

On the presence versus absence of determiners in Malagasy*

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Abstract

This paper explores definiteness as expressed by the determiner system of Malagasy. In particular, noun phrases with and without an overt determiner are compared in terms of familiarity, uniqueness and other semantic notions commonly associated with definiteness. It is shown that the determiner does not uniformly signal definiteness and that bare nouns can be interpreted as either definite or indefinite. The determiner instead signals the familiarity of the discourse referent of the DP and the absence of a determiner signals a non-familiar DP. In certain syntactic positions, however, where the determiner is either required or banned, the interpretation of DPs is more open to variation.

1 Introduction

Much of the literature on determiners assumes that they encode (in)definiteness. Lyons (1999) goes so far as to claim that what has been called DP in the literature is in fact a DefinitenessPhrase (see also Gebhardt, this volume). In this paper, I examine the distribution and interpretation of determiners in Malagasy, a Western Austronesian language and show that these data call into question the connection between determiners and definiteness. This language has a dedicated determiner and also licenses bare arguments (DPs with no overt determiner). Although traditional descriptions claim the determiner encodes definiteness and that the lack of a determiner encodes indefiniteness, it is possible to show that the standard notions of (in)definiteness (familiarity and uniqueness) cannot account for the full range of data. Instead, the so-called definite determiner only signals the familiarity of the discourse referent, but even this semantic property can be overridden in certain syntactic contexts. In particular, if the determiner is required in a certain position (e.g. the subject position), then the DP can be

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interpreted as familiar or non-familiar. Similarly, if the determiner is not permitted in a position (e.g. the object of certain prepositions), then the DP can be interpreted as familiar or non-familiar.

2 Background

Malagasy is famous for its rather rigid VOS word order and also for the definiteness restriction in the subject position. In particular, traditional grammars and linguistic descriptions claim that the subject must be definite (i.e. it must be a pronoun, a proper name, or a DP headed by a determiner or demonstrative). Hence the contrast in (1).

- (1) a. Lasa ny mpianatra.
 gone DET student
 ‘The student(s) left.’
- b. *Lasa mpianatra.
 gone student
 ‘Some students left.’ [Keenan 1976]

More recently, however, Law (2006) points out that it is possible to find examples where the subject is not definite, despite the presence of the determiner *ny*.¹ The examples in (2) and (3) illustrate DPs that are headed by the determiner *ny*, but from the translations, the DPs are not definite (see section 5 for more conclusive evidence against definiteness).²

- (2) Ka nandrositra sady nokapohiko ny hazo...
 then AT.run-away and TT.hit.1SG(GEN) DET tree
 ‘Then I ran away and hit a tree...’ [Fugier 1999]

¹ Note that in the second clause of (2) the subject is a thematic object – promoted to subject via voice alternations. As has been long noted in the literature, however, so-called voice in Malagasy is not the same as English passive and therefore the translations remain active. Keenan and Manorohanta (2001) show that in text counts, active and passive are equally prevalent. Pearson (2005) argues that the subject position is an A-bar position. Rasolofo (2006) claims that the passive is an inverse construction and is used to signal the increased topicality of the thematic object. In (2), however, it is not clear in what sense *ny hazo* ‘a tree’ is topical.

² It is important to note that *ny* is compatible with definiteness (speakers often translate examples of *ny* with a definite determiner), but it does not always encode definiteness, as will be shown in detail throughout this paper.

- (3) Tonga teto ny ankizy anakiray izay.
 arrive here DET child one INDEF
 ‘A (certain) child arrived here.’ [Dez 1990]

Objects, on the other hand, can either be “bare” (4a) or have a determiner (4b).³

- (4) a. Tia boky frantsay aho.
 like book French 1SG(NOM)
 ‘I like French books.’
- b. Tia ny boky frantsay aho.
 like DET book French 1SG(NOM)
 ‘I like French books.’ [Rajaona 1972: 432]

Note that in this example, the difference in meaning is not obvious, which again calls into question the labeling of *ny* as a definite determiner – I will return to the difference between (4a) and (4b) in section 7.

Based on these examples, the questions that arise are: first, what is the semantic content of *ny*? And second, what happens when *ny* is absent? Traditional grammars and generative linguists (myself included) have assumed that *ny* marks definiteness or specificity and that its absence indicates indefiniteness. Based on data such as (2)-(4), the present article questions these assumptions and attempts to find the semantic correlates of determiners in Malagasy.

The organization of this paper is as follows. I first provide a basic description of the determiners and demonstratives in Malagasy. Section 4 presents a discussion of definiteness and some of the definitions that have been proposed in the literature. Sections 5 and 6 illustrate the distribution and interpretation of DPs with and without a determiner, respectively, and I show the standard definitions of definiteness fail to account for the Malagasy data. Section 7 concludes.

