

The Fox or Mr Fox?: Particularization of the Bare Noun

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Abstract

In numeral classifier languages a dog-type noun (i.e. a noun that refers to a kind subsuming some similar individuated entities or things) is also an NP by default. This in turn means that unlike in an English-like language, the move from the general (as is indicated by a noun) to the particular (as is indicated by an NP) is not grammatically marked in such a language. The current paper demonstrates how Assamese, a numeral classifier language spoken in Assam, a north eastern province of India, allows the bare noun to be used at the sentential level for different degrees of particularity. Thus, in the following example from Assamese (taken from a popular folk tale) *tetiā xiāl-e kole...* [*tetiā* 'then'; *xiāl-e* 'fox-NOM'; *kole* 'said'] the bare noun *xiāl* 'fox' is used as an NP, precisely as a proper name. The paper thus argues that we have a better English translation of the concerned Assamese sentence in "Mr Fox then said..." rather than in "The fox then said...". The Assamese data used in the paper comes from the author's native speaker competency in the language.

Keywords: bare noun, general term, particularization, numeral classifier language, proper name, personification

1. Noun to NP in Numeral Classifier Languages

A bare noun,¹ e.g. *dog*, is what Philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) referred to as a *general term* (Locke 1689/1999, p. 394), for it refers to the general, i.e. it refers to a kind of thing; an NP, such as *a dog*, or *dogs*, on the other hand, refers to the particular, i.e. a member or some members of the kind. No two things are identical in the world – every dog is different from every other dog, but the bare noun *dog* ignores both quantity and quality – it does not indicate how many dogs are being referred to or what particular qualities they have. As a general term, *boy*, like *dog*, refers only to the common properties that boys share. In other words, the bare noun *boy* refers to no particular boy of the real world – it carries only an abstract concept, which exists in the human mind rather than in the real world. Thus, the move from the bare noun to the noun phrase is a move from the abstract world of the general to the concrete real world of the particular of both quality and quantity – to the real world of particular individuals and the relations they enter into at particular points of time.

In a language such as English, the move from the general to the particular is marked by either by the necessary presence of the indefinite article,

¹ The term *bare noun* is used here to mean the root of a noun.

i.e. *a/an*, or by the morpheme [s]. In other words, in a language like English, a bare noun like *dog* may be particularized or individuated either by the *a*-expression (i.e. indefinite article-noun) or by the *s*-expression (i.e. noun-[s]).² The indefiniteness of *a/an* or [s] can then be overridden by the use of a definite determiner, as in *the dog/dogs* (see Borah, 2006).

However, in a numeral classifier language such as Chinese, Thai, or Assamese, a *dog*-type noun is also an NP by default. But this in turn means that unlike in English the move from the general to the particular is not grammatically marked in these languages. In other words, a *dog*-type noun in such a language may also mean what the *a*-expression and the *s*-expression mean in a language like English. This is clear in the following examples from Assamese:

- (1) *xihatar gāri āse*
 they car have
 ‘They have a car/cars’
- (2) *ghar-at ālahi āsil*
 home-LOC guest exist-PAST
 ‘We had a guest/guests at home’

In the above examples, *gāri* ‘car’ and *ālahi* ‘guest’ are indefinite NPs. However, note that a bare noun in a numeral classifier language like Assamese can be used also as a definite NP, as is clear from the following examples:

- (3) *gāri kot?*
 car where?
 ‘Where is the car(s)?/Where have you parked the car(s)?’
- (4) *ālahi golen?*
 guest has.left?
 ‘Has the guest(s) left?’

