

The semantics of bare nominals

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Our paper explores the semantics of bare nominals (henceforth, BNs) with an emphasis put on their kind readings. Building on Carlson (1977), Chierchia (1998) and Dayal (2001) claim kind reference integral to the meaning of BNs and treat their other possible readings as derivatives on this basic meaning. BNs of determinerless languages like Polish are particularly worth–examining, because they express the whole range of meanings such as kind, taxonomic, definite and indefinite ones. An account of their properties will be a ‘window’ to the crosslinguistic study of BNs. They will be compared to BNs of a determiner language like English.

Cross–linguistic studies reveal that in languages with number distinction morphologically marked both singular and plural nominals can be kind–referring terms (cf. Krifka et al. 1995):

(1)a. Psy są ssakami.

‘Dogs are mammals.’

b. Pies towarzyszy człowiekowi od dawna.

‘The dog has been accompanying man for a long time.’

Our goal in this paper will be to defend the main lines of the theory of Dayal (2001), who argues for the existence of the two distinct kind formation strategies, “...one that applies only to plural properties of objects and one that can take singular properties of kinds.”¹ The main motivation for Dayal’s proposal comes from the fact that singular and plural kind terms differ in relations to their individual instantiations, which is manifested, for instance, by contrasts in acceptability of singular and plural kinds with certain verbal predicates:

(2) a. Rutgers Professors seem to be born on weekdays.

b. *The Rutgers Professor seems to be born on a weekday.²

¹ Dayal (2001: 52)

² (Dayal 2001: 30–1, her (71) due to Edwin Williams (p.c.))

The observed differences are claimed to be cross-linguistically valid and independent of particular language (in)definiteness morphology. We believe that the main points of Dayal's proposal can also be maintained for Polish. Polish singular kind terms, similarly to English ones, can only be used to refer to natural or well-established kinds, whereas this restriction does not hold for plural kinds:

- (3) a. Butelka od coli jest szeroko rozpowszechniona, bo sprzedaje się w niej też fantę i tonic.
- b. *Zielona butelka jest szeroko rozpowszechniona, bo sprzedaje się w niej też piwo.
- c. Zielone butelki są szeroko rozpowszechnione, bo sprzedaje się w nich też piwo.

Moreover, singular kinds do not usually appear with stage-level predicates, in contrast to plural kinds:

- (4) a. The dog is barking. *only definite reading available*
 - b. Pies szczeka. *kind reading only when paired with individual level interpretation*
- 'The dog barks. or A/The dog is barking.'

Finally, singular kinds cannot have a distributive reading required by a quantificational predicate be everywhere:

- (5) a. */??Pies był wszędzie.
- 'The dog was everywhere'
- b. Psy były wszędzie.
- 'Dogs were everywhere.'

Still, certain predictions of Dayal's theory raise our doubts and need be thoroughly investigated. One of them is the claim that bare singulars get the indefinite reading in special contexts only³, which implies that this reading is rare. Polish data seem to run against this claim.

References:

- Carlson, G. 1977. "A Unified Analysis of the English Bare Plural." *Linguistics & Philosophy*.
- Chierchia, G. 1998. "Reference to Kinds Across Languages." *Natural Language Semantics* 6.
- Dayal, V. 2001. "Number Marking and (In)definiteness in Kind Terms." Ms. Rutgers University.

³ Dayal argues at length that bare nominals are ambiguous only between kind and definite readings.

Krifka, M. et al. 1995. "Genericity: an introduction." In G. Carlson and J. Pelletier. eds. *The Generic Book*. Chicago.