

Drawing up a play on words:

Modified common name constructions as a feature of Sports Announcer Talk

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Abstract

The dual-feature system of nouns allows for a more accurate syntactic classification of names, which in English occasionally appear with a preceding article for syntactic or semantic effect. The dual-feature system applies a feature — [PROPER] — on the determiner and a feature — [NAME] — on the noun level of a determiner phrase such that there are four possible classifications: common noun, common name, proper noun, and proper name. The common name classification allows for the explanation of a construction common to sports commentary — what I call the modified common name construction (MCNC). The MCNC consists of a name preceded by an article and modifier/modifier phrase, allowing for sports commentators to convey game information more efficiently by eliminating modifier clauses common to the register of sports commentary — sports announcer talk (SAT).

Keywords: determiner, name, noun classification, common names; register, sports announcer talk

1. INTRODUCTION: MOTIVATING THE DUAL-FEATURE APPROACH OF NOUN CLASSIFICATION

In English, while singular count nouns must be preceded by articles within determiner phrases (DPs) — see (1a) — names usually are not preceded by an article (1c). For example, replacing the noun *dog* with the name *Maria* in (1b) results in the ungrammatical sentence (1b).

- (1) a. The dog went to the park.
 b. *The Maria went to the park.
 c. Maria went to the park.

The DP within (1a) can be modeled by Figure 1.

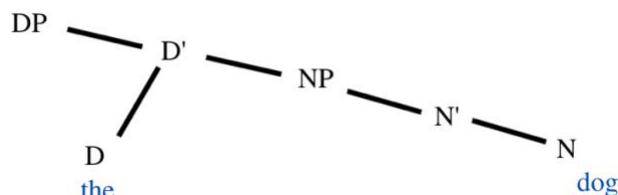


Figure 1: Common noun tree diagram

Diagramming (1c), the structure of the tree remains the same despite the absence of an overt determiner. This corresponds with the rules of syntax, which state that every phrase must have a corresponding head, and the noun phrases exists within DPs. Accordingly, to diagram DPs with bare names in English, Ghomeshi & Massam (2009: 76) argue for the presence of a phonologically null¹ determiner — an argument continued by Jambrović (2021) in his paper outlining the features of proper nouns¹ — with certain features. Thus, the tree diagram for sentence (1c) is shown in Figure 2.

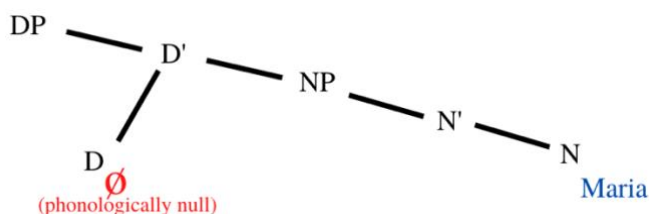


Figure 2: Proper name tree diagram

¹ The phenomenon of phonologically null slots is not unique to determiners, suggesting its accurate use in Figure 2. Complementizers have this property, too. Take the following sentence from page 4, for example: *They argue [that] the feature is mutually exclusive with common nouns...*

Aside from the reason the D slot of the DP must be filled already discussed — noun phrases must still be headed by a D because they are daughters of a DP — there is also cross-language evidence the position must be filled. Ghomeshi & Massam (2009: 70) show that in languages such as Catalan, names that are the subject of a sentence — like *Maria* in (1c) — are preceded by a determiner.

(2) *Catalan*

- a. La Maria
 DET Mary
 ‘Mary’
- b. L’ Enric
 DET Henry
 ‘Henry’
- c. En John
 DET John
 ‘John’

Matushansky (2006: 287) also shows this naming construction, “where proper names require an article in argument position but not with naming verbs,” exists in languages such as Icelandic, Northern Norwegian and Northern Swedish and Tagalog. Therefore, the D position, whether overt or phonologically null, should be filled in tree diagrams in English.

Thus, Ghomeshi & Massam (2009) make the argument for a [PROPER] feature on phonologically null D in languages in which names appear without a preceding article, such as English. They also argue the feature is mutually exclusive with common nouns, which appear with an overt determiner within the mother DP.

