

## NOMINAL DECAY\*

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### 1 Preamble

My first introduction to syntax was in the fall of 1962, in Zellig Harris's course at Penn. Harris, a quiet man, was nondescriptly dressed, with eyes that seemed blurred, from looking over vast horizons. There was very little to read on transformational grammar – I doubt that there were more than a few dozen researchers in the world who thought in terms of kernel sentences and ways of transforming them. I have no reason for a feeling that I had in this class, of around twenty of us, in a dusty room in a ramshackle house on Walnut Street – the feeling that we were on the burning edge of syntactic understanding. None of us talked very much – we just listened to Harris talk about syntax from the bottomless understanding of language that the decades of work had given him. I was certainly in awe of him, and I think anyone who felt differently would have been out of it.

Maybe halfway through the course, after I had, by dint of ceaseless reading and thinking, studying incessantly, the first time I had ever worked seriously on linguistics — I had gotten a taste of how beautiful was the system that he could see, and was helping us to see along with him.

And one day in class, he said – I believe – in these very words,

“Some transforms of a sentence are more noun-like than others.”

I don't remember that he gave us any reason for this statement, and I don't know if there was anyone else in our class, into whose heart this short assertion had also gone all the way through them – all I know is that I have never forgotten this sentence. And in the complement system of English, which I would not be able to get a good grasp of for perhaps ten years, I began to find nets of phenomena which would serve as the evidence that Harris had never given. I gathered them all in a monograph to be published in 1974, under the title “Nouniness.”

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I was only to stay at Penn for a year and a half; I finished my Masters degree there and then went on to the turbulent waters of MIT, in January 1964. Jerry Katz and Paul Postal's groundbreaking book was available in Xerox form, all of us students were abuzz with the rumors of the new book that Chomsky was writing – the book that this volume is celebrating. We all of us could see very clearly a new way of interconnecting syntax, phonology and semantics. Deep structure! It is hard to remember what a huge breakthrough in thinking *Aspects* represented. We felt that we had a powerful new tool that would revolutionize thinking about syntax. And that it did.

But in this vision there was no smidgin of room for Harris's insight. I joined in the celebration, I became a Chomsky lieutenant, we all worked like beavers, it was a fertile time.

And after Peter Rosenbaum's thesis was finished and eagerly put into use in the mid-sixties there were all kind of heady loose ends to follow up on. Working out the details of Peter's thesis led me back to noun-likeness – I wrote a number of papers on what I called non-discrete grammar, and I began to view grammaticality itself as a scalar entity, one that could definitely be subtracted from, and perhaps even added to, and if grammaticality can be lessed and mored, could even noun-likeness be? Not in *Aspects*, and in the many papers which it gave rise to, but the seed that Zellig Harris's throwaway line had planted in me would not be denied. Hence the following lucubrations on some of the problems that such a squishy way of thinking inevitably brings with it.

## 2 Squishiness

In an antediluvian squib (Ross (1970)), I called attention to the fact that there is a difference between two types of idioms with nominal(oid) objects: some objects can trigger pronominalization, some can't (cf. (1)).

- (1) a. I stubbed my toe<sub>i</sub>, so the doctor will have to look at it<sub>i</sub>.  
 b. \*You can take your time<sub>i</sub> if you like, but I doubt that you'll value it<sub>i</sub>.

While I then thought of things in an all-or-none way, I would now be inclined to believe that intermediate cases could be found, in line with my general contention that things in syntax (and elsewhere in linguistics, for that matter) are rarely black/white, but are rather usually of varying shades of grey.

Thus in the present case, I would argue that in the idiom to hold one's breath, the object NP(?) is less pluralizable than toe in (1a), but more so than time in (1b). For me, pronominalization is possible for breath with a shared subject, but not with a different one. Thus (2a) works, but not \*(2b).

- (2) a. Bellwether held his breath<sub>i</sub> and then (he) released it<sub>i</sub>.  
 b. \*Bellwether held his breath<sub>i</sub>, so that I could measure its exhalatory velocity with the miniaturized anemometer I grafted onto his pharynx.

Thus I envisage an implicational hierarchy along the lines of (3).

- |     |                      |                       |
|-----|----------------------|-----------------------|
| (3) | to stub one's toe    | more nounlike objects |
|     | to hold one's breath | ↑                     |
|     | to lose one's way    | ↓                     |
|     | to take one's time   | less nounlike objects |

In passing, I note that this hierarchy may play a role in accounting for why only some of these nouns can be modified by the passive participles of their associated verbs:

- (4) a. A stubbed toe can be very painful.  
 b. \*Held breath is usually dank and fetid when released.  
 c. \*\* A lost way has been the cause of many a missed appointment.  
 d.\*\*\* Taken time might tend to irritate your boss.

