

# Bare Nouns in Akan Revisited

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## 1 Introduction

One of the innovations of Schwarz (2009) is that it argued that uniqueness and familiarity are distinct definite readings.

- Either interpretation is distinctly marked in German. Consider (1).

(1) German (Schwarz 2009:24)

- a. Der Empfang wurde **vom/** #**von dem** **Bürgermeister** eröffnet  
the reception was by-the<sub>weak/</sub> by the<sub>strong</sub> mayor opened  
'The reception was opened by the mayor.'
- b. Hans hat einen Schriftsteller und einen Politiker interviewt. Er hat  
Hans has a writer and a politician interviewed He has  
**#vom/** **von dem** **Politiker** keine interessanten Antworten  
from-the<sub>weak/</sub> from the<sub>strong</sub> politician no interesting answers  
bekommen.  
gotten  
'Hans interviewed a writer and a politician. He didn't get any interesting answers from the politician.'

- Uniqueness is marked by the weak definite (1-a), and familiarity is marked by the strong definite (1-b).

Schwarz's claim has been shown to be true for other typologically distinct languages.

Akan is a well-known example of a language that is supposed to support this theory. (See Jenks 2015, 2018; Grubic 2015, and Ingason 2016, a.o., for other languages.)

- The claim for Akan is that familiarity is marked by the definite determiner **nó**, and uniqueness by the bare noun (Arkoh & Matthewson (2013), henceforth A&M.)

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## Main Claim of This Talk

We argue that bare singular nouns in Akan **do not have a definite reading**, contra A&M.

## Goal

Provide independent evidence in support of the above claim.

Suggest a reanalysis of the Akan pattern á la Coppock and Beaver's (2015).

- Specifically, following Coppock and Beaver's (2015) notion of determinacy verses definiteness, we argue that bare nouns in Akan are always indefinite, but can have a determinate reading.<sup>1</sup>
- Provide an analysis of bare plural nouns, i.e. that they have a kind reading.

## 2 The Facts

### 2.1 Determiners in Akan

- Akan (Kwa, Niger-Congo; spoken in Ghana), like English has a definite determiner (2-a) and an indefinite determiner (2-b).

(2) Definite & Indefinite

- a. Kofi tɔ-ɔ ataadeɛ nó  
Kofi buy-PST shirt DEF  
'Kofi bought the shirt.'
- b. Kofi tɔ-ɔ ataadeɛ. bi  
Kofi buy-PST shirt INDEF  
'Kofi bought a (certain) shirt.'

- But, unlike English, Akan allows bare singular nouns (BN) (3-a).

(3) Singular BN

- a. Kofi tɔ-ɔ ataadeɛ.  
Kofi buy-PST shirt  
'Kofi bought a shirt.'
- b. \*Kofi bought shirt.

#### 2.1.1 The definite determiner *nó*

There are two competing analysis of the definite determiner.

- A&M argue that it marks familiarity, and Bombi (2018) claims it marks uniqueness, based on data like (4).

- (4) a. Mmɔfrà nó wɔ̀ dā̀n nó mù.  
children the be room the in  
'The children are in the room.'

<sup>1</sup>Note: This claim is substantially different from that which we proposed originally in our abstract.

- b. **Awia** (nó) a-pue.  
 sun DEF PERF-come.out  
 ‘The sun is out.’

### 2.1.2 The indefinite determiner **bi**

The indefinite determiner, **bi**, allows for both wide and narrow scope readings.

- (5) Osikanni biara tɔ-ɔ dan **bi**  
 rich.person every buy-PST house INDEF  
 ‘Every rich person bought a (certain) house’
- $\forall x. \text{Richperson}(x) \rightarrow [\exists y \text{ house}(y) \wedge \text{buy}(x,y)]$
  - $\exists y. \text{house}(y) \wedge [\forall(x)[\text{Richperson}(x) \rightarrow \text{buy}(x,y)]]$
- (6) Sogyani bi gyina pono biara ano.  
 soldier INDEF stand door every mouth  
 ‘A soldier is guarding every door.’
- $\# \exists x. \text{Soldier}(x) \wedge [\forall(y)[\text{door}(y) \rightarrow \text{guard}(x,y)]]$
  - $\forall y. \text{Door}(y) \rightarrow [\exists x \text{ soldier}(x) \wedge \text{guard}(x,y)]$

## 2.2 Bare Nouns

The **bare noun** is preferred for the low scope reading.

- (7) Osikanni biara tɔ-ɔ dan  
 rich.person every buy-PST house  
 ‘Every rich person bought a (certain) house’
- $\forall x. \text{Richperson}(x) \rightarrow [\exists y \text{ house}(y) \wedge \text{buy}(x,y)]$
  - $*\exists y. \text{house}(y) \wedge [\forall(x)\text{Richperson}(x) \rightarrow \text{buy}(x,y)]$
  - (7) does not have the interpretation that there is a single house such that all the rich men bought.
- (8) Sogyani gyina ɛpono biara ano.  
 soldier stand door every mouth  
 ‘A soldier is guarding every door.’
- $*\exists x. \text{Soldier}(x) \wedge [\forall(y)[\text{door}(y) \rightarrow \text{guard}(x,y)]]$
  - $\forall y. \text{Door}(y) \rightarrow [\exists x \text{ soldier}(x) \wedge \text{guard}(x,y)]$
  - There is a different soldier guarding each door; it doesn’t have the weird meaning.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The bare noun has a subset of the readings of the indefinite *bi*. This is interesting on its own but not for today’s purposes.