But why is such a language called a *numeral classifier* language? They are *numeral classifier* languages, primarily because a *dog*-type noun in a such a language, besides being an NP by default, resists numeral quantification – they can be subjected to such a quantification only by using a classifier.³ Noun referents, i.e. things, tend to exist in space either by occupying a limited part thereof (e.g. a *tree*) or by occupying whole of the infinite space (e.g. *air*). Accordingly, natural things are either discrete (i.e. they come with an inherent shape); or they are a mass (i.e. they are shapeless). Now, given that numerical quantification, i.e. counting, is repeating a finite space as is occupied by a

² In contrast to a *dog*-type noun, a noun like *water* is, however, an NP by default (e.g. *Water is transparent*). This is because such a noun refers to a mass, which is an unsegmented whole, just like a unique individual implying the particular. Thus, *water*-type nouns are called *mass nouns*, while their *dog*-type counterparts are known as *count nouns*.

³ In English only a mass noun (see fn 2), i.e. a *water*-type noun, resists numerical quantification. Thus, *three dogs* is grammatical, but **three waters* is not. If so, a *dog*-type noun in a numeral classifier language, in resisting numerical quantification, is rather like a mass noun in English.

discrete thing, only such things can be counted (note here also that in counting the number of repetition involved is encoded in the numeral). By contrast, a mass cannot be numerically counted, for infinity cannot be repeated (a mass is not inherently finite; it tends to be rather infinite). Clearly, nouns are linguistic counterparts of things. Thus, in a numeral classifier language a noun can be subjected to counting only when a classifier is used with the noun: the classifier, by indicating the particular shape of the noun referent, confirms that it is discrete and hence the noun is countable. In other words, a classifier in such a language particularizes or individuates the noun as a general term to facilitate numerical quantification.⁴ Thus, to say ‘three books’ in Assamese, one is required to use a (particular) classifier besides the numeral. Thus, **tini kitāp* [*tini* ‘three’; *kitāp* ‘book’] is ungrammatical, because the classifier *khan* is missing in the construction (the classifier *khan* means ‘flat and broad’). The grammatical version here, then, is *tini-khan kitāp* ‘three books’. In English, on the other hand, it is [s], i.e. the so-called plural marker, that grammatically confirms that the noun referent is discrete and hence the noun is countable. Thus, nouns which resist suffixation by [s] are uncountable in English. A numerical classifier, however, is more informative than [s] in that it informs us of the particular shape the referent of the noun comes in (i.e. whether it is long, round, or flat, and so on), not just of the fact that it has a shape (see Borah, 2006).

According to the Sapir-Whorf linguistic relativity hypothesis, the grammar of the particular language we speak affects the way we think about reality. It is thus occasionally claimed that that speakers of classifier languages attend more to the substance than to the form of entities, while opposite is the case with speakers of a non-classifier language like English (see e.g. Lucy, 1992; Imai & Gentner, 1993). This, as the argument goes, would happen because the NP in a classifier language is not immediately grammatically marked for the particular. By contrast, the English NP is immediately marked for the particular, respectively by *a* and [s]: while *a* picks up (at least) one particular member of the kind, [s] picks up a plural number of such members. Given that the particular always comes in an individual form, speakers of classifier languages would tend to attend more to the formless substance, i.e. what the particulars share, rather than the particulars themselves with a concrete individual form or shape. In other words, it is the general rather than the particular that these speakers would *immediately* be concerned with.⁵ Thus, in Lucy’s experiments, Yucatec speakers⁶ “showed a strong tendency to group objects on the basis of common material composition and English speakers

⁴ In the case of a noun that designates a mass, Assamese uses measure terms (e.g. *glass*, *bucket*, *litre*) for its numerical quantification, e.g. *tini bālti pāni* [*tini* ‘three’; *bālti* ‘bucket’; *pāni* ‘water’] ‘three buckets of water’. Note that measure term referents are man-made to make a mass finite, but classifiers refer to the natural inherent shapes of discrete things.

⁵ Speakers of a numeral classifier language attend to the form, as the argument goes, only when they need to numerically, i.e. precisely, quantify. Thus, classifiers, which classify noun referents on the basis of their inherent shape, surface in a numerically quantified NP. But facts remain that people in their day-day life mostly go for imprecise quantification, which is done without a classifier.

⁶ A numeral classifier language, Yucatec Maya is an indigenous language spoken in south-eastern Mexico.

showed a strong tendency to group objects on the basis of common shape” (Lucy, 1992, p. 156).