³ Zribi-Hertz and Mbolatianavalona (1999: 186) claim that the definite determiner *ny* is barred from the object position (unless required to license a modifier). They propose that there is a null determiner that is in complementary distribution with *ny*. I have never worked with a speaker with this restriction.

3 Determiners and their kin in Malagasy

Before turning to the issue at hand, I provide an overview of the various kinds of determiners and demonstratives found in Malagasy. Traditional grammars list the following determiners:

- (5) a. *ra, i, andria, ry* – for people
- b. *ilay* – determiner for previously mentioned entities (usually singular)
- c. *ny* – definite/specific determiner (unmarked for number)

(6) *Tonga i Koto / ry Rakoto.*

arrive DET Koto / DET Rakoto

‘Koto/The Rakoto family arrived.’

[Dez 1990: (21), (29)]

Given the head-initial nature of Malagasy, determiners all occur pre-nominally. The head noun immediately follows the determiner and other modifiers follow, as schematized in (7) (see Ntelitheos 2006).

(7) det/dem + N + poss’r + adj + poss’r + numerals + quantifiers + relative clause +dem

(8) a. *ny satroka fosten’ny lehilahy*

DET hat white’DET man

‘the man’s white hat’

b. *ny alika kely fotsy tsara tarehy anankiray*

DET dog small white good face one

‘one small white pretty dog’

[Dez 1990: 105]

As well as occurring with nouns, determiners can also combine with other categories to create a DP. In (9a), we see the determiner with an adjective and in (9b) a verb.

(9) a. ny ratsy
 DET bad
 ‘evil’ (e.g. good vs. evil)

b. ny nataony
 DET TT.do.3(GEN)
 ‘what he did’ [Rahajarizafy 1960]

Ntelitheos (2006) argues that examples such as these are relative clauses, headed by a null N.

Although the focus of this paper is determiners, I will briefly mention the demonstrative system. We can see in the table in (10) that this system is highly complex, encoding six degrees of distance and invisible versus visible (note that the grave accent indicates stress).

(10)

	VISIBLE			INVISIBLE		
	SINGULAR	PLURAL	GENERIC	SINGULAR	PLURAL	GENERIC
NO DISTANCE	ito/ity	ireto	itony	izato/izaty		izatony
UNDEFINED DISTANCE	io/in ^y	ireo/ireny		izao/izay/izany		
VERY CLOSE	itsy	iretsy	itsony	izatsy		izatsony
SMALL DISTANCE	its ^y	irets ^y		izats ^y		
BIG DISTANCE	ir ^ò a	irer ^ò a		izar ^ò a		
VERY BIG DISTANCE	ir ^y	irer ^y	ir ^ò ny	izar ^y		izar ^ò ny

In terms of distribution, demonstratives frame the NP (at the beginning and at the end).

- c. Efa lasa ny mpianatra sasany.
already gone DET student some
'Some of the students have already left.' [Keenan 2007]

The above data show that Malagasy appears to have dedicated determiner-like elements that appear in a fixed position (prenominal) within the DP. In the next section, I provide an overview of determiners in general, their semantic and syntactic roles. In sections 5 and 6, I return to the Malagasy determiner *ny* and discuss it in more detail (I will focus on this determiner and leave the other determiners and the demonstratives for future research).

4 What are determiners?

Determiners are commonly assumed to play two key syntactic and semantic roles: as the head of DP and as the indicator of definiteness. The goal of this section is to describe some of the definitions of definiteness that have been proposed in the literature. In subsequent sections I explore how Malagasy fits with the standard definitions.

4.1 *Syntax*

Since Abney's (1987) seminal work, many syntacticians analyze nominal arguments as DPs rather than NPs. That is, they are projections of the head D (for determiner), whose complement is NP. This line of thinking typically assumes that the determiner turns an NP into an argument, in other words, into something that the syntax can manipulate. Along with this syntactic analysis is a semantic parallel: nouns (and noun phrases) are considered to be predicates, type $\langle e,t \rangle$, and the addition of a determiner creates an entity, type $\langle e \rangle$.

4.2 *Semantics*

As mentioned above determiners are typically taken to indicate (in)definiteness. Definiteness has long been discussed in both the linguistic and philosophical literature and remains the subject of much debate. I limit myself here to a very brief overview of some of the recurring themes that arise in analyses of definiteness, following closely the description in Lyons (1999). Simplifying his discussion, definiteness can be seen to indicate either familiarity or uniqueness (or both).