Yet another way in which this hierarchy seems to display itself is in interaction with GAPPING, the optional rule which can elide a repeated verb in a coordinate clause:

- (5) a. I stubbed my toe, and she ~~stubbed~~ hers.  
 b. I held my breath, and she ~~held~~ hers.  
 c. ?\*I lost my way, and she ~~lost~~ hers.  
 d. \*I took my time, and she ~~took~~ hers.

And yet one more: the object nouns (?) in (3) are less and less incorporable, as we see in (6).

- (6) a. Please make the children all wear steel-tipped boots, to minimize the danger of toe-stubbing.  
 b. ? Prolonged breath-holding may lead to an exalted state.  
 c. \* Way-losing in the woods leads to merit badge cancellation.  
 d. \* Undue time-taking at the water-cooler will surely rile Mr. Garlsh.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true for OBJECT RAISING (a.k.a. *TOUGH-MOVEMENT*):

- (7) a. i. To stub one's toes in the dark is easy → via OBJECT RAISING  
 ii. One's toes are easy to stub in the dark.  
 b. ? One's breath is harder to hold under the water than above it.  
 c. \* One's way is almost impossible to lose in a GPS-equipped new Solara™.  
 d. \* One's time is impossible to take on the freeway.

However, the main point of this squib is the interaction of the hierarchy in (3) with a rule which I will call PLURALIZATION. With a plural subject, the higher up an idiom is on the list in (3), the less grammatical is the sentence with a singular NP in object position. Compare the sentences in (8):

- (8) a. Jeanne and Minerva stubbed their [toes / \*toe].  
 b. Jeanne and Minerva held their [breaths / breath].  
 c. Jeanne and Minerva lost their [\*\*ways / way].  
 d. Jeanne and Minerva took their [\*\*times / time].

It does not suffice merely to say that for *stub one's toe*, PLURALIZATION is obligatory, that it is blocked for *take one's time* and *lose one's way*, and optional for *hold one's breath*. For in this last case, there seem to be different conceptualizations associated with the presence or absence of the plural on *breath*. With singular *breath*, it is required (for me) that the speaker perceive that there is one event which causes Jeanne and Minerva to either hold their breath physically, i.e., to stop breathing for a while, or, in the metaphorical sense, merely to wait in suspense, and very intently. In short, Jeanne and Minerva are conceptualized as doing this breath-stopping waiting, together, at least at the same time, if not at the same place.

By contrast, while *breaths* admits of this joint reading (as I hear the sentence), this plural also allows for a reading in which there are two, non-simultaneous, waitings. As would be the case in a context like (9).

- (9) As the swimming teacher went slowly down the list of names, checking each child's breath-holding ability individually, it turned out that Jeanne and Minerva had held their [breaths / ??breath] the longest of any of us.

Another way of forcing a non-joint reading, as noted in Lakoff and Peters (1969), in which the semantactic consequences of jointness are gone into in depth, is to append the quantifier both:

- (10) Both Jeanne and Minerva held their [breaths / ?\*breath].

For me, however, the clearest ungrammaticality results when one collapses such sentences as (11a) into (11b) by means of the operation that produces/sanctions the adverb respectively:

- (11) a. Jeanne held her breath on Tuesday, and Minerva held her breath on Wednesday.  
 b. Jeanne and Minerva held their [breaths / \*breath] on Tuesday and Wednesday, respectively.

I have been discussing these contrasts in jointness as if they were to be accounted for by a semantactic rule which, under conditions of non-joint interpretation, changes a non-plural form breath (as in (11a)) into a plural one (as in (11b)). Such a view of matters is by no way forced by the facts – it merely is my personal lineage as a transformationalist speaking. Those whose predilections and training have inclined them to a descriptive apparatus involving filters or interpretive rules should encounter no difficulties in constructing a functional equivalent for PLURALIZATION. Nor are they intended to, for the main purpose of this note is not to champion some theoretical framework, but rather to call the attention of all researchers to a shared problem.

I will close with some final observations about the object nouns in (3). In related uses of these nouns, even when they are not in construction with the idiomatically collocated verbs of (3), these nouns seem to differ with respect to how well they can occur in the plural. This becomes clear from such data as those I cite in (12).

- (12) a. Hans stubbed both big toes. But since these toes are crucial equipment for a rock-climbing instructor, he'll probably be fully compensated by his insurance company.
- b. ? Even though pearl-divers in the laboratory were able to hold their breath 3 times longer than normal citizens, pneumometer tests performed on the breaths from both groups of subjects revealed no significant differences in fetidity.
- c. ?\*The way to Pike's Peak through the city is far less scenic than the way through the stockyards, but the two ways are about equal in number of beer cans per square meter.
- d. \*\*\* Even if you take your time slicing the carrots and I take my time peeling the onions, these times will still feel like work.

