# Are there weak definites in bare classifier languages?

**Background.** One important question in the study of definiteness is to understand how it is encoded differently in natural languages and informs semantic theory. Schwarz (2009, 2013), based on German and Fering, proposes a strong-weak dichotomy to capture two important notions in definiteness: while *weak definites* encode uniqueness, *strong definites* encode familiarity and establish anaphoric links. This line of research has been pursued in a wide range of languages, where *bare nouns* (bare Ns) are claimed to be weak definites and another form to be strong definites (determiners in Akan, Arkoh & Matthewson 2013; bare classifiers in Bangla, Biswas 2012; demonstratives in Mandarin, Jenks 2018; *i.a.*). However, treating bare Ns as weak definites has been shown to be questionable at least in Mandarin (Dayal & Jiang 2021, Simpson & Wu 2022).

**Goal.** We examine the strong-weak distinction with novel data from two classifier languages, Cantonese and Bangla, where *bare classifier* (bare CL) constructions are the predominant definiteness marker (CL-N in Cantonese, Cheng & Sybesma 1999; N-CL in Bangla, Bhattacharya 1999, Dayal 2012) but definite bare Ns are also allowed (Simpson, Soh & Nomoto 2011). We argue that definite bare Ns and bare CLs do **not** align with weak and strong definites. Rather, their difference corresponds to a contrast between **names** and **definite descriptions**. We further address how this analysis may inform the typology of definites by extending it to determiner languages like Akan.

**The flawed strong-weak dichotomy.** An apparent strong-weak definite distinction figures in the contrasts between bare CLs and bare Ns. In (1), only bare CLs may be used anaphorically.

(1) a. Ngo camjat gindou jat-go-haauzoeng. {go-haauzoeng/ #haauzoeng} hou houjan.
 1SG yesterday saw one-CL-principal CL-principal principal very kind
 'I met a principal yesterday. The principal was very kind.' [C(antonese)]

 b. ek-jon headmastar ebong ek-jon shikhhok-er shathe dekha holo. {headmastar-Ti/
 one-CL principal and one-CL teacher-GEN with see happen. principal-CL/
 #headmastar} duschintay chilen.
 principal worried AUX
 'I met a principal and a teacher. The principal looked worried.' [B(angla)]

In (2), on the other hand, only bare Ns but not bare CLs may refer to the unique entity in the larger situation (namely school). Such contrasts in anaphoricity and uniqueness suggest a strong-weak dichotomy: bare CLs are strong definites and bare Ns are weak definites.

(2) *Context: A teacher talking to a new colleague in the school ...*
 a. {#go-haauzeong/ haauzoeng} wui bei fan sigaanbiu nei [C]
 CL-principal/ principal will give CL timetable 2SG
 'The principal will give you the timetable.'

 b. {#headmastar-Ti/ headmastar} toma-ke nishchoi timetable-Ta diyech-en? [B]
 principal-CL/ principal you-DAT timetable-CL of.course give-PERF-3
 'The principal must have given you the timetable?'

However, the dichotomy breaks down in (3), where only bare CLs but not bare Ns can refer to the unique principal, the opposite pattern of (2). The minimal difference in contexts is that the referent establishes a relation with the speaker (i.e. being the speaker's principal) only in (2) but not in (3). This casts doubt on bare CLs being strong definites and bare Ns being weak definites.

(3) *Context: An officer in Dept. of Education asking a colleague about their visit to a school ...*
 a. {go-haauzeong/ #haauzoeng} jaumou daai nei tai gaan-hokhaau? [C]
 CL-principal principal have.or.not bring you see CL-school
 'Did the principal show you around the school?'

 b. {headmastar-Ta/ #headmastar} toma-ke iskul-Ta ghuriye dekha-l-en? [B]
 principal-CL principal you-DAT school-CL go.around show-PFV-3
 'Did the principal show you around the school?'

**Bare N $\neq$ definite description.** **(i)** Different from definite descriptions, unique bare Ns always take *the widest scope* over intensional operators. **First**, unlike bare CLs, bare Ns resist a *counterfactual* reading and can only refer to the elected principal in the actual world as in (6) (*on p.3*). **Second**, bare Ns lack a *co-variation* reading with a universal quantifier. In (7), while the singular bare CL may co-vary with the situations and refer to different bosses/principals when Siuming/Ravi goes to different restaurants/schools, the bare N maintains wide scope. **Third**, bare Ns only have a *de re* reading when embedded under attitude verbs and lead to false statements in (8). Bare CLs, in contrast, allow (8) to be truthfully asserted with a *de dicto* reading. These cases illustrate that bare Ns deviate from definite descriptions in being world-insensitive such that the referent is always rigidly understood in the root context, patterning with referential names (e.g. Muñoz 2019, Agolli 2022).