Lyons uses “identifiability” rather than familiarity, but the two notions are similar, and he defines it as follows:

(14) The use of the definite article directs the hearer to the referent of the noun phrase by signaling that he is in a position to identify it. [Lyons 1999: 5-6]

Uniqueness (“inclusiveness” for Lyons) can be described as:

(15) The reference is to the totality of the objects or mass in the context which satisfy the description. [Lyons 1999: 11]

As Lyons points out, some uses of the definite determiner in English show familiarity (and not uniqueness) while others show uniqueness (but not familiarity). He proposes that definiteness is the grammaticalization of familiarity and can develop other uses (as is typical with grammatical categories).

A third notion that has been connected to definiteness and determiners is domain restriction (Westerståhl 1984, von Stechow 1999, inter alia). It is well known that quantifiers typically do not quantify over the entire domain (the world), but rather are sensitive to the context. For example, in (16), *every freshman* is not used to refer to all the freshmen in the world, but instead to the freshmen in a contextually relevant domain.

(16) Every freshman is from out of state. [von Stechow 1999: 3]

This is also true for other DPs, such as *the freshmen*, and Westerståhl (1984) claims that the determiner *the* is itself domain restriction. Gillon (2006, this volume) develops this line of analysis and argues that determiners in Salish introduce domain restriction and that they are associated with implicatures of inclusiveness; in English, on the other hand, *the* introduces domain restriction but in addition, it asserts uniqueness. Moreover, she claims that familiarity can be derived from domain restriction plus the uniqueness assertion (in English).⁴ In fact, one of

⁴ Kehler and Ward (2006) claim that the failure to use a referring expression (e.g. the use of ‘a dog’ over ‘the dog’) conversationally implicates nonfamiliarity.

Gillon's central claim is that cross-linguistically determiners always introduce domain restriction. Note here that her conclusions mesh well with Lyons', if we take domain restriction to be connected to familiarity.

4.3 Summary

Taking the above discussion as our guide, we can ask whether determiners in Malagasy play a key role in creating arguments from predicates, whether they encode definiteness (familiarity, uniqueness, domain restriction) and whether their absence signals indefiniteness. I should point out here that Massam, Gorrie and Kelner (2006) explore the Niuean determiner system and show that no one group of morphemes in this language plays the role of determiner, as we understand it. Instead, the case+article particles are the top-level category within DP that ensures referentiality or argumenthood, while the quantifiers encode notions such as backgrounding and focus, rather than definiteness. Thus any study of determiner-like elements in a particular language must be open to the presence of novel meanings and uses, as well as language-specific division of labour.

I will show in the next section that the Malagasy determiner *ny* does not encode uniqueness but it does assert familiarity. Moreover, much like determiners in Skwxwú7mesh, the Malagasy determiner *ny* introduces domain restriction.

5 Malagasy determiners

This section explores the Malagasy determiner *ny*, in particular its semantics. The properties of the other determiners (in particular, the determiner *ilay*) and the demonstratives await further research. To avoid confusion, I will refer to DPs that have the determiner as “*ny* DPs” and those without as “bare DPs”. Whether bare DPs are headed by a null D° or are in fact D-less (i.e. NPs) is an issue I turn to directly.

5.1 Syntax

Is the determiner required for argumenthood in Malagasy? We have already seen that arguments do not need to have a determiner and I provide more examples in (17), where the complements of the verbs are bare DPs.

- (17) a. Manolotra voankazo izy.
 AT.offer fruit 3(NOM)
 ‘She offers fruit.’
- b. Rakofana lamba ny fandriana.
 TT.cover cloth DET bed
 ‘The bed is covered with a cloth.’

I will argue below that bare DPs are headed by a null determiner, that is, Malagasy does not permit NP arguments.

In the syntactic literature, null heads are often analyzed as elements that need to be licensed in some particular way. For example, null complementizers have a limited distribution and therefore are argued to have special licensing requirements. As is well known, the complementizer is obligatory in sentential subjects.

- (18) a. People widely assume (that) politics is corrupting.
 b. *(That) politics is corrupting is widely assumed.

Whether this licensing is via government or some other means (e.g. Landau 2007 claims that the EPP is a PF constraint that requires the head – here C° - to be overtly realized), the generalization appears to be true. Similarly, the restricted distribution of so-called bare nouns in Romance languages has been linked to the licensing requirements of the null determiner (Contreras 1986). With this background in mind, I now turn to the Malagasy data.

First recall that bare DPs in Malagasy (DPs without a determiner or demonstrative) are rather limited in distribution in Malagasy. As discussed by Keenan (1976), they are barred from the subject position and, moreover, they are usually absent in positions marked by genitive case (e.g. the non-active agent and the complement to certain prepositions). They are therefore acceptable in three positions: direct object (18a), predicate (18b), accusative object of a preposition (19c).⁵

⁵ It might be possible to conflate (19a) and (19c) as both being instances of a bare DP in an accusative case position.

