

“Dependent Plurals” Are Distinct From Bare Plurals  
A Squib<sup>1</sup>

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1. Background

The term “dependent plural” comes from Sjaak de Mey, a Dutch linguist who has studied and written about them extensively (de Mey 1981). It refers to a use of bare (=determinerless) plurals in which their meaning seems to be the same as that that a singular indefinite would have in certain related sentences. For a bare plural to get this reading, it has to be semantically under the scope of either a plural quantifier or a frequency adverb or something like that; one complication is that being within the scope of an implicit generic operator seems to count as a possible trigger, except then the dependent plural gets hard to distinguish from the Carlson bare plural (Carlson 1977a, Carlson 1977b, Carlson 1980, Carlson 1982) which is interpreted as the proper name of a kind.

One early reference to the dependent plural phenomenon, not under that name, was in Chomsky’s Golden Anniversary lecture (Chomsky 1975) at the 1974 Linguistic Institute at Umass, published in a collection edited by Austerlitz, where my reply (Partee 1975) also appears. Chomsky used the example sentence (1) as an argument against compositionality, arguing that you can’t determine in a bottom-up compositional fashion whether the phrase ‘have wheels’ means ‘have wheels’ ‘have a wheel’ without knowing whether it’s in a singular or plural sentence. I offered counterarguments to his argument, but have not been able to come up with a really satisfying account of the phenomenon. No one really has a satisfying solution, though I think de Mey’s work has really helped to clarify what the basic generalizations are.

(1) Unicycles have wheels.

One thing that has emerged from de Mey’s work, I think, is that the phenomenon is restricted to bare plurals; the behavior of other quantified noun phrases follows one set of laws, the behavior of bare plurals another. This makes one wonder whether there isn’t some way to unify dependent bare plurals and Carlson bare plurals, especially since it often seems that Carlson bare plurals occur most naturally as subjects and dependent bare plurals as non-subjects (as in (1)). Whenever interpretations seem to be in complementary distribution, it’s advisable to try to unify them, as Carlson himself did successfully with the ‘generic’ and ‘existential’ readings of bare plurals.

Nevertheless I think dependent readings of bare plurals have to be recognized as a separate phenomenon, and that they aren’t really in complementary distribution with

<sup>1</sup> Note September 30, 2005: This squib has just been typed up electronically; I am leaving it as it was except for the addition of references – there were names of authors but no specific citations in the original.

Carlson readings. This squib is about some new evidence for distinguishing them. (I gave some evidence involving aspect-shift and time adverbials in a seminar last spring; I won’t repeat that here. That evidence points in the same direction but is independent.)

2. The new data.

In section 2.1 of his dissertation (Carlson 1977b), Carlson gives arguments from opaque contexts to show that the bare plural does not act like a plural of the indefinite article ‘a’. He gives pairs of sentences in which one contains ‘a’ and exhibits scope ambiguity (the (a) sentences below) and the other (the (b) sentences) contains a bare plural and has no scope ambiguity. (He notes that plurality alone can’t account for the lack of ambiguity because a plural noun phrase with an overt determiner like ‘some’ or ‘three’ does exhibit ambiguity in such contexts.)

Below I repeat his examples and add a third (c) sentence to each in which the rest of the sentence is minimally modified in such a way as to make the bare plural able to fall under the scope of another plural NP. The (c) sentences exhibit a 3-way ambiguity corresponding to the two readings of the (a) sentences (these are ‘dependent plural’ readings) plus the reading of the (b) sentences (the Carlson bare plural reading). Note that to get the ambiguity with respect to the opacity-inducing predicate, the bare plural has to be interpreted as having wider scope than the opacity-inducing predicate.

This behavior seems reminiscent of the behavior of negative-polarity items, of Anne’s Finnish question-polarity disjunctive ‘or’ (Vainikka 1987), perhaps of Jae’s anti-quantifier (Choe 1987). A good framework for describing and explaining such phenomena is lacking. In a sense it seems that Chomsky was right to raise this as a basic challenge to compositionality. All these phenomena involve language-particular rules that say that certain syntactic expressions can get certain semantic interpretations only under the scope of certain other semantic operators. How do you say that in any theory?

(The numbering of examples is Carlson’s; I’ve added the (c) examples.)

- (7) (a) Miles wants to meet a policeman.  
(b) Miles wants to meet policemen.  
(c) All the schoolboys want to meet policemen.
- (8) (a) Bill believes a fascist to have robbed the bank.  
(b) Bill believes fascists to have robbed the bank.  
(c) All the detectives believe fascists to have robbed the bank.
- (9) (a) Jimmy must find a congressman before noon.  
(b) Jimmy must find congressmen before noon.  
(c) All the aides must find congressmen before noon.
- (10) (a) Max is looking for a book on Danish cooking.  
(b) Max is looking for books on Danish cooking.

(c) All the R.A.'s are looking for books on Danish cooking.

- (11) (a) A drunk is likely to win the lottery tomorrow.  
(b) Drunks are likely to win the lottery tomorrow.  
(c) Drunks are likely to win all the contests tonight.

- (12) (a) If a bank president were appointed to this committee, it would be better organized.  
(b) If bank presidents were appointed to this committee, it would be better organized.  
(c) If bank presidents were appointed to these committees, they would be better organized.

Another example not from Carlson:

- (2) (a) John found every flea before Mary did. AMBIGUOUS  
(He found every flea, then she found every flea; OR  
he found flea 1 before she did, and flea 2, etc)
- (b) John found fleas before Mary did. UNAMBIG. (lacks the distributive reading,  
only allows he found fleas before she found fleas)
- (c) John (always) finds fleas before Mary does. AMBIG
- (d) = (b) but now read it as a past generic: AMBIG

All this suggests that the Carlson bare plural is indeed not the plural of 'a', but the dependent bare plural is exactly that.

Perhaps there is some perspective from which they can still be unified, but I don't know what it would be. At this point cross-linguistics data could be very important; are there languages which have a Carlson bare plural but not a dependent plural? I'm quite sure there are languages where the existence and/or distribution of dependent plurals is quite different from in English - there is even considerable dialect variation in English about where you can or must use a dependent plural in place of a singular 'a' - but I don't know whether there are any corresponding differences in Carlson bare plurals in such languages. It would strengthen the case for a real binary ambiguity in English if the two kinds of plurals went their separate ways, so to speak, in other languages.

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