In the following we have, however, tried to show that in a numeral classifier language, at least in Assamese, the bare noun is used also as a proper name, referring *only* to the particular.

2. Instance, Individual, and Proper Name

Now, between an unspecific and a specific indefinite NP the latter is more individuated or particularized, for the speaker in the case of such an NP clearly knows which particular member of the concerned kind he is referring to. On the other hand, once it is introduced to the hearer in the form of an indefinite NP both the speaker and the hearer are in the domain of shared knowledge. Thus, the indefinite determiner is now replaced by a definite determiner. A noun phrase with a definite determiner, e.g. *that boy*, is thus more particularized or individuated than the introductory indefinite noun phrase, e.g. *a boy*, for the referent of the definite noun phrase is uniquely defined in the minds of both the speaker and hearer in the speech act situation involved. As is argued in Timberlake (1977, p. 160): “...[A] definite participant is understood as *uniquely defined* individual within a set of individuals which might conceivably be involved in the event. A definite object is therefore more individuated than an indefinite object...”

Now we consider a proper name. A proper name needs no introduction in a discourse, for it is *inherently* definite - the referent of a proper name is already uniquely defined in the minds of both the speaker and hearer. If so, a proper name, e.g. Erik, is more particularized or individuated than a definite noun phrase with a definite determiner, such as *that boy* or *the boy*.

Note that proper names are mostly given to humans. In other words, we have at least one proper name for every human being. By contrast, we do not have a name for every monkey or every snake in the world – what we have for them is rather a common name – only a general term. Thus, a human being is an Individual (to use the terminology used in Fraurud, 1996), while a monkey or a dog or a stone is an Instance.⁷ In other words, typical Individuals are human beings, while typical Instances are animals and inanimate things: It matters much more to us to distinguish people than monkeys or pencils. As a matter of fact, what is predicated in the proper name Anna, for instance, is Anna’s unique personality as a human being, which makes her different from another individual with the proper name Namrata or Erik, for instance (see Borah, 2012). We do not have a proper name for every monkey or every pencil, suggesting that their unique “personality” has been ignored, for it is not important in our life.⁸ (Thus, in Assamese you say, “I don’t know his name” when you are furiously angry

⁷ Between a typical Individual and a typical Instance, there can, however, be a *Functional* – a “dehumanized person” - “the Principal”, “the President”, and so on. *Functionals* are dehumanized or deanimasied in the sense they are representatives of roles, positions or functions rather than Individuals.

⁸ This is what Comrie (1981) calls ‘animacy hierarchy’: people empathize most with (themselves and then with other) people, then with animals, least with stones, etc., i.e. inanimate things.

with someone!). This is to say that while an Individual as referred to by a proper name is inherently particularized or individuated and is, therefore, inherently definite; an Instance, which is without a proper name, is, by contrast, inherently undefined and hence inherently indefinite. Using a determiner is thus the usual way we particularize or individuate an Instance.

Thus an entity which is fully particularized or individuated is a human being rather than an animal or an inanimate thing; it has a proper name rather than a common name;⁹ it is inherently definite and does not, unlike a general term, need to be determined with a definite determiner.

But what also follows from the above is that particularization or individuation is a gradual scale. To quote Dahl and Fraurud (quoted in Yamamoto 1999, p. 28):

“From a more general cognitive point of view, we might postulate a distinction between those objects which are primarily treated as individuals, clearly distinguishable from everything else in the universe, and those objects which are primarily seen as instantiations of a type. If we see this as a gradual scale rather than a dichotomy, we may choose examples from each and end of the scale on one hand, people whom you know well, on the other, grains of sand on the beach. It should be clear that animates (particularly humans) will in general be higher up on the scale than inanimates (*italics added*)”.

