Specific Nominals in Mandarin and Korean

This study explores the possibilities of extending the DP-hypothesis (Abney 1987) to article-less languages by concentrating on the behavior of specific nominals in two such languages, Mandarin and Korean. I argue that a Kratzer (1998)-style choice function analysis correctly captures the interpretation of these nominals. I then propose a syntactic extension of the choice function proposal, and show how the semantic and the syntactic types I posit for Mandarin and Korean specific nominals account for their semantic and syntactic properties.

In Mandarin and Korean, certain positions are restricted to nominals with a specific interpretation, roughly translatable into English as certain-N or partitive nominals. For instance, in Mandarin, only specific nominals can occur preposed in the post-

*a* ta **ba yi jian fang** zu chuqu le
s/he BA one CL room lease out LE
‘He leased out one of the rooms.’

*b* ta zu chuqu le **yi jian fang**
LE one CL room
‘He leased out a room.’ [Wang 1987:82]

Other positions which are subject to similar interpretative restrictions include preverbal subject positions in Mandarin and “scrambled” positions in Korean. These positions are collectively referred to as “VP-external”.

I begin by examining the semantics of the Mandarin and Korean nominals that appear in VP-external positions, and argue that these are the Mandarin and Korean equivalents of Fodor and Sag’s (1982) and Kratzer’s (1998) referential indefinites: they tend to take widest “scope”. Moreover, these nominals exhibit intermediate “scope” interpretations in the presence of a bound variable, similarly to Kratzer’s (1998) referential indefinites. I therefore extend her choice function analysis of specific nominals, which was motivated by their behavior in languages with articles, to specific nominals in languages without articles, and show that her choice function analysis correctly predicts only the attested readings.

The choice function analysis, I argue, also determines both the semantic type and syntactic type of specific nominals. Semantically, specific nominals are of individual-type (type e); choice functions pick out members from the set delimited by the denotation of the noun (phrase). Adopting the hypothesis that the choice-function operator has a syntactic correlate (cf. Kratzer 1998 on English), I propose that the syntactic type of specific nominals is a DP, where the D is projected by the choice-function operator. Nonspecific nominals are then taken to be NPs, since nothing in their interpretation justifies the presence of a choice-function operator.

The distinction in the semantic types of specific and nonspecific nominals accounts for the problem of the distributional asymmetry exemplified above: I attribute the conspicuous absence of nonspecific nominals from VP-external positions to the ill-formedness of chains involving objects of different types—traces which are of individual (e) type, and nonspecific nominals which are of predicate (<e,t>) or predicate-modifier type.

The distinction in the syntactic types of specific and nonspecific nominals offers a solution for a syntactic property distinguishing the two. Specific nominals have been known to resist extraction, unlike their nonspecific counterparts. I attribute this resistance to extraction to the additional projection at the level of D, which creates a barrier to extraction; such barrier is absent in nonspecific nominals, which are mere NPs.
Finally, both the semantic and the syntactic distinctions may help explain still another property of specific nominals: in languages such as Korean, where Case-marking is overt (cf. Enq 1991, for similar facts in Turkish), specific nominals obligatorily appear with an overt Case marker. Assuming that structural Case, when overtly marked, facilitates the mapping between argument structures and grammatical functions, we can easily understand why structural Case should be marked on a specific nominal, which functions as an argument of a predicate. Non-specifics, which are not arguments of predicates (van Geenhoven 1998), do not require overt Case. Alternatively, one may argue that overt structural Case is a way to signal the presence of the D-level projection in article-less languages such as Korean.

The current proposal, which posits two distinct structures (DP vs. NP) and two distinct semantic types for strings that are often indistinguishable on the surface, has advantages over previous proposals under which nominals are of one syntactic type regardless of their interpretation. Approaches with semantic type-shifting (e.g. Chierchia 1998) crucially fail to capture the correlation between interpretation and distribution, as they simply type-shift nonspecific nominals in VP-external positions into individual-types, instead of excluding them from those positions. Diesing’s (1997) approach to Germanic VP-external nominals cannot be extended to Mandarin easily: it incorrectly characterizes movement as a necessary condition on specific nominals (i.e. it asserts that specific nominals must move out of the VP), whereas the Mandarin facts point to movement as merely a sufficient indication of specificity (i.e. specific nominals can stay inside the VP). Furthermore, all “one-nominal-type” approaches fail to capture the various properties of specific nominals that go hand in hand with their interpretation, such as their resistance to extraction and structural Case-marking requirement.

The proposed analysis argues for a close connection between semantics and syntax: the interpretation of nominals is taken to be reflected in their syntactic distribution and behavior, and the distribution of nominals is taken to delimit the range of their interpretations. This close inter-modular connection was suggested by the data we examined, where the VP-external positioning of nominals was observed to coincide with a specific interpretation. The presence of similar phenomena in languages other than Mandarin and Korean encourages us to extend this approach to those languages. Doing so will enable us to determine whether the inter-modular connection claimed in the current proposal holds in the same manner across languages.

Selected References