Yet Ghomeshi & Massam (2009) make a bolder claim, one furthered by Jambrović (2021), that like the [PROPER] feature on D, there is a distinction on the noun level. They introduce the feature [NAME] on the noun level. The key implication of this division is that names are not universally categorized as proper nouns. Instead, according to Ghomeshi & Massam

(2009) and further expounded upon by Jambrović (2021), there are four classifications for any noun²: common noun, common name, proper noun, and proper name.

	N	N _[NAME]
D	common noun <i>the woman</i>	common name <i>the Diana (I know)</i>
D _[DEF, SG, PROPER]	proper noun ?	proper name <i>Diana</i>

Table 1³: Dual-system classification of nouns

By this categorization, names are not strictly labeled as proper nouns. Instead, there are constructions, listed and studied by Matushansky (2006: 2901-291) and Burge (1973: 429), in which names are preceded by articles to identify the person among a group.

- (3) a. The Alfred who joined the club today was a baboon. (Burge 1973: 429)
 b. This is not the Elisabeth I know. (Matushansky 2006)

Matushansky (2006) lists that an additional feature of the definite article within common names is that of partitivity — selecting or identifying someone among who is a part of a group of people with the same name, represented by the feature [PARTITIVE].

Further, Matushansky (2006) lists an additional sentence which adds an adjective between the article and proper noun.

- (4) a. The audience was confronted by a furious Barbara Smith. (Matushansky 2006: 291)

² Disagreeing with Ghomeshi & Massam, who claim that the possibility of a noun phrase which fits under the newly defined “common noun,” Jambrović (2021) continues his paper with the conclusion that there are constructions that should be categorized as such. This paper will deal strictly with common nouns, common names, and proper names.

³ Retrieved from Jambrović (2021: 817)

Sentence (4a) is an example of the types of constructions I will study in this paper — what I call the modified common name construction (MCNC). MCNCs are an expansion of the theory described by Ghomeshi & Massam (2009), who show examples in English where names are preceded by determiners. When a name is preceded by a determiner in English, the determiner lacks the feature [PROPER]; when the name appears bare — without an overt determiner — the phonologically null determiner has the feature [PROPER]. Therefore, the features of the DP from Figure 2 are as follows.

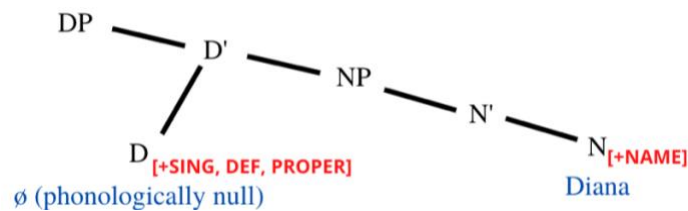


Figure 3: Proper name tree diagram with full features

2. SEMANTIC FUNCTION OF THE DEFINITE ARTICLE

Just as common name constructions include articles with the feature of [PARTITIVE] to identify someone within a group, the definite article can be included for additional effect. Matushanky (2006: 294) writes that “the existence of lexical exceptions to the ability of proper names to appear without the definite article also suggests that this ability is not a syntactic phenomenon.” This is often the case in spoken utterances for semantic effect, usually to imply — with an accompanying increase in pitch — the prestige of the name which follows. In English writing, the definite article is italicized to demonstrate its usage for semantic effect.

- (5) a. Is he *the* Picasso? (Ghomeshi & Massam: 83)
 b. Is he *the* John Doe?

In (5a), the definite article has the semantic effect of showing reverence for Picasso as a famous artist. On the other hand, the use of the definite article can be used sarcastically, as in (5b). Further, the use of the definite article in (5a-b) is unique, as its semantic effect enhances the meaning of the sentence but is not necessary for its grammatically. This semantic function differs

from sentences (3a-b), which, along with the restrictive clause which follows the name, is necessary to identify by name a certain individual among a group. Such can be seen by removing the article from the phrases.

- (6) a. *This is not Elisabeth I know.
- b. Is he Picasso?

3. METHODS: FINDING AND CATEGORIZING MCNC WITHIN SPORTS COMMENTARY

The purpose of this study was to study established linguistics to be able to explain why the MCNC kept bearing out in live sports commentary or written coverage of sports games. Over my Spring 2022 semester at Virginia Tech, I recorded the instances when I heard or read the MCNC and where I had found them.