**(ii)** The **noun choice** of unique bare Ns is also highly restricted. Nouns denoting a unique entity in a conventionalized context (e.g. 'principal' in a school, 'doctor' in a clinic, 'church' in a community) easily lend themselves as unique bare Ns; whereas other nouns like 'student'/'book' reject this use even with a strong context (=9). Bare CLs, in contrast, do not have such a restriction. Strikingly, the noun restriction parallels name-marking devices in both languages: prefix *aa-* (polysyllabic person names) in Cantonese (Sio & Tang 2020) and honorific suffix *-moshai* (persons of higher authority) in Bangla. Besides proper names, the affixes combine with a **subset** of common nouns to yield a name-like reading (=10). Importantly, this set overlaps with unique bare Ns: if a (human) noun has unique bare N use, it also permits *aa-/-moshai* affixation. The affixed Ns are interchangeable with the bare Ns with no change in felicity patterns, including the ones in (1)-(3) and (6)-(8).

**A quasi-name analysis.** We propose that bare Ns are **not** weak definites (*contra.* Biswas 2012 for Bangla), but rather, they are **quasi-names**, like the English use of *Mom* (Pelczar & Rainsbury 1998, Muñoz 2019); whereas, bare CLs denote definite descriptions, covering cases of *both* strong and weak definites. We suggest that bare CLs are derived by a null determiner (triggering CL-to-D movement in Cantonese and NP-movement to Spec DP in Bangla, *cf.* Yang 2001, Dayal 2012) which denotes *iota* on a par with *the*, as in (4a). As for bare Ns, we combine the insights from Muñoz (2019) and Agolli (2022) and propose that they are derived by a null determiner carrying an index *i*. This morpheme, which may realize as *aa-/-moshai*, spells out *iota* together with an assignment function (=4b). We further suggest that some common nouns may serve as quasi-names *q* and conventionally allow an individual to bear the name *q* in the speaker's doxastic world, as in (5).

(4)    a.    $[\![\text{D-}\varnothing]\!]^{g,w}$           $= \lambda P : |P| = 1.\iota x\,[P(w)(x)]$
       b.    $[\![\text{D-}\varnothing_i/aa_i/moshai_i]\!]^{g,w}$   $= \lambda P : |P| = 1.\iota x\,[P(w)(x) \wedge g(i) = x]$

(5)    $[\![q]\!]^{g,w} = \lambda x : [\forall w' : w'$ is doxastically accessible to the speaker at $w$.
                 $[x$ bears the name $q$ at $w']]\,.[\![q]\!](w)(x)$

This analysis capitalizes two crucial aspects of bare Ns' interpretation: **(i) *Uniqueness*** is sourced from *iota* as a presupposition anchored to current context; **(ii) *World-rigidity*** is captured by the assignment function which is constant across worlds, determined by the speaker's referential intention *modulo* satisfaction of name-bearing properties. **Furthermore**, the contrast in (1)-(3) is accounted for with the semantics in (11)-(12): when the referent does not bear the name "Principal" in the speaker's doxastic world (=1&3), bare Ns are disallowed; when the name-bearing requirement is met, bare Ns are chosen over bare CLs by Maximize Presupposition (=2). **Moreover**, the noun restriction also follows: the uniqueness of nouns like 'student' can only be achieved in immediate situations like (9) where the referent has no pre-established relation with the speaker, banning bare Ns.

<u>**Extension.**</u> The claim that definite bare Ns are not weak definites but quasi-names in classifier languages has implications for determiner languages too. Akan, with determiner *no*, also has definite bare Ns that exhibit name-like properties (N restrictions in Bombi *et al.* 2019; world-rigidity in (13)). This challenges the strong-weak definite distinction proposed for Akan (resonating with Bombi 2018, Owusu 2021; *contra.* A&M 2013), and calls for a rigorous re-examination of the typology of definites.