That is, it would be refreshing if the declining acceptabilities in (12) could provide a basis for the differences which have formed the main topic of this paper, and I am hopeful that such a demonstration will one day be feasible.

There is an extremely important issue lurking in the wings here – the question of the conceptual, or possibly perceptual, basis for the count/mass distinction. Let us return to the contrast between (8a) and (8b), which I repeat for convenience.

- (8) a. Jeanne and Minerva stubbed their [toes / \*toe].  
 b. Jeanne and Minerva held their [breaths / breath].

The question which this contrast raises, in my mind, is why we refuse to perceive a simultaneous toe-stubbing (say, one in which Jeanne and Minerva both kick a rock at the same time, as part of a prearranged plan) as codable with a singular toe, as in (11).

- (13) ?\* On Tuesday, June 9, at 5:17 a.m. precisely, Jeanne and Minerva deliberately stubbed their toe together, precipitating a constitutional crisis unparalleled in recent legal history.

It seems unsatisfying to me to rejoin along the lines of (14):

- (14) “But there are two physically distinct toes (except in the rather grotesque case of Siamese twins)! Obviously, it was not one physical object that was injured, but two. Hence the plural.”

The reason is that the way I conceive of the referent of *her breath* in (15):

- (15) Jeanne held her breath.

is as a physical, bounded entity: the gaseous contents of Jeanne's lungs. To be sure, this is not a physical object, but rather, as we “know” from physics, a collection of molecules. Still, English does not scruple at viewing it as a singular entity, as we can see (in (2a)). And obviously, the set of molecules in Jeanne's lungs is not the same as the set in Minerva's, so why should we be able to “fuse” the two distinct volumes, as it were, in the case of a simultaneous breath-hold, to say (16)?

- (16) Jeanne and Minerva held their breath together.

### 3 Prototypical Objects

I do not think that we can look to physics for an answer here. Rather, I believe that what is at issue is a psychological matter: what are the properties of prototypical objects? The provisional answer I would suggest appears in (17).

- (17) Objects are prototypically (for a discussion of this crucial psychological, and linguistic, notion, cf. Rosch (1975) and Lakoff (1987)).
- a. Solid
  - b. Spatiotemporally contiguous
  - c. Not aggregates (like piles, sets, etc.)
  - d. Not inalienable parts of larger objects (thus elbows and necks are not great objects, though toes and fingers and perhaps tongues are, perhaps because they protrude, seem to be far closer to attaining object-citizenship).

We are willing to depart from all of these: we refer to some spatially-bounded liquids as objects (*teardrop, lake, river*), and volumes of gas (*cloud, column of smoke*), and sometimes temporally but not spatially contiguous event parts, as in a joint breath, and even, wildly, in cases of morphological regeneration, as Postal (1976) has pointed out – cf. (18), in which the *it* refers to an object (?) that is neither spatially nor temporally contiguous with the chameleon's tail.

- (18) My pet chameleon got his tail<sub>i</sub> caught in the door, but it<sub>i</sub> will grow back.

But none of these are garden-variety, prototypical objects, and when we depart from the prototype, we find that certain morphosyntactic properties which go with the psychological prototype, such as those in (19), may be absent.

- (19) The Count Noun Syndrome (in part)
- Count nouns can
- a. be pluralized
  - b. be modified by numbers and *many/few*, and *each*
  - c. trigger pronouns
  - d. not occur articlelessly in the singular (*I kissed \*(a) dog.*) etc.

What appears to be beating the drum which the constructions that I have been discussing dance to is a gradual departure from the experientially-based prototype in (19) – thus a toe is a better match to the prototypical object than is a breath, and a breath (which is still physical, anyway) is better than is a way – whose physicality or not I will leave to my colleagues in philosophy to debate) and *way* (which is visualizable, anyway) is better than *time*. So far, so good, perhaps.

What I have yet to understand is how the factors in (19) are arranged – why does the more or less monotonic decline in experienceability of the nouns in (3) pick one or the other of the

morphosyntactic properties in (19), and the others that the discussions of this paper presuppose, as criterial? Tersely, why all the fuss about pluralizability?

To sum up the discussion above, I think that the following squish<sup>1</sup> is adequate, to the limited extent that I have been able to explore the phenomenon to date.

(20)	Less Restrictive <span style="float: right;">→</span>				
	Ven N	<u>Gapping</u> w/ idiom	Plural	Pronominal- izability	Plural w/o idiom
a. <i>stub one's toe</i>	OK	OK	OBL	OK (cf. (1a))	OK
b. <i>hold one's breath</i>	*	?	“OPT” (but cf. (8)-(11))	OK w/= subject, (cf. (2))	OK
c. <i>lose one's way</i>	*	?*	BLOCKS	% <sup>2</sup>	??
d. <i>take one's time</i>	*	?*	BLOCKS	*	*
	(cf. (4))	(cf. (5))	(cf. (6))	(cf. (1b))	(cf. (12))

The problem for future research, as I see it, is to provide an explanation for the ordering of the columns of (20), assuming, that is, that the basis I have suggested for the explanation of the rows – namely, departure from the prototypical notion of physical object – can be made to stand up under detailed scrutiny.

