

## Marking definiteness in Nuosu Yi: a counterexample to the Blocking Principle?

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**Overview.** Nuosu Yi (Tibeto-Burman) is typologically exceptional; unlike most other classifier languages, it has an overt definite determiner, i.e., *su*. The determiner *su* linearizes after the *obligatory* classifier (CLF), turning an indefinite DP (i.e., N-CLF, (1a)) into a definite one (i.e., N-CLF-*su*, (1b)). Previous work has argued that in Nuosu Yi both *su* and bare nouns can denote definite meanings (Jiang, 2018; 2020). This proposal challenges Chierchia's (1998) *Blocking Principle*, which states that bare nouns cannot encode definite meanings in languages with overt definite determiners. Here we investigate whether Nuosu Yi truly constitutes a counterexample to the Blocking Principle by experimentally assessing whether bare nouns can convey *anaphoric* and *unique* definite meanings (Schwarz, 2009; 2013). The former type of definites requires previous linguistic mention (i.e., discourse anaphora) in order to refer (2), while the latter does not (3).

In an acceptability judgment study, we find that native speakers display a robust preference for *su*-DPs in contexts that are only compatible with an anaphoric interpretation of the definite, while no such preference is observed for unique definiteness. We propose that anaphoric definiteness requires a DP projection (cf. Jenks, 2018), while no such requirement obtains for unique definites. Hence, unique definiteness can be derived by either an NP (bare noun) or a DP (N-CLF-*su*) structure. Our findings suggest that the application of the Blocking Principle is constrained by the underlying syntactic structure of definite constructions (NP/DP).

**Experiment.** Two factors were fully crossed: 1) the type of **definiteness** (anaphoric, unique); and 2) the **target form** (bare, *su*, see Table 1). The position of the target form (subject vs. object) was counterbalanced. Sentences were divided into two blocks. Block 1 tested anaphoric definites while Block 2 tested unique definites. To exclude the possibility that bare nouns receive a default plural interpretation, half of the anaphoric items contained singular forms in the context sentence, while the other half contained plural forms (e.g., 'There are *two apples* and one banana on the table.'). Participants (N=12, ongoing) were instructed to read the context and target sentences, and rate the acceptability of the second sentence as a continuation of the preceding context. Participants provided ratings on a 7-point scale (1: unacceptable, 7: acceptable). **Results.** We fit a linear mixed effects model predicting acceptability ratings from DEFINITENESS, TARGET FORM and their interaction. Results (Fig. 1) show that *su*-DPs were rated significantly higher than those with bare nouns ( $p < 0.001$ ), while no significant difference in ratings was observed between anaphoric and unique conditions ( $p > 0.5$ ). Most importantly, a significant interaction between DEFINITENESS and TARGET FORM was detected ( $p < 0.01$ ), such that bare nouns were rated significantly lower than *su*-DPs in the anaphoric conditions. No significant difference was detected in the unique conditions.

**Discussion & Conclusion.** Our results suggest that the Blocking Principle applies to anaphoric definites, as shown by the lower acceptability of bare nouns compared to *su*-DPs in the anaphoric conditions. However, unique definites seemed to obviate this principle, as no acceptability difference was detected between bare and *su*-DPs in the unique conditions. We argue that this contrast arises from the different syntactic requirements associated with the type shifters (Chierchia, 1998) needed for *bare nouns* to denote anaphoric and unique definiteness. Specifically, for bare nouns, unique definiteness is derived by the unique type shifter  $\iota$ , while anaphoric definiteness is derived by the anaphoric type shifter  $\iota^x$ , which has been claimed to be available only when a DP layer is syntactically projected in languages with null D heads (i.e., languages without determiners such as Mandarin, see Jenks, 2018). The absence of an underlying DP structure in Nuosu Yi bare nouns (Jiang, 2018; 2020) results in the unavailability of  $\iota^x$ , preventing bare nouns from expressing anaphoric definiteness. As for unique definiteness, the Blocking Principle favors the overt form *su*, which requires the presence of a classifier. Nevertheless, given that there is no classifier in the NP projection,  $\iota$  becomes available as a last resort, allowing bare nouns to convey unique definiteness. To conclude, Nuosu Yi does not constitute a counterexample to the Blocking Principle. Instead, evidence from Nuosu Yi offers a new perspective: the cyclic application of the Blocking Principle is conditional on the underlying structure of the definite (NP/DP).

