Bare nouns and Object mass nouns in Wapichana (Aruák): preliminary remarks

Wapichana (Aruák) is an endangered and under-represented language spoken in Roraima (Brazil), Guiana and Venezuela. This is a language that has a Bare Singular, a Bare Plural, the mass count distinction, and a rich system of classifiers. In this paper we present a preliminary description of the nominal system. We shall argue that, contrary to Chierchia’s prediction that furniture type of nouns can be treated lexically since only few languages have it, this seems to be a productive operation in this language. Our analysis relies mostly on the literature (Santos (2006), dictionaries, and manuals) although we have checked some of the data with native speakers. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of this language as well as to the theoretical discussion about cross-linguistic nominal systems, where the mass/count is at the heart.

In the first section, we show that Wapichana is a bare language, because it allows bare nouns as arguments, both a Bare Singular (BS) and a Bare Plural (BP), built from the combination with the plural morpheme, represented here by [nau]. It has no articles, though there are possessive phrases, and the demonstrative seems to be in process of grammaticalization (Giovanetti (2014, 2015)). The Bare Singular (BS), i.e. a DP constituted by a noun without morphology and without any sort of determiner, as exemplified by churura (pants) in (1), seems to be “number neutral”, and singularity, as well as definitude, is derived from tense and aspect or pragmatics. Thus, in (1) the BS implies a singular definite entity, probably due to the tense/aspectual morpheme; in generic contexts, the BS seems to be interpreted as the kind (2); finally there are evidences of plural interpretations of the BS, (3):

(1) Antônio turii nii churura ixturu ii
   Antônio 3 ps buy np pant store in
   "Antônio bought a pant in the store"

(2) Pinkeyzzu tabuchi?.
   Do you eat caju?

(3) Sakatau man muku kupay na ii?
   Catch maybe doubt peixe there in
   Can you catch fishes over there?

Plurality is expressed by a plural morpheme attached to the noun. (4):

(4) Antônio turii nii churura-nau ixturu ii
   Antônio 3ps.buy np pants pl store in
   "Antônio bought some pants in the store"

In subject position, only the BS is interpreted as denoting the kind:

(5) Tamanuua auna'a naa
    tamanduá NEG be
    "Tamanduá is extinct"

We argue that the BS is not a singular, but rather denotes the kind (Chierchia (1998), Pires de Oliveira & Rothstein (2011)). We rely on the idea of type shifting. The Bare Plural does not

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1 pib.socioambiental.org
2 There is an alomorphy [-nhau], depending on the final syllable be or not to be the vowel -i.
3 np abbreviates non-present
denote the kind and is a plural predicate. We argue that plurality is marked on the noun obligatorily. The proposal explains the behavior of quantifiers as *iri*be (much or many): *iri*be *atamyn* literally, much tree, where tree is interpreted massively versus *iri*be *atamyn-nau* many trees.

The second section is about the mass-count distinction. Wapichana distinguishes mass nouns: they do not combine with the plural morpheme, and cannot be counted without a classifier:

(6)  a. *Untykap izei imi'i baara'a*
   1st saw blood

   b. *Untykap idikinhayda'y izei sabiken imi'i baara'a*
   1ps see three blood drop beneath surface
   "I saw three blood drops on the ground"

As expected, there is language variation with respect to the mass and count distinction: manioc in Wapichana is mass, in Brazilian Portuguese, it is count.

The third section is devoted to the classifier *i'z* that attaches to nouns and turns its denotation non discrete. Thus, *w'i'z* means star-not-discretely, something like a constellation, and it is mass, i.e. it does not combine with the plural mark, but it behaves as furniture type of nouns, since they can be evaluated by the number of individuals. We argue that this is an object mass noun. The example below indicates that banana is considered without taking into account the units, as a collection:

(7)  Baukupkay puatynau niken nii sy-yz
   ten monkey pl eat np banana-non discrete
   "Ten monkeys ate banana"

We shall argue that -iz builds furniture type of nouns. If this is so, then Wapichana defies Chierchia’s (2010) proposal concerning this type of noun.

References


PIRES DE OLIVEIRA, R.; ROTHSTEIN, S. “Bare Singular noun phrases are mass in Brazilian Portuguese.” In. Lingua, 121, 2011, pp. 2153-2175.