## Bare Singular Nouns in Akan are NOT Definites

- The claim that bare nouns in Akan have a definite reading is prevalent in the literature though it is not really supported empirically.
- This claim was first reported by A&M (*in a footnote*), and has been repeated in the literature by Schwarz 2013, Bombi 2018, Jenks 2018 *inter alios*.
- We will show that only a small subset of bare nouns in Akan get this so-called definite reading. Consider the following:

- (9) Me-hu-u    **kraman**  
 1SG-see-PST SG-dog  
 ‘I saw a dog.’
- (10) Me-hu-u    **ɔmanpayin.**  
 1SG-see-PST president  
 ‘I saw the president.’
- (11) a. **Abofra no maame** (\*nó) ba-a    ha  
 child DEF mother DEF come-PST here  
 ‘The child’s mother came here.’  
 b. **Abofra no nua** (nó) ba-a    ha.  
 child DEF sibling DEF come-PST here  
 ‘The child’s sibling came here.’

## 2.3 Generalization

A bare noun gets a “definite” reading if it is semantically unique, i.e., the denotation in the context is singleton set e.g. *sun*, *president*, *mother*, as in (10-b).

- Löbner (2011) argues that these types of nouns are already type  $e$  so they do not need any operation to turn them to type  $e$  unlike NPs of type  $e \rightarrow t$ .
- He argues that using the definite determiner with these nouns in English is superfluous.
- In addition, in languages with definite bare nouns, typically, all noun types can have the definite reading

- (12) Mandarin  
 Hufei he-wan-le    tang.  
 Hufei drink-finish-PERF soup  
 ‘Hufei finished the soup.’
- (13) Hindi  
Bacca khel rahaa hai.  
 kid play PROG PR  
 ‘The kid/\*a kid is playing.’

- In both the Mandarin and Hindi example, the nouns are regular  $e \rightarrow t$  nouns which do not denote singleton sets but they still have a definite reading.

This shows we cannot keep grouping Akan with these languages.

### 3 Going Forward

The empirical facts do not support the analysis that bare nouns in Akan have a definite reading

But we acknowledge that a subset of nouns have this so-called definite reading. We will account for this interpretation.

To do this, we will adopt some ideas from Coppock and Beaver's (2015) analysis of the the definite determiner in English

- We will show that separating definiteness from determinacy will help account for the facts in Akan.

### 4 Determinacy vs Definiteness (DvD)

- Coppock and Beaver (2015) have a theory of definiteness that separates Definiteness from Determinacy.
- It proposed to account for data such (14) where the use of the definite determiner does not presuppose existence, i.e. there is no referent for *only invited talk*.

(14) Anna didn't give the only invited talk.

- To account for this data, they argue that we need to separate denoting an entity (determinacy), from the meaning of the definite determiner.

**Determinacy** consists in denoting an individual

**Definiteness** is seen as a morphological category which, in English, marks a (weak) uniqueness presupposition, and in Akan **marks a familiarity presupposition**

- They propose the following as the interpretation of the English determiners THE and A. Crucially, they are both identity functions.
- THE =  $\lambda P. \lambda x. [\partial (|P| \leq 1 \wedge P(x))]$   
The cardinality of P is at least one ( *weak uniqueness presupposition but no existence presupposition*)

- A =  $\lambda P. P$  (Winter 2001 )

- In addition to these determiners, there are two type shifters that are freely available

(15) IOTA =  $\lambda P. \iota x. P(x)$

IOTA: denotes the unique individual satisfying the description of the noun, thus giving a determinate interpretation.

(16) EX =  $\lambda P. \lambda Q. \exists x. [P(x) \wedge Q(x)]$

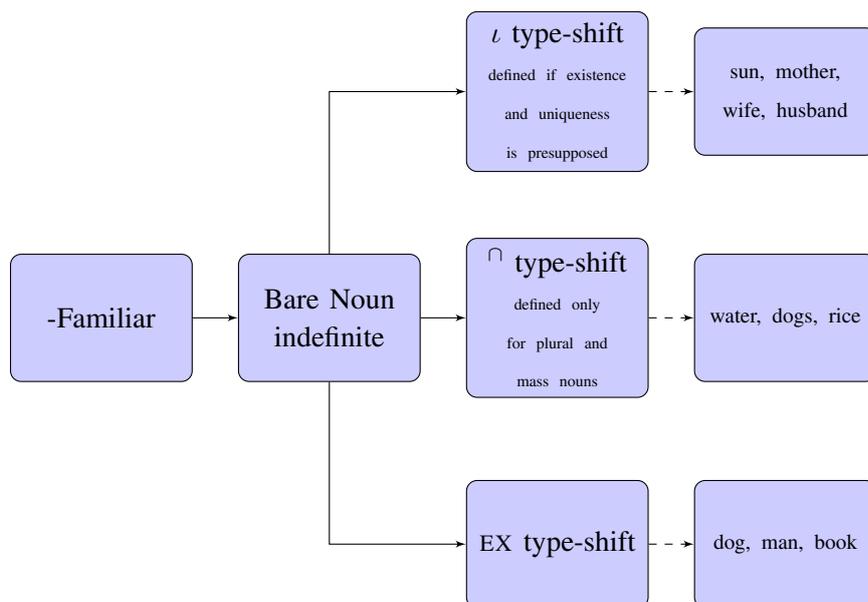
EX: introduces an existential quantifier, giving an indeterminate interpretation.







## Summary



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