(6) Counterfactual: Bare CL: ✔ vs. Bare N: ✘
*Context: The principal in your school is elected by teachers. Billy lost the election last year. This year, he was found out to have committed murder. You say: "If we had voted for Billy, ..."*

    a. ... jigaa {go-haauzoeng/ #haauzoeng} zau hai saatjanhungsau.       [C]
        now   CL-principal    principal   then be murderer
        '... now the principal would have been a murderer.' (bare N: #the actual principal)

    b. ... {headmastar-Ta/ #headmastar} ek-jon khuni   hoten          [B]
        principal-CL     principal   one-CL murderer AUX
        '... the principal would have been a murderer.' (bare N: #the actual principal)

(7) Co-variation: Bare CL: ✔ vs. Bare N: ✘

    a. Siuming muici    heoi caacaanteng, {go-lousai/ lousai} dou wui tung keoi kinggai.
        Ming   every.time go    restaurant   CL-boss   boss   ALL will with 3SG chat
        'Every time Ming goes to restaurants, the boss chats with him.'        [C]
        (Bare CL: potentially different bosses vs. Bare N: only one unique boss)

    b. robi-babu jokhone   kono school inspection korte jan, {headmastar-Ti-r/ headmastar-er}
        robi-HONF whenever any   school inspection do    go,  principal-CL-GEN/ principal-GEN
          shathe kotha bolen
          with   words speak
        'Whenever Ravi goes for a school-inspection, he talks to the principal.'      [B]
        (Bare CL: potentially different pricipals vs. Bare N: unique principal: speaker's principal)

(8) *De dicto*: Bare CL: ✔ vs. Bare N: ✘
*Context: Your new colleague, Mary, just left the principal's office and told you that the principal was wicked. However, you know that the person inside was not the principal. You say:*

    a. Mary gokdak {go-haauzoeng/ #haauzoeng} hou ok.            [C]
        Mary think   CL-principal    principal   very wicked
        'Mary thought that the principal is wicked.' (true with Bare CL vs. false with Bare N)

    b. mary-r    dharona {headmastar-Ta/ #headmastar} kharap manush        [B]
        mary-GEN idea    principal-CL/    principal   bad     human
        'Mary thinks that the principal is wicked.' (true with Bare CL vs. false with Bare N)

(9) *Context: There is only one student in the room, and the rest are teachers.*
    a. {Go-hoksaang/ #hoksaang} zodai-zo.         b. {chhatro-Ta/ #chhatro} boshlo
        CL-student       student   sit.down-PFV       student-CL/   student sat
        'The student sat down.' [C]           'The student sat down.' [B]

(10) a. **aa**-{haauzoeng/*hoksaang} zodai-zo.   b. {headmastar/*chhatro}-**moshai** boshlo
        AA-principal/student     sit.down-PFV      principal/student-HONF     sat
        'Principal/*Student sat down.' [C]        'Principal/*Student sat down.' [B]

(11) $[\![\text{D-}\varnothing]\!]^{g,w}([\![\text{go-haauzoeng/headmastar-Ta}]\!]^{g,w})$ =               *Bare CL*
    $\iota x[principal(w')(x)]$ ; if $|principal| = 1$, undefined otherwise

(12) $[\![\text{D-}\varnothing_5]\!]^{g,w}([\![\text{haauzoeng/headmastar}]\!]^{g,w})$ =             *Bare N*
    $\iota x [principal(x)(w) \wedge g(5) = x$ ; if $|principal| = 1 \wedge \forall w' : [w'$ is doxastically accessible to the speaker at $w]$. x bears the name Principal at $w'$, undefined otherwise

(13) Co-variation: N-*no*: ✔ vs. Bare N: ✘
    Abiribiara Kofi bɛ-kɔ sukuu mu    nsrahwe no, headmaster (no) ne   no      kasa  [A]
    time.every Kofi FUT-go school inside visit    DET, principal   DET and 3SG.OBJ talk
    'Whenever Kofi goes for a school inspection, the principal talks to him.'
    (N *no*: potentially different principals vs. Bare N: only one unique principal)

**Selected references. Agolli**, E. (2022) The complex lives of proper names. Ms., Rutgers. **Bombi**, C. *et al.* (2019) The semantics of the (so-called) clausal determiner *no* in Akan (Kwa). *SuB 23*: 181-200. **Muñoz**, P. (2019) The proprial article and the semantics of names. *S&P* 12(6): 1–32. **Schwarz**, F. (2009) Two types of definites in natural language. UMass PhD thesis.