Thus, an Instance is often developed into an Individual in discourse. This is done by providing more and more information about it after being introduced, which helps the hearer to distinguish it from other instances of the kind. As is argued in Fraurud (1996, pp. 79-80):

“[An] important factor determining the degree to which we conceive of something as an individual entity is the amount of knowledge we have about it. In the minimal case, our knowledge of an entity is confined to what is conveyed by the definite or indefinite NP referring to it. This comes close to what Dahl [...] calls ‘unstable individual concept’ ‘characterized by there being some simple property without which the concept would no longer identify a specific individual’. [...] The more we know about an entity, or – metaphorically speaking – the more ‘weight’ it has in our memory, the more individuated it will be. Consequently, as our knowledge of a certain entity increases, it gradually becomes more and more individuated in our minds. This evidently takes place in discourse, as more and more is said about a referent. Something that is initially described and conceived of as an Instance or a Functional [see fn 2] may thus, in the course of the developing discourse, gradually ‘grow into’ an Individual”.

As is further described by Fraurud (1996, p. 80), “For any entity that is mentioned repeatedly, the need arises for a new way of conveniently and non-ambiguously referring to it”. One way here is personification, that is, using a personal pronoun or a proper name to refer to the Instance introduced as topic. To quote Garrod and Sanford (1988, p. 522), “a proper name is an ideal means of introducing a character to whom one will want to keep referring in the future – it effectively fixes the reference”. Essentially, to personify is to assign human qualities to an Instance (which may be either an inanimate thing or an animal),

⁹ A pet gets a proper name because it is viewed as an Individual rather than an Instance. Sometimes this may apply to an inanimate thing as well (e.g. to a unique bridge in some place).

or to inform about its human like qualities and activities.¹⁰ Thus, personifying – assigning a proper name to an Instance – means in turn particularizing or individuating the Instance to the maximum.¹¹

3. The Bare Noun as Proper Name

It follows from the discussion in the preceding section that an Instance determined by a definite determiner (e.g. *the monkey*) is more particularized or individuated when it is referred to by a personal pronoun (e.g. *he*) or a proper name (e.g. *Mr Monkey*).

Particularization or individuation of the bare noun in a language like English, as is observed at the beginning of the current paper, is marked. Thus, the indefinite particularized singular version of the bare noun, *monkey*, for instance is *a monkey*; we arrive at its definite counterpart by replacing *a* by *the*; the definite determiner is then replaced by the person marker *Mr* or *Miss* to arrive at the personified version of the bare noun. Thus, the bare noun in English usually cannot be used as a proper name: “*Mr Fox then said to the rabbit...*” c.f. “*Fox then said to the rabbit*”.

With a language like Assamese this is not the case, however. Particularization or individuation of the bare noun in Assamese, as is already observed in the initial section of the paper, is not marked, which means that the bare noun in the language is an NP by default and further that as an NP it is indeterminate to quantity and reference. Thus, a bare noun in Assamese, unlike its English counterpart, happily lends itself to be used as a proper name. This is clear from the examples below, taken from a popular folk tale in Assamese. With (5) below begins the folk tale:

- (5) *e-tā* *xiāl* *āru* *e-tā* *mekuri*
 one-CLF: 3D fox and one-CLF: 3D cat
 ‘Once there lived a fox and a cat’

The indefinite NPs *e-tā xiāl* ‘a fox’ and *e-tā mekuri* ‘a cat’ have introduced a fox and a cat in the narrative. Note that in both NPs, a classifier (viz. *tā*, which classifies three dimensional things) is used. In a numeral classier language, a classifier is used to particularize or individuate the bare noun for a precise quantity of members it subsumes. In the concerned example, the precise quantity is indicated by the numeral *e(k)* ‘one’ (*ek* is realized as *e* when prefixed to a classifier). In the next sentence of the tale cited in (6) below, the indefinite NP *e-*

¹⁰ Personification is a form of ontological metaphor. Of personification George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write: “Perhaps the most obvious ontological metaphors are those where the physical object is further specified as being a person. This allows to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities.” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 (1980, p. 33). To cite here some of the examples of personification used by the authors in the work: *Life has cheated me*; *This fact argues* against the standard theories; *Cancer* finally caught up with him.