- (19) a. Mividy boky aho.
 buy book 1SG(NOM)
 ‘I am buying a book/books.’
- b. Vorona ratsy feo ny goaika
 bird bad voice DET crow
 ‘The crow is a bird with an ugly voice’
- c. Ampirimo ao an’efitra ny kitapona.
 put-away there ACC’room DET bag.2SG
 ‘Put your bag away in the room.’

As a second restriction, bare DPs (unlike *ny* DPs) can’t appear in displaced positions. For example, bare DP objects cannot scramble: in (19) *ny ankizy* ‘the children’ can scramble rightwards past the adverb *matetika* ‘often’, while in (20), scrambling of *ankizy* ‘children’ is impossible (Rackowski (1988), Rackowski and Travis (2000)).

- (20) a. Mamitaka ny ankizy matetika Rabe.
 AT.trick DET child often Rabe
 ‘Rabe often tricks the children.’
- b. Mamitaka matetika ny ankizy Rabe.
 AT.trick often DET child Rabe
 ‘Rabe often tricks the children.’
- (21) a. Mamitaka ankizy matetika Rabe.
 AT.trick child often Rabe
 ‘Rabe often tricks children.’
- b. * Mamitaka matetika ankizy Rabe.
 AT.trick often child Rabe

This restriction on movement also rules out bare DPs from appearing in the topic position:

- (22) *(Ny) bibilava dia mikisaka.
DET snake TOP AT.crawl
'Snakes crawl.'

Bare DPs can appear in the focus position, but it has been argued that this is in fact not an instance of focus movement – the bare DP is in fact the matrix predicate (Paul 2001). And we have already seen that predicates (not surprisingly) can be bare.

Thus the distribution of bare DPs is not free and from this restricted distribution, I conclude that bare DPs are not truly bare: there is a null determiner and it is this null determiner that limits the distribution of the DP.⁶ Moreover, determiners are not permitted in the predicate position (with some minor exceptions). Therefore the data suggest that in Malagasy, truly bare nominals are predicates (and therefore are NPs). In order to act as an argument, a noun must combine with a determiner (null or overt). We now turn to the semantics of the overt determiner – I will discuss the null determiner in section 6.

5.2 Ny

This section focuses on the determiner *ny* and its interpretation. I will present data from *ny* DPs in different syntactic positions: subject, object of preposition and direct object. We will see that *ny* is not always associated with familiarity or uniqueness.

As mentioned earlier, *ny* is usually described as a specific or definite determiner, one that can also appear with generics, as in (22).

- (23) Biby ny alika.
animal DET dog
'The dog is an animal.' [Domenichini-Ramiaramanana 1977]

⁶ Note that this conclusion conflicts with Gillon (2006). As we will see, bare DPs do not introduce domain restriction, therefore, according to Gillon, they lack D. The existence of a null determiner is not crucial to the present analysis and perhaps more evidence could be found for or against such an element.

ny sotro mahamay ‘the hot spoon’ must have a determiner because of the preposition *amin* ‘with/at/in/etc.’.⁷

- (26) ...misy mpampiasa karany iray nandro ny tava
 exist employer Pakistani one AT.burn DET face
 sy ny fen’ny mpiasany tamin’ny sotro mahamay.
 and DET thigh’DET worker.3(GEN) with’DET spoon hot
 ‘... there is an Indo-Pakistani employer who burned his servant’s face and thigh with a
hot spoon.’ [J&R: 20]

Again, the referent of this DP is neither familiar nor unique – the spoon has not been mentioned previously nor is it referred to again in the text. If there is a previously introduced DP, however, the *ny* DP must refer back to it. Thus in (27), the *ny* DP is interpreted as partitive.

- (27) Niditra ny vehivavy telo. Niresaka tamin’ny vehivavy iray aho.
 AT.enter DET woman three AT.talk with’DET woman one 1SG(NOM)
 ‘Three women entered. I talked with one of the women.’

Thus we see that *ny* DPs (when subject or the object of a preposition) need not be familiar nor unique.

Turning to the object position, I have not been able to find textual examples of discourse-initial, non-familiar arguments that are headed by *ny*.⁸ On the other hand, it is easy to create situations which show that *ny* DPs in object position are not always unique. For example, in (28) *ny vehivavy iray* does not mean ‘the one woman’, but rather ‘one of the women’, a partitive reading.

