Bare nouns in Akan revisited

Augustina P. Owusu & Sampson Korsah
(Rutgers University & University of Cape Coast)

Claim: In this paper, we contest the claim by Arkoh & Matthewson (2013) (henceforth, A&M) that bare nouns (BN) in Akan have a definite reading. Rather, we claim that such nouns are indefinites. We show that the so-called definite reading of the BN in the language is derived not from covert ι shift, but rather from an existential quantification over a singleton set (in terms of Schwarzchild 2002). Furthermore, we follow Chierchia (1998) and Dayal (2004) to argue that bare plural nouns in Akan also have a kind reading.

Background : According to Chierchia (1998), Dayal (2004, 2011 2013), a.o., there are three main type shifters that are available for the interpretation of bare nouns. These are: ι,$^{\cap}$, and $\exists$. ι is used to derive definite readings; $^{\cap}$ kind readings, and $\exists$ indefinite readings. These type-shifters are not equally available, and are affected by certain factors, such as Chierchia's *Blocking Principle* which states that if a language lexicalizes the interpretation of one of the type-shifters, the type shifting is blocked in the language. Dayal (2013) ranks the type-shifters as follows, $\{\iota,^{\cap}\} > \exists$. The ranking predicts that $\exists$ is only resorted to if neither ι, nor $^{\cap}$ is available. This accounts for the preferred definite reading of the bare nouns in determinerless languages like Hindi. Kind reading is derived when the NP is an argument of kind-level predicates like *extinct, common, rare etc*.

Akan (Kwa, Niger-Congo) marks number distinction in the NP, has a definite determiner *no*, and a specific indefinite determiner *bi*, and also allow both plural and singular bare nouns in argument positions. In this way Akan is similar to Hebrew, (Dayal 2004), and Brazilian Portuguese (Beviláqua et al. 2016).

Data: A&M argue that the definite determiner *no* in Akan is a strong definite determine, (Schwarz 2009), i.e., it marks familiarity. Uniqueness is marked by the bare noun. Expressions like (1) constitute the basis of A&M's claim; globally unique NPs like *sun*, and *moon* are bare in neutral context.

(1) **Awia** a-pue.
　　　sun　　PERF-come.out
　　　'The sun is out.'

However, non globally unique NPs like fowl in (2) does not have a definite reading in similar contexts. Modulo number distinction, (2) is felicitous in a context where there are a hundred fowls; in other words, there is no presupposition of uniqueness.

(2) **Akokɔ** gyina ha.
　　　fowl　　stand here
　　　'There is a fowl standing here.'

We argue that both the readings in (1) and (2) are derived by applying the existential type shifter $\exists$ to the NP. Bare plural nouns (BPN) in Akan have a kind reading; this reading is unavailable with Bare Singular Nouns (BSN), as shown in (3). Note also that BPNs have an existential reading, as in (4).

(3) **N-kokɔ/*Akokɔ** a-bu.
　　　PL-fowl/fowl　　PERF-be.in.glot

'Fowls are in season.'

(4) **N-kokɔ** gyina ha.
     PL-fowl stand here
     'There are fowls standing here.'

Analysis: We argue that in examples like (1), the "definite" reading is not derived by ι. In the spirit of Schwarzschild (2002), we contend that this reading is derived by existentially quantifying over a singleton set. For Schwarzschild (ibid), a given occurrence of a noun is a singleton if there is exactly one such entity under consideration at the time of utterance in the world of evaluation. This is the interpretation that is associated with specific indefinites. The difference between the specific indefinite reading lexicalized by *bi* in Akan, and this "definite" reading is that the nouns quantified over are semantically unique, i.e., the set contains exactly one member in every world of evaluation. We thus predict this "definite" reading to be available for nouns such as *moon, sun, president*, and incompatible with common nouns that are not semantically unique like *boy, fowl, book, etc.* This prediction is borne out as we have illustrated in (2), where *fowl* is not interpreted as "definite", but as indefinite. In addition, we predict that BPNs do not have this 'definite' interpretation which also turns out to be true.

BPNs in Akan have a Kind reading, i.e., they are compatible with kind-level predicates, as shown in (3). Bare plural count nouns are analyzed as denoting plural properties, i.e., sets of sums of the singular atoms NP, (Chierchia 1998). Kind is the intentionalization of the sum of plural properties. The kind reading is derived by applying the **nom** operation below. The $\cap$ operator turns properties to kinds, $< s < e, t >>$ to e.

- For any property P and situations s, $^{\cap}P = \{ \lambda s \, \iota x \, [\, P_s(x)]$ is in the set of K of kinds undefined otherwise   (Chierchia 1998:351)

BPNs also have an existential reading ,as shown in (4). This is derived by Chierchia's (1998) *Derived Kinds Predication* (DKP) operation below. The $\cup$ operator turns kinds to properties, from things of type e to $< s < e, t >>$. DKP applies to instances of this derived property.

- <u>DKP</u>: If P applies to objects and <u>k</u> denotes a kind, then P(k) = $\exists x \, [^{\cup}k(x) \wedge P(x)]$

BSNs in Akan, like their English counterparts, do not have a Kind-level reading. Chierchia (1998) points out that $\cap$ is undefined for BSNs. Since $\cap$ is undefined, DKP cannot be applied to derive the narrow scope existential reading of the BSN. We contend that the existential reading of the BSN is derived with the $\exists$ type-shifter. In this context both ι and $\cap$ are unavailable. ι is unavailable generally in the language because of the presence of the lexicalized determiner, and $\cap$ is undefined for the singular. Dayal's ranking of type-shifters $\{\iota, \cap\} > \exists$ is thus not violated.

Conclusion: Given the above observations and proposed (re)analyses, we conclude that bare nouns in Akan are essentially indefinites.

Selected References: Arkoh, Ruby & Lisa Matthewson. 2013. "A Familiar Definite Article in Akan". *Lingua* 123. 1-30 ● Beveláqua, Kayron, Suzi Lima & Roberts Pires de Oliveira. 2016. "Bare Nouns in Brazilian Portuguese: An experimental study on grinding." *Batltic International Yearbook of Congnition.,Logic and Communication.*Vol.11● Chierchia, Gennaro. 1998. "Reference to Kinds across Languages." *Natural Languages Semantics* 6● Schwarz,Florian. 2009. *Two kinds of Definites in Natural Language.* University of Massachusetts Amherst● Schwarz, Florian. 2013. "Two kinds of Definites Cross-linguistically". *Language and Linguistics Compass* 7 (10). 554-559. London: Springer.