- (1) a. Nga sse-vo ma mo ox.  
1SG boy CLF see ASP  
'I saw a boy.' (indef.)  
b. Nga sse-vo \*(max) **su** mo ox.  
1SG boy CLF DEF see ASP  
'I saw the boy.' (definite)
- (2) si-hni ma si-nip sse-vo ma hmat-yi go vur li. **Si-hni max su** gox nyi ox.  
girl CLF and boy CLF classroom inside enter go.up girl CLF DEF LOC sit ASP  
'A girl and a boy entered the classroom. The girl sat down.' [anaphoric definiteness]
- (3) Ip-nyip li zho-qo zzy-nyip. Ip-mi nga **hlop-bbop max su** mo ox.  
today TOP mid-autumn festival tonight 1SG moon CLF DEF see ASP  
'Today is the Mid-Autumn Festival. I saw the moon tonight.' [unique definiteness]

DEFINITENESS TARGET		Sentence		FORM					
<i>Context: A girl and a boy entered the classroom.</i>									
a.	anaphoric	bare	<b>Si-hni</b> girl ' <u>Girl</u> sat down.'	gox LOC	nyi sit	ox. ASP			
b.	anaphoric	su	<b>Si-hni</b> girl ' <u>The girl</u> sat down.'	<b>max</b> CLF	<b>su</b> DEF	gox LOC	nyi sit	ox. ASP	
<i>Context: Today is the Mid-Autumn Festival.</i>									
c.	unique	bare	Ip-mi tonight ' <u>Moon</u> is very beautiful tonight.'	<b>hlop-bbop</b> moon	nrat beautiful	jjy very	nrat. beautiful		
d.	unique	su	Ip-mi tonight ' <u>The moon</u> is very beautiful tonight.'	<b>hlop-bbop</b> moon	<b>max</b> CLF	<b>su</b> DEF	nrat beautiful	jjy very	nrat. beautiful

Table 1: Example set of target sentences.

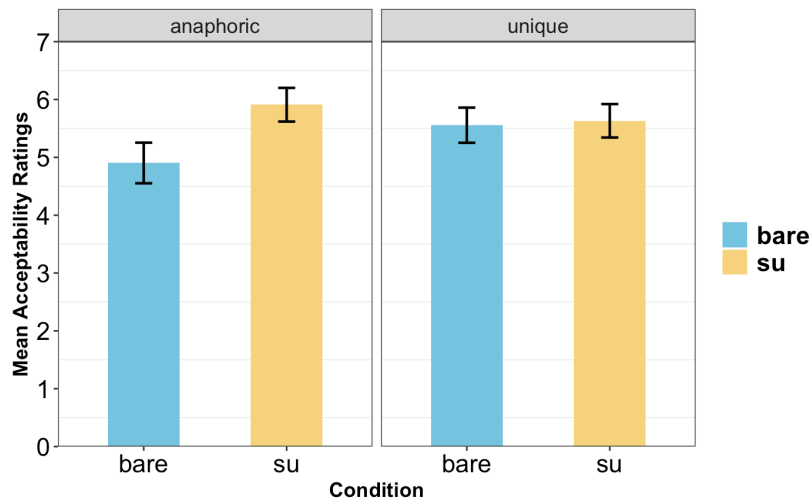


Figure 1: Mean acceptance ratings of anaphoric (left) and unique (right) conditions by target form. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

**References.** Chierchia 1998. Reference to kinds across languages. Jenks 2018. Articulated definiteness without articles. Jiang 2018. Definiteness in Nuosu Yi and the theory of argument formation. Jiang 2020. A classifier language with D. Schwarz 2009. Two types of definites in natural language. Schwarz 2013. Two kinds of definites cross-linguistically.