⁷ There are some exceptions to this, but overwhelmingly the complement of *amin* occurs with a determiner/demonstrative. This is likely related to case: the complement of *amin* is in the genitive case and, as Keenan (to appear) points out, text counts show that 94% of genitives are formally definite.

⁸ Rasolofo’s (2007) text-count analysis of narratives shows that 36% of *ny* DP objects are of low topicality: the antecedent to the referent occurs four or more clauses back in the text. I do not know if she found any truly non-familiar uses of *ny* DP objects, however.

- (28) Niditra ny vehivavy telo. Nahalala ny vehivavy iray aho.
 AT.enter DET woman three AT.know DET woman one 1SG(NOM)
 ‘Three women entered. I knew one of the women.’

In spite of the lack of non-familiar examples of object *ny* DPs, the data clearly show that *ny* is not necessarily associated with familiarity and uniqueness. So are *ny* DPs definite?

In a recent discussion of the so-called definiteness restriction on subjects, Keenan (to appear) claims that subjects are only “definite” in that they presuppose existence and therefore always scope over negation.

- (29) Tsy nandeha tany an-tsekoly ny mpianatra telo.
 NEG AT.go there ACC-school DET student three
 ‘Three students didn’t go to school.’
 * ‘It is not the case that three students went to school.’

Keenan shows that subjects take wide scope even when indefinite (not previously mentioned, not an identified group). In (29), for example, the judgment is that the speaker is merely making a claim about some three students; these students need not be under discussion.

I should point out here that *ny* doesn’t uniquely mark wide scope – the wide scope likely comes from the high structural position of the subject. As shown in (30), objects with *ny* can take narrow scope.

- (30) Izao aza aho mbola tsy nahazo ny akanjo mafana
 now even 1SG(NOM) still NEG AT.get DET clothes hot
 ho an-janako.
 for ACC-child.1SG(GEN)
 ‘Even now I still haven’t gotten (any) warm clothing for my child.’ [J&R]

From the context (and from native-speaker judgments), it is clear in (30) that negation scopes over the object.⁹ Wide scope is of course possible, as seen in (31), where the object scopes over the adverb.

- (31) Mamaky ny boky roa lalandava Rabe.
 AT.read DET book two always Rabe
 ‘Rabe always reads two books.’ (the same two books)

Summing up, the determiner *ny* in Malagasy does not always indicate definiteness – in particular, *ny* DPs are not always unique nor familiar. Moreover, although subjects take wide scope, wide scope is more likely a result of the position of subjects, rather than a property of the determiner. Outside of the subject position, *ny* DPs can take either wide or narrow scope.

5.3 Demonstratives

I return to demonstratives briefly, only because there are some demonstratives in Malagasy that can be used as determiners. Demonstratives are typically definite and also encode deixis (spatio-temporal context). As mentioned earlier, Malagasy demonstratives typically frame the NP, but certain ones can also be used in a determiner-like fashion (no framing). In these cases, even demonstratives can receive an indefinite interpretation, as seen in (31).

- (32) ...mahasarika azy kokoa ny maka sary ireo olona
 CAUSE.attract 3(ACC) most DET take picture DEM person
 eo amin’ny fianinana andavan’andro.
 there P’DET life everyday
 ‘... he is most interested in photographing people in daily life.’ [J&R]

As is clear from the translation, the meaning is simply ‘people’, not ‘these people’ or even ‘the people’. The indefinite reading of demonstratives appears to be limited to uses of *ireo* as a plural determiner.

⁹ This may in fact be an example of a non-familiar *ny* DP object. Given the context of the utterance, however (a discussion about money concerns), this could be an example of a “bridging definite”.

A related use of demonstratives as indefinites can be seen in the following example, where the clausal subject is framed by the demonstrative *ity* ‘this’:

- (33) ... zary fidiram-bola ho an’ny olo-marobe teny
 become source-money for ACC’DET person-many there
 amin’iny faritr’i Manandriana-Avaradrano iny
 P’DEM area’ Manandriana-Avaradrano DEM
ity fakana tany hosivanina any anaty rano ity...
 DEM taking earth TT.sieve there in water DEM
 ‘... taking soil to sieve it in water has become a source of income for a great many people
 in the Manandriana-Avaradrano area...’ [J&R]

This example is from the first sentence of a newspaper article about people looking for gold, so it provides the first mention of taking earth. This use of *ity* is cataphoric – it introduces a new entity that will be important in the remainder of the article. Note that colloquial English *this* has a similar use (Prince 1981).

6 The absence of determiners

In the preceding section, we have seen the presence of the determiner *ny* does not consistently signal a definite interpretation. We can now ask the opposite question: does the absence of *ny* consistently mark indefiniteness? In other words, is the null determiner indefinite? What I show in the next subsections is a bare DP can be interpreted as definite or indefinite. Thus neither the presence nor the absence of determiners is correlated with definiteness.

