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The Semantics and Pragmatics of Bare Singular Noun Phrases

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the behavior of bare singular noun phrases, a set of English nominals showing no formal indication of either definiteness or mass/count status. Although they appear to be count nouns, I show that these nominals represent maximal projections. Often disregarded as potential referring expressions and rarely discussed as an NP option, bare singulars are used to assist a hearer in finding relevant information about a referent.

Based on an examination of 922 naturally occurring tokens of bare singular NPs in locative PPs (e.g., on campus, at school, in church), I show that they are used to convey three distinct meanings involving the locatum and the denoted location. Specifically, their use can create a Familiarity Implicature, an Activity Implicature, or can be used generically.
Familiarity Implicature is a form of deixis by which the location is identified by being anchored off one of the discourse participants. Activity Implicature is a use of the whole PP to predicate information about the located person, although the NP itself is non-referential. Bare location forms can also be used as generic expressions to give characterizing information about the location kind. The implicated senses are created through conventional R-based implicature; thus, the implicated meaning is not cancelable, reinforceable, or non-detachable. This non-detachability means that the implicated meaning of these words is connected to the bare singular noun phrase form, but as a necessary, not sufficient, constraint; not all ostensive count nominals used in the bare singular form convey the implicated meanings. The Familiarity or Activity meaning is associated, by convention, with just those nouns that belong to certain semantic classes (social/geographical spaces, recording and framing media, and temporal interruptions), when certain relationships are taken to hold among the discourse participants. I show five morphosyntactic indicators by which other languages represent the same contrasts which the bare versus articulated form captures in English: omission of articles, contraction, contrasting locative prepositions, locational versus non-locational verbs, and case marking.
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