

Bare nouns, articles and (in)definiteness in Malagasy

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In languages that have a definite article but no indefinite article, the definite article typically maps to definites and the bare noun maps to indefinites. In Malagasy, however, it is reported that DPs headed by articles can be interpreted as indefinite in the subject position (where articles are obligatory) (Fugier 1999, Law 2006, Keenan 2007, Paul 2009). This interpretation of bare nouns raises the question of how DPs in other positions are interpreted (e.g. direct objects, clefted subjects). This talk presents data from an online questionnaire that addresses this question.

The literature describes the article *ny* as definite and the bare noun as indefinite. Thus, there appears to be a strict mapping between form and interpretation, as in the translations in (1).

- (1) a. *nahita ny mpivarotra aho* b. *nahita mpivarotra aho*
PST.AT.see DET merchant 1SG PST.AT.see merchant 1SG
'I saw the merchant(s).'

There is, however, a restriction on the subject position: the article is obligatory (2a) (Keenan 1976). Clefted subjects, on the other hand, may be bare (2b).

- (2) a. *lasa *(ny) mpianatra* b. *(ny) mpianatra no lasa*
gone DET student DET student FOC gone
'The/*some student(s) left.'

Despite the presence of the article, the subject (*ny hazo* 'the tree') can be interpreted as indefinite (3).

- (3) *ka nandrosita sady nokapohiko ny hazo...*
then AT.run-away and TT.hit.1SG DET tree
'Then I ran away and hit a tree...' (Fugier 1999:17)

This pattern raises the following questions. (i) Do speakers allow for indefinite readings of subjects, despite the presence of an article? (ii) Given that the article is optional in object and cleft position, do indefinite contexts favour the bare noun? (ii) If there is any optionality in article use, can it be attributed to linguistic or social factors?

To answer these questions, we administered an on-line questionnaire that presented participants with the choice of the article or the bare noun in different argument positions (subject, object, cleft) in contexts that favoured an indefinite/novel interpretation. As predicted, the article was obligatory in subject position, but disfavoured in the object and cleft position. There were 28 participants, so we cannot perform statistical analysis of the data, but the results confirm the current description in the literature. Bare noun subjects were accepted only 6% of the time (which we interpret as errors), while bare noun objects were chosen 89% of the time. Bare clefted DPs were accepted at a slightly lower rate (75%). Argument position was in fact the only factor that played a role in article choice. Finally, only two participants displayed any optionality, choosing both the bare noun and the noun with the article in object and cleft position 66% of the time.

We provide a syntactic analysis of the Malagasy DP, drawing on Giusti (2015). In this framework, Malagasy has two null determiners that can appear in Spec, DP: one indefinite and one definite. The indefinite null determiner combines with the overt article *ny* (in D) only in subject position and marginally when it is enriched with contrast features (e.g. in a cleft). The definite null determiner has the property of being in Spec-Head concord with an overt D, whatever Case (or grammatical function) is attributed to the nominal expression. In either situation, insertion of the

article *ny* is reduced to a matter of feature sharing (Case or concord) and is only indirectly related to interpretation.

References

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