6.1 Scope

When looking at examples with scope-bearing elements, bare DPs in Malagasy typically act like bare plurals in English: they obligatorily take narrow scope. This contrasts with what we have seen for *ny* DPs. In (34), for example, the bare DP scopes under the adverbs *indroa* ‘twice’ and *lalandava* ‘always’, as well as under the modal particle *tokony* ‘should’.

- (34) a. Namaky boky indroa Rabe.

AT.read book twice Rabe
'Rabe read a book twice.' (not the same book)

b. Nianatra lesona lalandava Rasoa.
AT.study lesson always Rasoa
'Rasoa always studied a lesson.' (not the same lesson)

c. Tokony hamaky boky ianao.
should FUT.read book 2(NOM)
'You should read a book.' (any book)

The data in (35) show that bare DPs also scope under negation: in (35a), we see that a bare DP in the scope of negation does not introduce a discourse referent that can be referred to later by a pronoun, (35b) shows a similar effect in an imperative.

(35) a. Tsy namaky boky Rasoa. # Sarotra loatra ilay izy.
NEG AT.read book Rasoa difficult too DEF 3(NOM)
'Rasoa didn't read a book. It was too difficult.'

b. Aza manolotra boky azy!
NEG-IMP AT.offer book 3(acc)
'Don't offer him a book!' (any book at all)

Thus far, bare DPs in Malagasy behave like weak indefinites. But just as we have seen that *ny* DPs can be interpreted as indefinite, there seem to be examples where bare DPs encode definiteness.

6.2 Body parts

Keenan and Ralalaoherivony (2000) discuss possessor raising in Malagasy, a very productive phenomenon where a body part (or other inalienable possession) surfaces as a bare noun, such as *nify* 'tooth' in (34a) and *kibo* 'belly' in (34b).

- (36) a. Fotsy nify Rabe.
 white tooth Rabe
 ‘Rabe has white teeth.’
- b. Marary kibo aho.
 sick belly 1SG(NOM)
 ‘I am sick in the stomach.’

[K&R: (4a)]

As is clear from these examples, the bare noun is semantically definite – in particular these examples show uniqueness. (36a) means that all of Rabe’s teeth are white, not one or some. Not surprisingly these bare nouns can scope over negation, unlike what we saw in (34a):

- (37) Tsy maty filoha ny firenana. Sitrana izy.
 NEG dead president DET country cured 3(NOM)
 ‘The country’s president didn’t die. She is cured.’

I set aside possessor raising here given that the semantics of the bare nouns in this context arises from semantics of the construction as a whole (see Paul in press for some discussion).

6.3 Other positions

As previously noted, bare DP arguments occur in two positions: direct object and object of a preposition. In looking through texts, I have found several examples of a bare DP referring to a previously identified or contextually salient entity. One example is from a newspaper article about people sieving for gold. In the first clause, locked houses are mentioned (with a determiner); in the second clause refers to the same houses with a bare noun.

- (38) Lalina aza fa ny tranon'olona mihidy mihitsy no nisy namoha,
 deep even C DET house'person AT.lock indeed FOC exist AT.open
 ka Alain'dry zalahy ny tany ao anaty trano...
 and TT.take.DET 2PLM DET earth there in house
 'Even more serious, locked houses had people breaking in; the scoundrels took the soil
 from inside the houses...' [J&R]

In fact, looking through texts, it appears that the preposition *anaty* 'in' is always followed by a bare DP, even if that noun is familiar or unique.¹⁰ The following sentence is from a story about two brothers who arrive at a lake, go up to the edge of the water and shout.

- (39) Voatabataba ny lalomena mpiandry farihy ka
 pass.noise DET lalomena¹¹ guardian lake and
 nisafaoka avy tany anaty rano lalina tany.
 rise.up come there in water deep there
 'The lalomena, guardian of the lake, was disturbed and rose up from the deep water.'

Here *anaty* 'in' is followed by *rano* 'water', a bare DP despite being familiar (the previous sentences have mentioned the lake and the water) and unique. The same is true of certain other locative prepositions, for example *an*.

- (40) Mandeha eny an-dalana izy.
 go there P-road 3(nom)
 'She is walking in the street.'

