Anaphoric variability in Kannada bare nominals

In this paper, we first establish bare nominals in Kannada as bona fide markers of definiteness, used to denote unique or anaphoric entities. However, there are some cases where the definite reading is unavailable, despite the presence of an anaphoric antecedent. We observe that these are usually cases where it is unclear if the sentence topic contains the intended referent. We formalize this characterization within a situational-uniqueness account for definites (Schwarz 09), and explain the limited uses of anaphoric bare definites as an interaction between this view of definiteness and an ambiguity analysis of the bare noun (Dayal 92).

Kannada bare nominals can be definite. (1)-(2) show that bare nominals can denote definite descriptions in uniqueness and anaphoric contexts. They can also felicitously occur in “donkey sentences” like in (3), once again patterning with standard anaphoric definites and unlike indefinites.

(1) Surya idii dina horage bandilla
   Sun all day outside come-PST-NEG (Translation: ‘The sun did not come out all day.’)

(2) Nenne naanu ondu naayi-anna no:Dide. Naayi noDakke bahala chennagittu.
   Yesterday I one dog-ACC saw dog to.look.at very nice.was
   ‘Yesterday I saw a dog. The dog was very nice to look at.’

(3) Katte(y)uLLuva donkey.having pratiyobba every raita-nuu farmer-EMPH katte-DAT
    uuTa food haakuttaane donkey.having every farmer-EMPH donkey-DAT food gives
    ‘Every farmer who has a donkey feeds the donkey.’

No definite readings in some anaphoric contexts. Though Kannada bare nouns can generally behave as anaphoric definites, as in (2), we find cases like (4)-(5) where this reading is unavailable despite presence of a potential antecedent--instead, a kind reading is obtained in (4) & non-specific indefinite reading in (5). Kind readings of bare nouns are independently established by (6), where it appears with a kind-level predicate.

(4) Nenne naanu kelavu naayigaL-anna no:Dide. nana-ge naayigaL-a kanDre tumbha bhaya.
   Yesterday I some dogs-ACC saw. I-DAT dogs-GEN towards lot fear.
   ‘Yesterday, I saw some dogs. I am very afraid of dogs/ #the dogs.’

(5) RoomgaL-alli out.of.the.rooms ondu one room room tumba chennagittu. 1920-alli raatri Nehru room-ali malgidda out.of.the.rooms one room very good.was 1920-LOC one night Nehru room-LOC slept
   ‘One of the rooms was especially nice. In 1920, Nehru slept a night in a room/#the room.’

(6) Naayi ondu saamanya-(v)aada praaNi
    Dog one common-COP animal (Translation: ‘The dog is a common animal.’)

Indefinite readings of bare nominals aren’t limited to Kannada—Dayal notices them in Hindi too; see (7) which conveys presence of a hearer-new mouse. In her account, indefinite readings of bare singular subjects (or indirect objects) arise by an iota type-shift same as the one responsible for definite readings, where the type-shifter presupposes uniqueness but not familiarity (though compatible with familiarity). In this, Hindi definites differ from those in English having determiner the—which presupposes uniqueness and familiarity.

(7) kamre mein cuuhaa hai
    room in mouse is (Translation: ‘There is a mouse in the room’) (Hindi; Dayal 04 ex. 19a)

However, there are at least three reasons why this account of bare singular subjects is not complete. First, we note that indefinite readings of bare subjects can be obtained not just in cases like (7) where there is no potential antecedent, but also in cases where there is one: e.g., (8) in Hindi. Simply appealing to absence of familiarity does not suffice here, especially since definite readings can arise in some anaphoric contexts like (2). Second, the non-specificity (speaker-newness) of the indefinite readings does not follow from absence of familiarity: iota is scopally inert and usually interpreted as having widest possible scope. Third, this analysis views definiteness in English as being fundamentally different from definiteness in determinerless languages. However, a uniform theory of definiteness is more parsimonious and therefore preferable.