Over time, I began to see patterns emerge in the types of modifiers — and even modifier phrases— used in the construction. I sorted them accordingly to the following category labels, which I describe with examples, noting which medium in which I found the MCNC.

Action Modifiers

- (7) a. Biddison gives way to the charging Malinowski. (Spoken commentary)
- b. Murphy fires to a streaking Cattoor. (Spoken)
- c. Sean Pedulla swiped the ball away from the driving North Carolina player to start the fast break alongside teammate Darius Maddox. (Written)

(8) Non-Action Modifiers

- a. Rebound by the aggressive Jalen Wilson (Spoken)
- b. ...a game not settled until the unapologetic Caleb Love drained a ridiculous 3 in the final minute. (Written commentary)
- c. A big turning point came in the final seconds of the second period when the athletic, aggressive, unorthodox-at-times Fleury stopped Patrik Laine. (Written)
- d. That doesn't mean he did it with a smile. After all, he's an ornery Friedman. (Written)

(9) **Adverb Phrases**

- a. ...look no further than the normally gruff Doeren. (Written)
- b. Caught up with a very emotional Roy Williams (Tweet)

(10) **Numeric Modifiers**

- a. The 6-8 Meka will guard the in bounder. (Spoken)

(11) **Comparisons**

- a. Just a magnificent kiss off the glass with the right hand by the bigger Paolo Banchero. (Spoken)

The similarity between common nouns and common names is illustrated in (7c) and (10a) — both include examples of the broad syntactic category of nouns — but by replacing a common noun with a common name, the sentence becomes more specific by identifying a certain player.

- (12) a. Sean Pedulla swiped the ball away from the driving North Carolina player... (Written)
- b. Sean Pedulla swiped the ball away from the driving Caleb Love

By substitution, *Caleb Love* can replace *North Carolina player* to grammatically form (12b) because both noun phrases lack the [PROPER] feature on the definite article. However, there is a difference in meaning between (12a) and (12b) due to the feature [NAME] on the noun in (12b); despite the use of the definite article, (12a) does not clearly identify any individual player. The same is true when comparing the noun phrases in (13a) and (13b), both of which were found this semester.

- (13) a. The 6-8 Meka will guard the inbounder. (Spoken)
- b. The 6-foot-10 big man was incoming classmates with Cole Anthony (written)

4.1 SPORTS ANNOUNCER TALK

In addition to discussing how this naming construction is allowed within syntactic theory, there is also the question of why this unusual construction is used so frequently in the context of sports

commentary specifically. One area of study which explains the presence of this phenomenon is register.

Describing speech acts more generally, Ferguson (1983: 154) writes that “Register variation, in which language structure varies in accordance with the occasions of use, is all-pervasive in human language.” For the purposes of this study, the “occasions of use” studied are that of live sports commentary (spoken) and written sports stories (written) and tweets. In the introduction to his quantitative study of sports commentary, Lewandowski (2012: 23), further summarizes the idea of register, asserting that while some scholars narrow their study of the register to focus on niche terms shared and understood within a speech community — for example, sports fans listening to a radio or television broadcast — one of the key features of the register is how speech fits within a “mode of communication.” The constraints of the medium and other extralinguistic factors are important in explaining the frequency and effect of the MCNC in sports commentary.

The extralinguistic constraints of the various mediums of sports commentary affect syntax by limiting how descriptive commentators can be. The paper focuses most on live sports commentary, where announcers describe game action on the fly. The extralinguistic constraint in this case is the time. In terms of written stories, where writers describe the game after the fact, the MCNC may appear due to the constraints of word count or limited space in print — this theory is seen best in the usage of the MCNC in tweets, which offer only 280 characters of text — but more likely, the MCNC was borrowed from the register of sports commentary. Despite the differences in medium, the MCNC is used because it more efficiently conveys information within grammatical syntax. Ferguson (1983: 154) writes,

The sportscast is a discourse genre as identifiable as the sonnet, the bread-and-butter letter, the knock-knock joke, the professional paper in linguistics, or any of the hundreds of such forms of discourse in the total repertoire of communities of users of English.

Further, he writes that the syntactic features of the sportscast — the register he calls Sports Announcer Talk (SAT) — is affected by “the rhythm of the activity itself is determinative of the kind of language used: how long do the units of the activity (quarters, innings, etc.) last, how much times passes between significant moves in the activity?”