## 4 How Nouns Lose It

And there is a more general problem, which I can only indicate here: how do nouns lose their identity? What I am thinking of can be suggested by the facts in (20) and (21).

- (21) a. Tom bought a set of burglar's tools.  
           two sets of  
           \*a set  
           ?a setta
- b. Tom bought a number of burglar's tools.  
       \* two numbers of  
       \*a number  
       \*a numbera

- c. Tom bought a couple of burglar's tools.  
 \*two couples of  
 a couple  
 a coupla
- d. i. Tom bought a bunch of burglar's tools.  
 \*two bunches of  
 \*a bunch  
 a buncha
- ii. There is a bunch of pears in the fridge.  
 \*wine  
 a buncha {pears/wine}
- e. i. Tom bought a lot of burglar's tools.  
 \*two lots of  
 \*a lot  
 a lotta
- ii. There is a lot of [?\*pears ≤ / OK wine] in the fridge.  
 a lotta [OK pears/ OKwine]
- (22) a. It is on the top of the box  
 on top of the box .  
 \*ontop the box  
 (but cf. *atop*)
- b. It is \*in the front of the box  
 (\* w/ the sense of “before the box”)  
 in front of the box  
 \* [infront / affront] the box
- c. It is \*in the side of the box (\* w/ the meaning *within the box*)  
 \*in side of the box  
 inside of the box  
 inside the box
- d. It is \*by the side of the box  
 (\* w/ the desired meaning of *next to*)  
 \*by side of the box  
 \*byside of the box  
 \*beside of the box  
 beside the box

It should be pretty clear, intuitively, what is going on in these two examples. In (21), we see a number of collective nouns which are in various: stages of ego-loss. In (21a), it is clear that we simply have two full nouns, *set*, and (*burglar's*) *tools*, while in (21e), the original noun *lot*, which



originally denoted a two-dimensional array, as in *a lot of stamps* (cf. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*), has vanished entirely, as we can see from the fact that it now accepts mass nouns as objects (*a lot of wine*), which would be deviant if *lot* still had only its "array" meaning. *Bunch* is, for some speakers, on the road down the tubes: when it has contracted with its following *of*, it too can modify (?) mass nouns (cf. (21dii)). And it is already so far gone that it can no longer be pluralized: cf. (21di). Of all the nouns in (21), only the nouniest, *set*, retains this property (but why is *lots of* OK?). Although I have not indicated this property in (21), the higher the noun is located in (21), the more easily (and variegatedly) it can be modified adjectivally: [*a large number of* / *\*a large lot*] *of pears*.

In (22), we find a similar slide toward ego-loss for such spatial nouns ( $N_{\text{space}}$ ) as *top*, *front*, and *side*. Without going into details, it is obvious that the stages in this nominal decay are those sketched in (23).

(23) **A Scenario for  $N_{\text{space}}$  Doom**

- a. Loss of article preceding  $N_{\text{space}}$ : first optional (cf. *top*), then obligatory (cf. all other examples in (22))
- b. Fusion of  $N_{\text{space}}$  with preceding locative preposition (obligatory for *side*)
- c. Loss of following *of* (optional for *inside*, obligatory for *beside*)

Some  $N_{\text{space}}$  have slid so far that we only find them as bound forms: *behind*, *beneath* and *underneath*; and *between*. Although I have not chronicled this factor in (22), it is my belief that the "application" of (23a) – the loss of the definite article – is correlated with unpluralizability: cf. *on the tops of the boxes* vs. *\*on tops of the boxes*.

It would be tempting to conclude that pluralizability correlates with some semantico-pragmatic notion like "usable to refer with." However, there are counterexamples: plural nouns which seem not to refer to plural sets: *lots of wine*, or *she is keeping tabs on him*. Thus I think that a lot of careful work will be necessary here, to remove the chaff from the undeniable grain of truth in such an idea.

So to return, for a brief farewell, to the problem raised by the dwindling compositionality of the idioms in (3), and to the mystery surrounding the ordering of the columns in the squish of (20), it seems we are in deep waters here. We must, as I have argued in a buncha papers on squishes, have a flexible set of metalinguistic predicates, so that we will be able to talk about the mores and lesses of idiomaticity, and of the egohood of nouns. Whether or not we will unearth a single generalized "scenario" for ego-loss in nouns in a wide range of categories remains an enticing, but open, beckon. Schön wär's.

Meet you over there.

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