¹⁰ The title of one of the stories in the collection I looked at is "*Anaty ala*" ('In the forest'). As a complicating factor, *anaty* is morphologically complex, made up of the preposition *an* and the noun *aty* 'the interior'. The category of *an* is in fact not clear. It surfaces between locative elements like *eny* 'there', *eo* 'here' and their complement and also productively creates locatives (e.g. *havia* 'left' -> *ankavia* 'to/on the left'). Abinal and Malzac (1888) list it as a preposition and compare it with *amin*, another all-purpose preposition; Dez (1980) follows this classification and claims that there are only two prepositions in Malagasy: *amin* and *an*. Given that *an* creates manner adverbs (e.g. *tselika* 'nimble' -> *antselika* 'nimbly'), it seems reasonable to classify it as a preposition.

¹¹ In the context of the story, *lalomena* means a large beast. In my dictionary, the definition is "extinct pygmy hippopotamus".

Of course, a bare DP can also be indefinite (unfamiliar, not unique) – the following sentence is from the beginning of a story about four friends: Vo, Vy, Tro, and Lalo.

- (41) Nitoetra tao anaty farihy avara-tanàna kosa i Tro.
live there in lake north-town on.the.other.hand i Tro.
'Tro lived in a lake north of the town.'

Here the lake is new in the discourse.

Thus we have the mirror image of the subject position: subjects must be headed by a determiner (but can be interpreted as indefinite) and the complements of certain prepositions must be bare (but can be interpreted as definite).¹²

The more interesting situation, therefore, is for positions where the determiner is truly optional. In instances of apparent free variation, is there still no correlation between the presence of a determiner and definiteness? As mentioned in section 2, direct objects in Malagasy can appear either with or without a determiner. I provide an example below, from Rajaona (1972: 432).

- (42) a. Tia boky frantsay aho.
like book French 1SG(NOM)
'I like French books.'
- b. Tia ny boky frantsay aho.
like DET book French 1SG(NOM)
'I like French books.'

Rajaona's discussion of these examples does not immediately make clear what the difference in interpretation is. But at the end of this section and in the conclusion we will return to the opposition and contrast connected with the presence of the determiner in (42b).

¹² The parallel is not quite perfect, however. The complement of *anaty* (and the other prepositions) can in fact be a *ny* DP (see also footnote 3). There is, however, a preference for bare DPs. Subjects, however, are truly restricted to *ny* DPs.

One potentially relevant comes from a newspaper article about cyclones: from the context (and the translation provided) it was all the streets that were blocked, but *arabe* ‘street’ is bare.

- (43) ... sy nanapaka arabe mihitsy tany amin’io toerana io ...
 and AT.cut street absolutely there P’DEM place DEM
 ‘... and completely blocked the streets there in that area...’ [J&R]

The apparently definite interpretation of *arabe* ‘street’ may, however, be a result of *mihitsy* ‘completely’ acting like an adverbial quantifier, binding the bare noun.

Working with speakers, however, I have found what appear to be relevant examples of bare nouns that can be used to refer to clearly familiar/unique entities.

- (44) a. Nahita solom-bavam-bahoakan’Antsiranana I aho omaly.
 see deputy’Antsiranana I 1SG(NOM) yesterday
 ‘I saw the deputy of Antsiranana I yesterday.’ (there is only one deputy)
- b. Nijery kintana aho tamin’ny alina.
 watch star 1SG(NOM) at’DET night
 ‘I looked at the stars last night.’
- c. Nahita volana aho tamin’ny alina.
 see moon 1SG(NOM) at’DET night
 ‘I saw the moon last night.’

The example in (44a) could be discounted as being not familiar (hearer-unknown), but (44b,c) are clear instances of referring to a familiar and unique object (or objects) with a bare noun.

On the other hand, it is clear that bare nouns cannot be used to refer to entities that have been mentioned in the immediately preceding discourse.¹³ For example, the bare noun *mananasy* ‘pineapple’ in (45b) cannot be used refer back to the previously mentioned pineapple in (45a).

¹³ Rasolofo (2006) exams the topic continuity of arguments in Malagasy folk tales and in elicited texts and shows that in sentences where the object is a bare DP, the referent has been previously-mentioned (i.e. is familiar) in 18%

- (45) a. Nahita mananasy naniry tery an-tsefatsefa-bato ilay zazavavy.
 find pineapple grow there ?-broken-rock DEF girl
 ‘The girl found a pineapple growing in the talus.’
- b. # Nandeha nanapaka mananasy izy.
 go take pineapple 3(NOM)
 ‘She went to get a pineapple.’

Similarly in (46b), the second mention of *sifaka* is to a new group, not the four mentioned in (46a).

- (46) a. Nandeha tany an-ala aho omaly ary nahita sifaka efatra.
 go PST.there P-forest 1SG(NOM) yesterday and see sifaka four
 ‘I went to the forest yesterday and saw four sifakas (lemurs).’
- b. # Nanaraka sifaka aho.
 follow sifaka 1SG(NOM)
 ‘I followed sifakas.’

