

c. *Man* is mortal.

The unmarked context for these sentences is a contrastive environment. The speaker of (1a) may be contrasting car with other means of transport and the speaker of (2a) may be denying the possibility of other materials being used. Thus, it is not difficult to assume that a situation when, in uttering a sentence like (1a), (2a) or (9), the speaker is, in fact, implying something like the following:

(1) a'. *Car, not train*, is the best mode of transport.

(2) a'. The house is built of *brick, not wood*.

(9) a'. *Spider, not wasp*, is shrike's favorite food.

b'. *Letter, not telephone*, was one means of communication he had.

c'. *Man, unlike God*, is mortal.

It is easy to recognize some kind of contrastive implication in other examples, such as (3B) and (9a-c).

Let us consider the following sentences again:

(13) a. The captain's word is *law*.

b. Are you *cosmetics*?

c. Are you *103*?

d. Are you *church* or *chapel*?

In all of these instances, as well as in (20), we can sense that there is an implied contrast, such as 'law instead of suggestion, advice, etc.' 'cosmetics as opposed to toys, jewellery, etc in a department store'.

#### 5. Concluding remark

In this paper, I have looked at properties of bare nouns in English: their idiosyncratic form, syntactic status, nonreferentiality, and property denotation. I have shown that their distinctive form represents their semantic and discourse function. It was demonstrated that bare nouns are restricted to nonreferential mentions: they do not have referents that exist outside the world of language, neither do they refer to other elements in linguistic context.

Before closing, let us note that many of the properties of bare nouns apply to unmarked use of uncountable nouns, too. In the following sentence, the former use refers to a specific cup of coffee and the latter represent an abstract quality of coffee:

(21) They had *a coffee*, because *coffee* aids digestion after a copious meal.

Whether we are dealing with countable or uncountable nouns, we express abstract quality of entity by means of bare noun form.

Our next task is to explore the contrastive discourse implication which is inherent in bare noun form, and to illuminate the process of its evolution as the necessary effect of abstract quality representation. But we shall have to leave that for another paper.

## Notes

- 1 As we will see below, in certain limited cases, bare nouns can be modified by an adjective.
- 2 Quirk et al. (1985: 248) regards (13b-d) as 'compressed form of the predication'.
- 3 Allan (1986), in line with Quirk et al. (1985), suggests that the *oak* in B and *oak* in C are lexically similar but distinctive items, the former being uncountable and the latter countable.
- 4 Cf. Du Bois (1980: 209).

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