Ferguson (1983: 159) lists one of the most prominent features of the sportscast as *Simplification* — a feature which saves time in sports commentary. Below is an example from Ferguson (1983) and a MCNC utterance I recorded from spoken commentary (read: Spoken).

- (14) a. Klutz [is] close at third. (Ferguson 1983: 159)
 b. Jerome [is] able to just elevate right over the smaller mora. (Spoken)

Utterances (14a-b) also show that the utterances, phrases and sentences I am studying fit within the established features of the sportscaster register. Describing the patterns of simplification within the register, a pattern seen in (17b), Ferguson (1983: 159) writes that post-nominal simplification “takes place most often after a single-word proper name at the beginning of a sentence, typically the name of a player.” Ferguson (1983: 159) also notes that many of the post-nominal verbs take an -ing ending, a common form I noticed in the modifiers in the naming construction I’m studying in the examples listed under *Action Modifiers* in (7a-c).

Another feature of SAT, one which is more unique to its register than *Simplification*, is what Ferguson (1983) calls *Inversion*.

- (15) a. Holding up at third is Murphy
 b. And here once again ready to go back to pass again in Haden. (Ferguson 1983: 160)

Inversion also demonstrates the effect of the extra-linguistic time constraints of the medium. In inverted utterances, the predicate precedes the subject, which Ferguson (1983: 160) notes is more common in written English but is unique to spoken English. Ferguson and his associates conclude that the most likely reason for this feature’s prevalence in SAT specifically is that it gives the speaker more time to assess the subject — further demonstrating how extralinguistic pressures affect syntax — a claim supported especially by (15b).

The inclusion of a modifier to add additional information about a player is not a groundbreaking feature of English, but its variance in usage in ad-lib spoken situations is. Take, for example, the utterances from Ferguson’s (1983: 163) study.

- (19) a. Warren Cromartie, *the left-handed hitter*, swings...

- b. Eddie Yost, *a crackerjack, who was not a power hitter...*
- c. Steve Yeager, *who won Sunday's game with the dramatic home run on the heels of Guerro's shot...*

Ferguson (1983: 163) notes “Most listeners to sportscasts are probably unable to use such devices in running speech without considerable practice, even though they may be thoroughly familiar with the devices in written English,” acknowledging that the salience of this feature is not purely syntactic because factors such as the cognitive energy or skill it takes to produce these utterances impact its usage. The uniqueness of using modifier phrases in live commentary when studying SAT is important because it highlights how extralinguistic pressures of the medium affect syntax.

4.2 QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF SPORTS ANNOUNCER TALK

The idea that the extra-linguistic constraints of game commentary affect the syntax of the speaker is supported by empirical evidence. In coding French play-by-play commentary of the 2007 Rugby World Cup, Augendre et. al (2018: 198) studied the usage of modifier phrases by announcers within different contexts of a single match. Augendre et al. (2018: 198) explain extra-linguistic constraints — time and rhythm of the game — “force the commentator to adopt a non-standard format in order to follow the game more efficiently.”

The evidence to support this claim comes from their study of syntactic structures of SAT coded during three different “game rhythms.” The game rhythms were defined “according to the number of moves realized in a given time window,” where Rhythm 1 included the least number of moves — the slowest pace of play, and thus, commentary — and Rhythm 3 included the most. From this study, the generalized that “when the rhythm is slow (rhythm 1), the discourse is dominated by (simple or complex) sentences; however, when the game rhythm accelerates, short and verbless turns (proper names, PPs, NPs, etc.) are much more frequent” (202). This phenomenon is summarized in Table 2.

Structure	Examples	Rhythm 1	Rhythm 2	Rhythm 3
X	a. <i>David Skrela</i>	46	41	14
	'David Skrela'	45,5%	40,6%	13,9%
Xqui	b. <i>Michalak qui va être un peu seul</i>	27	8	1
	'Michalak who is going to be a little isolated'	75%	22%	3%
PrepXqui	e. <i>Avec Michalak qui a les appuis</i>	9	8	0
	'With Michalak who is side stepping'	53%	47%	0%

Table 2⁴: Coding of constructions by game rhythm

Examples (b) and (e) in Table 2, transcribed without the punctuation of written English, are examples of SAT's heavy modifier feature Ferguson (1983) discusses. However, unlike Ferguson (1983), Augendre et al. (2018: 203) show that the pace of commentary affects the structural complexity of the syntax. There was only one example of the *Xqui* heavy modifier feature of SAT of the 36 utterances; the *PrepXqui* structure was not coded once in the game sample studied, either. These appositive modifier phrases that follow proper names are too syntactically complex and/or cognitively demanding to fit within quick game play, demonstrating the effect of the extra-syntactic variables on syntax.

