Agentive Activity Constraint on Bare Singular Count Noun Anchoring in Deictic Locative Contexts

In recent years, the study of bare nominals has received a lot of attention in the literature (Stvan 1998, 2009; Dayal 2003; Espinal and McNally 2010; Munn and Schmitt, 2005; Farkas and de Swart 2010; de Swart and Zwarts 2009; etc.). The studies focused on many topics, including cross-linguistics differences, incorporation, genericity, indefiniteness, subject/object asymmetries, and plurality. However, when considering locative BSCNs, three well-documented readings have been identified in object position: generic, activity, and familiarity (Stvan 1998). Examples are below in (1):

(1) a. Generic: Children make friends at school.
    - Children make friends at schools.

b. Activity: At school, Popeye learned to tie his shoes.
    - While doing school-activity, Popeye learned to tie his shoes.

c. Familiarity: I dropped Olive off at school.
    - I dropped Olive off at her school.

The third of these, the familiarity type, often allows hearers to deictically refer to a specific referent that is possessor-anchored (Stvan 1998, 2009). However, the set of lexical items that can accomplish deixis is very limited. In fact, they only come from the set (abbreviated) of institutional/geographical terms listed in (2):

(2) church, mosque, school, studio, synagogue, temple, etc.

While Stvan (1998) and Stvan (2009) predict the availability of the definite reading based conventional implicatures projected from a lexical item, there is no account for why the deictic reading is blocked for certain possessors, see (4).

(3) The teacher went to school.
    a) Activity: the teacher did school-activity
    b) Familiarity: the teacher went to the school where she teaches.

(4) The janitor went to school.
    a) Activity: the janitor attended/#cleaned school.
    b) Familiarity: the janitor went to the school where she studies/teaches/#works.

To start, I use a diagnostic from Stvan (1998:224) to determine whether a BSCN can actually be deictic, as opposed to just possessive. Deictic locations are always possessive, but possessed locations are not always deictic.
(5) John went to school/prison. It’s across the street from Wendy’s.

(6) Bill went to bed. It’s on the north side of the room, under the window.

Here, the deictic reading is licensed for school—a specific definite location in (5)—but not for prison, or bed—a possessed location (6). I claim that only BSCNs with agentive Activity readings can license definite reference anchored on possessors who can reasonably act as agent for the Activity.

There are three pieces to this account. To accomplish deixis, BSCN locatives must have:

   (6) a possessive anchor (following Stvan 1998)
   (7) specific lexical Activity readings
   (8) the possessive anchor as Agent of at least one acceptable Activity reading

For example, school has the associated activities ‘teach-at’ or ‘learn-at’ in its meaning. Thus, teacher can serve as the possessive anchor for a definite location. Since ‘work-at,’ or ‘clean-at’ aren’t acceptable activities for school, janitor cannot act as possessive anchor (except in a reading where she is Agent of an acceptable Activity reading). This account also explains why we don’t get deictic readings for BCNs like prison or hospital, since they don’t have agentive activity readings (in English).

References:


