Discourse versus syntax: The interpretation of ungrammatical bare nouns in L2 English

It is well known that L2 English learners who are L1 speakers of a language without (in)definite-marking articles (e.g. Hindi or Mandarin) demonstrate a high rate of ungrammatical omission of English articles (e.g. Zdorenko & Paradis, 2011; Schönenberger, 2014). This phenomenon has been explained from the perspective that 'bare' (i.e. article-less) nouns in article-less languages are ambiguous with respect to (in)definiteness (Löbner, 1985; Heim, 2011). This account predicts that articles in L2 English should be omitted at equivalent rates across contexts that require definite or indefinite nouns, assuming transfer from the article-less L1.

However, studies that have probed the semantics of article-less languages have found that bare nouns in these languages are not completely ambiguous with respect to (in)definiteness, but rather that discourse context and syntactic position restrict their interpretations (Dayal, 1999, 2004, 2017; Yang, 2001; Jiang, 2012). More specifically, bare nouns are by default semantically definite, and the numeral 'one' is required to elicit an indefinite interpretation. However, in direct object position, a non-topical bare noun can be 'pseudo-incorporated' into the verb, circumventing the definite interpretation (Dayal, 2011). This account, which we term the Unambiguity Hypothesis (UH), predicts that the interpretation of bare nouns in L2 English will not be random. Rather, it will be restricted by discourse context and syntactic position.

The present study aims to test the predictions of the UH in the interpretation of L2 English bare nouns with four experiments. All participants are L1 Mandarin speakers who are intermediate learners of English. Experiment 1 is an acceptability judgment task (AJT), in which participants judge the acceptability of sentences with ungrammatical bare nouns in one of two syntactic positions: subject or direct object; and one of three discourse contexts: anaphoricity, which requires a definite noun (ANA-D); partitive specificity, which requires an indefinite noun (PAS-I); or discourse referent introduction, which also requires an indefinite noun (DRI-I). 52 participants have completed Experiment 1. As seen in Figure 1, bare subjects were significantly more acceptable in the definite context (ANA-D) than in the two indefinite contexts (PAS-I and DRI-I), suggesting that bare subjects tended to be interpreted as definite, as predicted by the UH. In direct object position, on the other hand, discourse context was not a significant predictor of the acceptability of bare nouns, suggesting that bare objects were interpreted ambiguously with respect to (in)definiteness. However, it is possible that flexibility in the interpretation of number on bare objects gave rise to their apparent ambiguity.

Experiments 2 and 3 attempt to control the potentially confounding effect of number. These experiments are picture-point tasks in which participants read and listen to sentences with bare nouns in either subject or direct object position, and select one of three pictures that they feel the sentence best describes. In Experiment 2, each picture represents either a singular definite interpretation, a singular indefinite interpretation, or a plural definite interpretation. In Experiment 3, the options are the same, except that the singular definite interpretation is replaced with a plural indefinite interpretation. 29 participants have completed these experiments. The results of Experiment 2 (Figure 2) demonstrate that participants were more likely to interpret bare subjects as singular definite or plural definite than singular indefinite, supporting the finding from Experiment 1 that bare subjects tend to be interpreted as definite. Bare objects, on the other hand, were again interpreted ambiguously, even when number was controlled.

Turning to Experiment 3 (Figure 3), we see that participants were more likely to interpret bare subjects as singular indefinite or plural definite than plural indefinite. This suggests competing preferences for definiteness and singularity in bare subject interpretation. Among bare objects, there was an overwhelming preference for the singular indefinite interpretation, suggesting a strong preference for singularity, but no preference for (in)definiteness.

The results of Experiments 1-3 consistently demonstrate an asymmetry in bare noun interpretation by syntactic position: bare subjects tend to be interpreted as definite, while bare objects tend to be interpreted ambiguously with respect to (in)definiteness. However, since

subjects tend to be topical, while direct objects tend not to be, the question remains whether this asymmetry is caused by syntactic factors or discourse-based factors. Experiment 4, an in-progress picture-point task, will tease apart these explanations by testing the interpretation of bare nouns in *indirect* object position, which is not canonically topical. If indirect objects tend to pattern with subjects in their interpretation, this would suggest that syntax is the driving factor in bare noun interpretation, and that direct object position is unique in its ambiguity. If indirect objects tend to pattern with direct objects, on the other hand, this would support an account that privileges discourse-level factors in the interpretation of bare nouns, such that topicality, rather than syntactic position per se, determines the interpretation of (in)definiteness on bare nouns.

Preliminary informal judgments by native Mandarin speakers suggest that Mandarin bare nouns in indirect object position tend to be interpreted as definite, consistent with the syntactic account described above. Data from Experiment 4, currently being collected, will confirm whether this attested pattern in the native Mandarin grammar manifests in L2 English, as well.
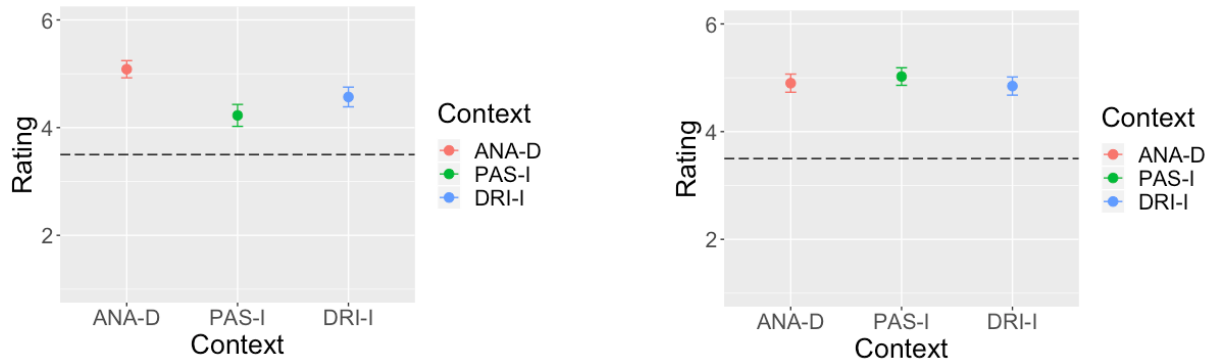

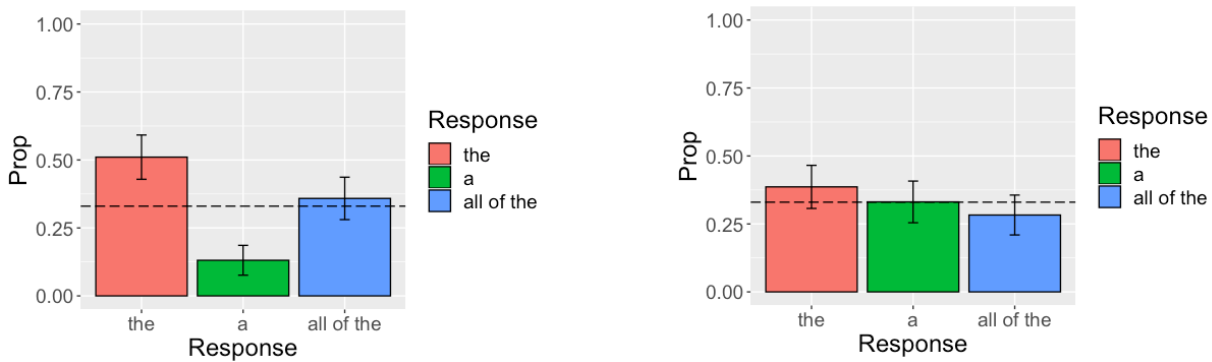**Figure 1.** Mean ratings of bare nouns in each context in subject (left) and object position (right).

Figure 2. Response type proportions in Experiment 2 for bare subjects (left) and bare objects (right).
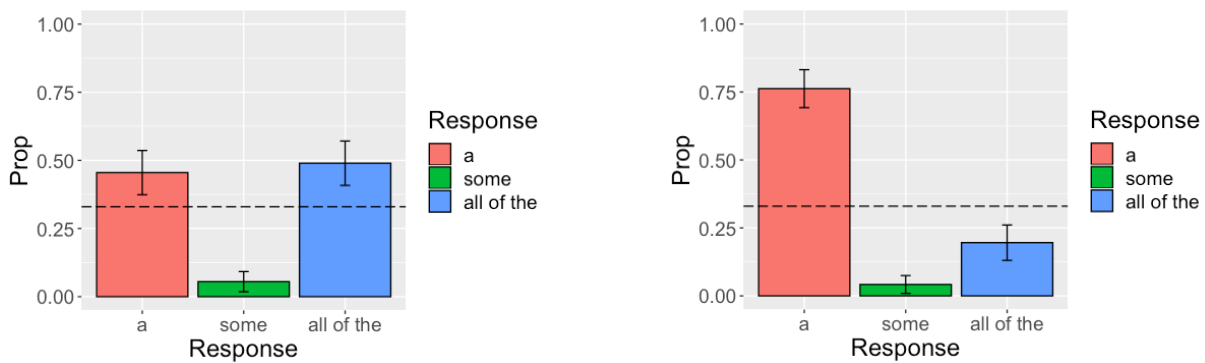

Figure 3. Response type proportions in Experiment 3 for bare subjects (left) and bare objects (right).