    yesterday Abhinav one mouse-ACC home brought came Room in mouse is
   ‘Yesterday, Abhinav brought home a mouse. A mouse/#the mouse is in the room’ (Hindi)
A new explanation for anaphoric variability of bare definites. To provide a principled explanation for why some anaphoric contexts are more amenable to definite readings of the bare noun than others, we propose a unified situational-uniqueness theory for definiteness (based on Schwarz 09). The core idea is this: definite descriptions are primarily resolved to entities known to be unique in the Topic Situation (TS; Austin 50)—i.e., the situation the sentence is about. For languages where the bare noun is ambiguous between definite and kind/ indefinite readings, the availability of the definite reading depends on how confident one can be that the intended unique referent is indeed part of the TS—if it is unclear that this is the case, then the definite reading becomes dispreferred and alternate readings of the bare noun take over. While it’s possible to resolve definite descriptions to entities in contextually salient situations different from the TS, we suggest these are less preferred and only invoked when uniqueness doesn’t hold in the TS. In this, we differ from Schwarz, who takes both TS and other salient situations to be equally preferred for computing definiteness.

How to identify the TS? The spatio-temporal location of the sentence—given by adverbials or tense/aspect marking—provides one clue to identifying the TS associated with a particular sentence, assuming that each situation is associated with a unique spatio-temporal address. To identify the TS more precisely, we adopt the idea (Schwarz 09, Kratzer 07) that these situations exemplify answers to the Questions Under Discussion (QUDs; Roberts 96). In the absence of explicit QUDs, an implicit QUD may be reconstructed using contextual and structural cues, two of which we discuss here: (i) the more context there is around an entity, the more likely it is for the QUD (and thus, TS) to be about that entity, and (ii) if the bare nominal is the Subject or if it otherwise occurs sentence-initially—a position that correlates cross-linguistically with the syntactic Topic—the QUD is likely to be about this entity. With this, it is now possible to explain the definiteness data presented above. In (4), the second sentence differs from the first in its temporal aspect, suggesting a shift in spatio-temporal location. Due to this, it is unclear whether the situation of the latter sentence contains the dogs introduced in the former—precluding the definite reading. However in (2), both sentences have perfective aspect, and the second sentence may naturally be taken as the extension of the situation introduced in the first, guaranteeing the presence of the dog. In (5), the first sentence introduces the intended antecedent as one among several rooms. The follow-up sentence also has a temporal adverbial suggesting a possible shift in situation, and additionally, the bare singular does not occur at the sentence head (also the case in (7)-(8)). For these reasons, it is unsurprising under our proposal that a definite reading does not arise. (9) is a variant of (5) that incorporates cues (i) and (ii). As expected in our account, the definite reading is felicitous in (9).

Implications. Our proposal addresses another puzzle: why do definites in English enjoy a wider distribution—as seen in the translations for (4)-(8)—than bare noun definites? We suggest this is because bare nouns are ambiguous between definite/kind/non-specific readings: due to competition that arises among the alternative readings of bare nouns, the definite interpretation only wins when uniqueness is obtained in more preferred situations (the TS). But in English, given the lack of competing readings, uniqueness may be computed in less ideal (contextually salient) situations. Another implication is that indefinite readings associated with bare subjects aren’t due to iota type-shift; they arise independently—perhaps via singleton instantiation sets of the kind term (like in bare plurals; Dayal 04). Finally, we note that our analysis conflicts with an existing treatment of Kannada bare singular objects by Lidz (06), where he claims that they are true indefinites having wide-scoped readings and narrow-scoped readings. But it can be shown that this is not so, given their inability to allow intermediate/wide-scoped readings, and to introduce discourse referents (Dayal 04).

Selected refs. Dayal 04, Number marking & (in)definiteness in kind terms. Roberts 96, Information Structure: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. Schwarz 09, Two types of definites in natural lgs.