¹¹ The gradual scale of individuation thus parallels ‘animacy hierarchy’ (cf, fn 3). Thus, the fully individuated, i.e. the humans, occupy the topmost level of the hierarchy while the least individuated, i.e. the inanimate things, occupy the lowest level of it. The middle level is thus occupied by animals.

tā xiāl ‘a fox’ becomes a definite NP with the classifier *tā*, now suffixed to the noun:

- (6) *xiāl-to*¹² *bar* *ahankāri* *āsīl*
fox- CLF: 3 D very boastful be PAST
‘The fox was very boastful’

In many folk tales it is animals, rather than humans, that have a major role. Then they have human traits - they speak, think, act and behave in the same way humans do. Thus, *personification* is a distinctive characteristic of many a folk tale. This in turn means that animal characters are gradually developed into human-like Individuals in them.

This process begins in our tale with the line in (6) above: the fox is attributed a human trait (i.e. being boastful) in the sentence. The fox is further personified in the subsequent lines: now the fox speaks like a human being and boasts about his superior intellect before the cat, his rather unassuming friend. The fox is now fully developed into a human-like Individual – a development that only a proper name can accentuate.¹³ Thus, the storyteller may drop the classifier so far used with the bare noun *xiāl* ‘fox’ (see 5 and 6 above) in order to use it rather as a proper name (see (7) below):

- (7) *teṭiā* *xiāl-e* *ufāidāng māri* *kole:...*
then fox <0>-NOM¹⁴ boast throwing say PAST
‘Then the fox boastfully said: ...’
‘Then Mr Fox boastfully said: ...’

The question then follows: of the two English translations of (7) above, i.e. ‘Then the fox boastfully said’ and ‘Then Mr Fox boastfully said’, which is closer to the original? Obviously, we have a more adequate translation in (7) rather in the second with ‘Mr Fox’ as a proper name; the NP ‘the fox’ in the first one is an individuated general term, not a proper name. However, one may observe that capital letters are often used in English (instead of a title or honorific like ‘Mr’) to personify a general term, as in the following Aesop’s fable retold in the language:¹⁵

The Fox and the Goat

By an unlucky chance a Fox fell into a deep well from which he could not get out. A Goat passed by shortly afterwards, and asked the Fox what he was doing down there. “Oh, have you not heard?” said the Fox, “there is going to be a great drought, so I jumped down here in order to be sure to have water by me. Why don’t you come down too?” The

¹² *tā* is realized as *to* when suffixed to a noun which is not a numeral.

¹³ As is observed in Fraurud (1996, pp. 81-82): Naming animals [...] makes them in a sense more ‘human’, as illustrated by the following piece of anecdotal evidence: At the small zoo in the Stockholm open air museum Skansen, the new-born bear cubs are given names after an annual competition in the daily newspapers. A few years ago there was a minor scandal when it was discovered that some of the bear cubs which had recently been named has been killed and even eaten by the zoo employees. One of the reasons that people were especially upset was formulated in the following way: “How can you give someone a name and then eat him?”

¹⁴ <0> means absence of classifier.

¹⁵ Source: http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Aesop/Aesops_Fables/index.html

Goat thought well of this advice, and jumped down into the well. But the Fox immediately jumped on her back, and by putting his foot on her long horns managed to jump up to the edge of the well. “Good-bye, friend,” said the Fox, “remember next time”.

A proper name is by convention capitalized in English, such that ‘the Fox’, though less personified than ‘Mr Fox’, is obviously more personified than ‘the fox’. Needless to say that it is personification that gives folk tales their wonderful life.

4. In Lieu of a Conclusion

The current paper is intended to demonstrate how the bare noun in a language like Assamese encapsulates both the general and the particular and further that it can be used even as a proper name, i.e. the most particularized or individuated form of NP. Thus, translation of the bare noun of Assamese into English may prove rather problematic, as the English noun encases only the general.

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Abbreviations

CLF	Classifier
D	Dimensional
LOC	Locative
NOM	Nominative
PAST	Past tense Task A

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