Anaphoric bare nouns: Japanese and Korean vs. other languages

Japanese and Korean are bare argument languages that freely allow bare nouns as arguments to predicates. In this paper, I present a novel generalization on the anaphoric ability of bare nouns in these languages, focusing on how Japanese and Korean differ from other bare argument languages like Hindi and Thai. I account for this difference with a competition-based analysis where the presence of morphologically simplex pronouns affect the anaphoric ability of a bare noun.

Observation: It has been known that bare nouns in many bare argument languages can be definite (Dayal 2004). However, recent discussions suggest that there are two kinds meanings associated with definiteness: uniqueness and familiarity (Schwarz 2009). With this distinction, what we find is that bare nouns in these languages allow uniqueness-denoting interpretations as in (1).

(1) a. tsuki-ga oki.       b. duan-can sawaan maak.
   moon-NOM big          moon bright very
   ‘The moon is big.’ [Japanese] ‘The moon is very bright.’ [Thai; Jenks 2015]

However, when we turn to the familiarity-denoting anaphoric interpretation, bare argument languages diverge into two categories. While Japanese and Korean allow bare nouns in intersententially anaphoric contexts like (2) (cf. Furuya 2008, Nemoto 2005), Thai and Hindi do not. For example, in the Thai example (3a) from Jenks 2015, the only possible interpretation is that students in general are clever. I call the languages in (2) ABN (anaphoric bare noun) languages, and those in (3) *ABN languages.

(2) a. watashi-wa hon-o kat-ta. hon-wa takaka-ta.
   I-TOP book-ACC buy-PAST book-TOP expensive-PAST
   ‘I bought a book. The book was expensive.’ [Japanese]

b. ecey haksayng-ul manna-ss-ta. haksayng-un pappa poy-ess-ta.
   yesterday student-ACC meet-PAST-DECL student-TOP busy seem-PAST-DECL
   ‘I met a student yesterday. The student looked busy.’ [Korean]

(3) a. miawaan phom cee kap nakrian khon nin. #nakrian chalaat maak.
   yesterday I meet with student CLF INDEF student clever very
   (Intended) ‘Yesterday I met a student. The student is very clever.’ [Korean]

b. maine ek kitab kharid-i. #kitab mehngi thi.
   1SG.ERG one book.SGF buy-PAST.SGF book.SGF expensive be.PAST.SGF
   (Intended) ‘I bought a book. The book was expensive.’ [Hindi]

Note that this difference is not due to topichood in (2): in Korean, a nominative marker can replace the topic marker nun and the bare noun can still be anaphoric. The bare noun can also appear in object positions as in (4).

(4) ecey haksayng-ul manna-ss-ta. na-nun haksayng-ul kwanchalha-yess-ta.
   yesterday student-ACC meet-PAST-DECL I-TOP student-ACC observe-PAST-DECL
   ‘I met a student yesterday. I observed the student.’

I propose a novel generalization to account for this difference between ABN and *ABN languages, based on the observation that the availability of an anaphoric bare noun corresponds to the availability of morphologically simplex pronouns in the language.

(5) Bare noun blocking: If a bare argument language has morphologically simplex pronouns for third person reference, bare nouns are blocked from intersentential anaphora with one salient entity.

In Korean and Japanese, all anaphoric expressions involve a full demonstrative description, or a reduced form that is morphologically complex with the demonstrative and an NP as in (6) (cf. Seah 2013).
Korean, the demonstrative *ku* (‘he’) can stand alone in Korean, but it is rarely used in speech (Kim & Han 2016), and there is no simplex form for inanimates.

(6) a. *kyay* : *ku-ay* (‘that kid’) [Korean]
    b. *ano hito* (‘that person’), *ko/so/a-itsu* (‘this/that guy’) [Japanese]

In contrast, Thai has pronouns *kh´ aw* (3s) and *man* (3s inanimate) that are distinct from the demonstrative, while Hindi demonstrative *vo* is used relatively freely as pronouns.

**Analysis:** What we see is that the availability of anaphoric bare nouns in these languages depends on the presence of a pronoun that is more minimal (e.g., not containing the noun). This motivates a competition-based story. I propose one possible analysis by a) analyzing them as elements on a scale derived from meaning, and b) proposing a principle that chooses the lowest one in the scale.

I assume that the syntactic structure contains an empty DP place-holder with an index. The index identifies the target referent, the antecedent. The competition takes place between possible expressions to determine which expression can felicitously refer to the target referent.

The denotations I propose are shown in (7). The pronoun and the anaphoric bare noun differ in the restriction that is used to evaluate uniqueness, and are ordered in terms of semantic content in (8). While the pronoun such as *kh´ aw* in Thai returns the unique entity in the context, the definite bare noun NP_{def} returns the unique entity $x$ such that $[\text{NP}(x)]$ is true. Then, the economy principle in (9) requires that the least redundant or informative element in the given context be chosen. This principle can be derived from more general principles such as Grice’s Brevity, similar to Minimize Restrictors! (Schlenker 2005) and Efficiency (Meyer 2014), which rule out LFs of redundant meanings.

(7) a. $[\text{pronoun}] = \text{x: entity(x)}$ (8) Scale: $\langle \text{pronoun}, \text{NP}_{\text{DEF}} \rangle$
    b. $[\text{NP}_{\text{DEF}}] = \text{x: entity(x)} \land [\text{NP}(x)]$

(9) Among the anaphoric expressions whose existential and uniqueness presuppositions are satisfied, choose the lowest item on the scale (the least informative element).

In an intersentential anaphoric context with one salient entity, the uniqueness presupposition is satisfied for both the pronoun and NP_{DEF}. In languages like Thai and Hindi, the availability of the pronoun blocks the use of bare nouns. In languages like Korean and Japanese, however, the lowest element in the scale is the bare noun, so no blocking occurs.

I analyze the demonstrative description as taking an additional restrictor property $R$ which can be filled by relative clauses or pointing. The (reduced) demonstrative description does not block the bare noun in Korean or Japanese because it is higher in the scale than the anaphoric bare noun.

(10) $[\text{DEM}_R \text{NP}] = \text{x: entity(x)} \land [\text{NP}(x)] \land [R](x)$ (11) $\langle \text{pronoun}, \text{NP}_{\text{DEF}}, \text{DEM} \text{NP} \rangle$

The competition-based analysis has an advantage over an analysis where bare nouns in ABN and *ABN languages differ in basic denotations. The anaphoric bare noun becomes felicitous even in *ABN languages if there is more than one salient entity as in (11). This is readily accounted for by the competition-based analysis because in a context with more than one potential referents, the pronoun can no longer uniquely identify the referent and does not compete with the bare noun. Thus, the bare noun is felicitously used.

(11) **Maine ek kitab aur ek cup kharid-a. Kitab mehngi thi.**
    1SG.ERG one book.SGF and one cup buy-PAST.SGF book.SGF expensive be.PAST.SGF
    ‘I bought a book and a cup. The book was expensive.’ [Hindi]