If the noun itself is not mentioned, however, then reference is fine, as shown in the following example. Here, the initial discourse context is an existential construction that asserts five children being in the yard. As an answer to the question ‘what are they doing?’ it is possible to use to bare noun *zazalahy* ‘boys’ to refer to the boys who are part of the group of children under discussion.

of the instances. While much lower than newly introduced (non-familiar) uses of bare DPs, these results show that bare DPs can be familiar. I found the following passage from one of the stories analyzed by Rasolofo:

- (i) Rehefa tonga teo amin’io anana maitso mavana sy maha te-hihinana io ny lakana,
 when arrive pst.there p’this plant green splendid and cause want-eat this det canoe
 niteny tamin’ny mpivoy i Damo hijanona kely hitsongo anana.
 pst.at.say pst.p’det paddler Damo fut.at.stop little fut.at.gather plant
 ‘When the canoe arrived close to this green and appetizing edible plant, Damo ordered the paddlers to stop a minute to gather some.’

Here the second mention of *anana* ‘plant’ is a bare DP, but is clearly familiar and receives a partitive reading – they will gather some of the plant.

- (47) Misy ankizy dimy ao an-tokotany. Maninona izy ireo?
 exist child five there AT-yard do-what 3PL(NOM)
 Mamazivazy zazalahy ny zazavavy.
 tease boy DET girl
 ‘There are 5 kids in the yard. What are they doing? The girls are teasing (the) boys.’

In English, however, this is not a possible use of the bare plural, as can be seen in the translation.

6.5 Summary

This section has overviewed the distribution and interpretation of the lack of the determiner and shown that the absence of a determiner does not always signal indefiniteness. Instead, bare DPs can be interpreted as either definite or indefinite. These results fit with what we saw in section 5, where nouns headed by determiners can also be interpreted as either definite or indefinite. The syntax requires determiners in certain positions (e.g. the subject) and bars them in others, but even in contexts where determiners have a freer distribution (e.g. the object), we can see both definite and indefinite readings of bare nouns. This leaves us with a puzzle: what is the determiner doing if it doesn’t signal definiteness? I suggest an answer to this puzzle in the final section.

7 Is it chaos?

At this point, the reader may wonder what role, if any, the determiner plays in interpretation. Up until now, we have only seen certain syntactic reasons for the determiner, but no semantic correlates. Based on the data and on native-speaker judgements, I suggest when the determiner is not obligatory it signals contrast. The notion of contrast will unfortunately remain somewhat vague, but I offer some illustrative examples. Consider again Rajaona’s examples:

- (48) a. Tia boky frantsay aho.
 like book French 1SG(NOM)
 ‘I like French books.’
 “J’aime les livres français” – valeur généralisante

b. Tia ny boky frantsay aho.

like DET book French 1SG(NOM)

‘I like French books.’

“J’aime les livres français” – valeur catégorisante (la catégorie de livres qui sont écrits en français – par opposition implicite aux livres non écrits en français)

In his translation, he notes that when the determiner is present there is an implicit opposition with other kinds of books, non-French book. I have found a similar effect in the following pair:

(49) a. Fotsy ny volon’akoho.

white DET hair’chicken

‘Chicken feathers are white.’

generic statement about chicken feathers

b. Fotsy ny volon’ny akoho.

white DET hair’DET chicken

i. ‘Chicken feathers are white.’

generic, but in context of talking about the coats of various animals

ii. ‘The chicken’s feathers are white.’

statement about a particular chicken

In (49bi) the determiner signals that chicken feathers are being discussed, not the feathers (or coat) of any other animal.

Finally, we see a slightly different type of contrast below:

(50) a. Nahita volana aho tamin’ny alina.

see moon 1(SG) at’DET night

‘I saw the moon last night.’

- b. Nahita ny volana aho tamin'ny alina.
 see DET moon 1(SG) at'DET night
 'I saw the moon last night.'

While (50a) is an unmarked utterance, describing what I did last night, (50b) is more marked. One speaker suggested that (50b) would be appropriate in a context where it was surprising that I saw the moon. Perhaps it was cloudy or there was some other reason why the moon shouldn't have been visible. Another speaker felt that in (50b) it is understood that I saw other things as well as the moon (for example, the stars).

What is clear from examples (48)-(50) is that determiners in Malagasy cannot be markers of definiteness, as traditionally defined. Although I leave the notion of contrast undefined, I note that this use of the determiner recalls the Niuean situation, where the quantifiers signal certain discourse properties, such as focus and backgrounding. Although the Malagasy facts are not identical, they do suggest that in some languages, determiner-like elements may have a different set of discourse properties than those found in more commonly studied languages.

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