

Distribution of Bare Nouns and Determiners in French: A Syntactic Model

According to prescriptive French grammars, all French noun phrases require an overt determiner. However, the actual distribution of NPs lacking an overt determiner is more complex; even descriptive grammars prepared by linguists sometimes list examples without providing possible explanations.

Longobardi's (1994: Linguistic Inquiry) model of DPs and empty category as D_0 , developed using Italian and several Germanic languages, can usefully be applied to French as well. Longobardi predicts that proper nouns will undergo head-to-head raising from N_0 to D_0 , and that empty determiners may occur in lexically governed positions, where they receive an existential interpretation.

However, one unusual French construction – the coordination of two NPs in the subject position – requires careful examination; there is no overt determiner in this usage, although we would predict one. This phenomenon can be explained if we allow the possibility of a conjunction acting as a determiner.

Data

NP rather than DP in non-argument positions (vocative, predicative, object of PP used as adjunct):

1a. O mort cruelle!

O cruel death!

2a. Paul est médecin

Paul is a doctor.

2b. Paul, médecin, n'était pas apprécié de ses confrères.

Paul, a doctor, wasn't appreciated by his colleagues.

3a. Nous sommes venus par curiosité.

We came out of curiosity.

3b. Je suis entré sans hésitation.

I walked in unhesitatingly.

Proper Nouns

4a. Marie m'a téléphoné.

Marie called me.

4b. La Marie m'a téléphoné.

Marie called me. (deprecating)

“Idiomatic” NPs as objects without overt determiners

5a. J'ai faim.

I'm hungry.

5b. Il fait froid.

It is cold.

Coordination

6a. Neige et pluie ont alterné pendant notre séjour en Roumanie.

Snow and rain alternated during our trip to Romania.

“Idiomatic” nominals with overt determiners accompanying additional description

7a. avoir une faim pressante

to be desperately hungry

7b. J'ai un faim de loup.

I'm ravenously hungry.

7c. Il fait un froid de loup.

It's bitterly cold.

Additional coordinating and non-coordinating subjects

8a. La neige et la pluie ont cause beaucoup de dérangement pendant notre séjour en Roumanie.

Snow and rain caused a great deal of inconvenience during our trip to Roumania.

8b. *La neige et pluie ont cause beaucoup de derangement pendant notre séjour en Roumanie.

8c. Parents et enfants suivaient avec un meme intérêt l'histoire de Harry Potter.

Parents and children followed the story of Harry Potter with equal interest.

8d. Garçons et filles s'entendent bien.

Boys and girls get along well.