Bare nominals in Catalan and Spanish. Their structure and meaning

M. Teresa Espinal (UAB; Dept. de Filologia Catalana / Centre de Lingüística Teòrica)

In this talk I will focus on the nominal system of Catalan and Spanish, two Romance languages that have both a morphologically binary number distinction and a determiner system, but which still allow bare count nominals (BNs) in internal argument position. I will deal with various aspects of the structure and meaning of these nominal expressions.

I will show that BNs in object position are not singular, and do not denote individual entities, either object-level individuals or kinds. Instead, they denote properties of kinds. This denotation conveys a number-neutral (NN) interpretation that is compatible with atomicity as well as non-atomicity entailments, a reading that can lead to either an enriched singularity or a plurality interpretation in appropriate contexts.

I will also show that BNs differ from other nominal expressions (singular indefinites, bare plurals, and mass nouns) in several respects. From a lexical perspective BNs have neither cumulativity nor divisivity of reference, but involve atomic domains.

Syntactically, BNs are unmarked for Number and Determiner. A Number projection is conceived as a realization function (from properties of kinds to either object individuals or sum entities). A definite Determiner is interpreted as the iota-operator, which can apply directly to a Noun and instantiate a kind-denoting expression; if it applies to a Number projection, it selects the unique satisfier or maximal object that has the property denoted by the nominal expression.

This study highlights the existence of languages that have number inflection, determiners and numerals, but still allow BNs in object argument position. It supports Munn and Schmitt's (2005) hypothesis that morphological number may be underspecified in the syntax of these languages, whilst at the same time providing additional evidence for the claim that a D(eterminer) is not necessary in object argument position (cf. Longobardi 2001, 2005). Moreover, it corroborates Landman's (1989) claim (later followed by Wilhelm 2008) that the distinction between count and mass basically lies in atomicity, but it presents an alternative to Wilhelm Type I languages (i.e., those that have number inflection, such as English) consisting in: (i) associating in a uniform way BNs with a NN interpretation (as is also the case in languages with numeral classifiers, such as Chinese, and languages with bare nouns, such as Dëne Suliné), and (ii) attributing a Carlsonian realization relation (Carlson 1977, Déprez 2005) to Num(ber).