Bare nominals and reference to capacities

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Abstract This paper concentrates on the syntax and semantics of bare nominals in Germanic and Romance languages. These languages do not normally allow nominals to occur without an article. However, some syntactic configurations, including predicative constructions, supplementives and some prepositional phrases, allow bareness of certain nominals. We argue that bare nominals in these constructions refer to capacities: professions, religions, nationalities or other roles in society. Capacities are analyzed as entities of type e, sortally distinct from regular individuals as well as kinds. We further argue that the capacity interpretation is associated with NP—a layer within the DP that lacks number features. This accounts for the number-neutral status of bare nominals. We also show some patterns in languages other than Romance and Germanic that provide further cross-linguistic support for the postulation of capacities as a separate ontological category, specific to a low position within the DP.

Keywords Indefinite · Bare nominal · Predication · Capacity · Number · DP structure
1 Introduction

In many languages, nominals are allowed to be morphologically unmarked and occur in a wide range of argument positions without an article or a determiner. Examples include Chinese, Hindi, Brazilian Portuguese, Slavic languages and several Creole languages. This phenomenon of *Bare Nominals* (henceforth BNs) is cross-linguistically common. In other languages, including the Germanic and Romance languages, in most syntactic environments nominals cannot occur in their bare singular form. These languages typically require nominals to appear with an article or a determiner, or at least with overt marking of number and (possibly) other morphological features. We henceforth refer to such nominals as *Marked Nominals* (MNs), a term that is used here to refer to bare plurals as well. This choice of terminology is not accidental. As we shall see below, in Dutch and other languages (see Munn & Schmitt, 2005 for Brazilian Portuguese, Déprez, 2005 for Haitian Creole), bare “singular” nominals are semantically number-neutral, whereas bare plurals are not.¹

Despite the strong tendency in Romance and Germanic languages for marking nominals, even these languages allow BNs in certain syntactic configurations. For linguistic theory, these constructions are particularly interesting, since they provide a unique kind of evidence of the syntactic and semantic opposition between BNs and MNs. Some examples of such constructions in Germanic and Romance languages are given in (1) through (5).

(1) a. *Il* travaille comme professeur dans un collège. [French]
   He works as a teacher in a high school.
   b. *Il* parle comme un professeur.
   He talks like a teacher.

(2) a. *Zij* heeft de rol van manager.
   She has the role of manager.
   b. *Zij* heeft de rol van een manager
   She has the role of a manager.

(3) a. *Es* negrero.
   He is a trader in black slaves.

¹ We do not address in this paper the question of mass terms, which are notable for their cross-linguistic variance, especially in connection with number marking. In line with this restriction, we also do not address the use of abstract BNs, like *motivo ‘reason’* in (ia) below. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, such abstract BNs may actually be mass terms, analogous to (ib), which are not discussed in this paper.

(i) a. Questo fu motivo di aspre discussioni. [Italian]
   This was reason for lively discussions
   b. Questa è felicità.  
   This is happiness

² Example from Butt and Benjamin (1988).