The proper names which precede appositive phrases do not appear often with the heightened pace of certain game action, but the key information within these appositive phrases is similar to the ones in MCNCs. Compare utterances (b) and (e) from Table 2 to utterances from Section 3 to see, according to my argument, why MCNCs, are a unique syntactic feature to SAT.

- (20) a. Rebound by the aggressive Jalen Wilson (Spoken)
b. Michalak, who is going to be a little isolated, ... Augendre et al. (2018:98)
c. The isolated Michalak...
- (21) a. Biddison gives way to the charging Malinowski. (Spoken)
b. With Michalak, who is side-stepping... (Augendre et al. 2018:98)
c. With the side-stepping Michalak...

⁴ Retrieved from Augendre et al. (2018: 203)

Between utterances (21b-c) and (22b-c), the change from a proper name followed by an appositive phrase to a common name phrase with a modifier between the article and name allows the commentator to add the key information within the appositive phrase more efficiently.

Adding this information rarely occurred during more rapid game action, seen in Table 2.

Furthermore, MCNCs allow the commentator slightly more time to identify the player they're describing — the action they're performing is more immediately apparent — seen best in the change in syntax from (21b) to (21c). Additionally, the analysis of French sports commentary shows that while syntactic features are subject to various constraints of a medium, these effects affect syntax similarly across different languages rather than being a feature of just English.

Within the different categories of MCNCs listed in Section 3, the action modifiers are the most dissimilar compared to the rest; however, they still fit within the hypothesis that MCNCs take the key descriptive information from a modifier phrase and move it ahead of a common name construction. The modifiers ending with *-ing* are verbs also within the construction *PrepXqui* construction listed in Table 2. The modifier phrase from utterance (e) — *who is side-stepping* — is in the imperfect aspect with *is* as the form of *to be* and the gerund is *side-stepping*. Any of the other sentences or utterances listed in Section 3 could include a similar modifier phrase as *PrepXqui* — *who is* +[modifier] — but the MCNC allows for this information to be conveyed more efficiently by eliminating an extra, appositive clause. Selected utterances from Section 3 with the modifier contained within an appositive clause are listed in (22a-d) below.

- (22) a. Rebound by Jalen Wilson, who is [being] aggressive.
 b. ...look no further than Doeren, who is normally gruff
 c. Meka, who is 6-[foot]-8, will guard the inbounder.
 d. Just a magnificent kiss off the glass with the right hand over Paolo Banchemo, who is bigger.

5. SEMANTIC FUNCTION OF THE MODIFIER

While Section 2 discussed how the definite article can be used both as a required syntactic element of the common noun phrase and for semantic effect, the semantic effect of the modifier within the MCNC is also important in this study. In the utterances I have recorded, in rare

instances the meaning of the modifier within the construction — rather than the article — differs according to context.

- (23) a. Still, the younger Backer Admitted he was surprised... (Written)
 b. Jerome able to just elevate right over the smaller Mora. (Spoken)

The phrase (23a) comes from a post-game article about a spring training game between the Washington Nationals and Houston Astros. Dusty Baker managed the Astros while his son, Darren Baker, played for the Nationals. Phrase (23a) demonstrates the effect the [PARTITIVE] feature on the determiner in common name phrases: singling out which person within a group with the same name is being described, aided further in this example by the adjective *younger* preceding the name rather than a restrictive clause following it.

But utterance (23b), though the name completes a similar construction — definite article, comparative adjective and common name — it does not designate *Mora* among a group of players with the same name. Instead, in what is understood by watching the players the announcers are commenting (23b) describes a player, *Jerome*, who is *able to elevate* over *Mora*, a player smaller than Jerome. Grammatically, however, the same utterance could have a meaning similar to that of (23a). What makes the DPs different is demonstrated below.

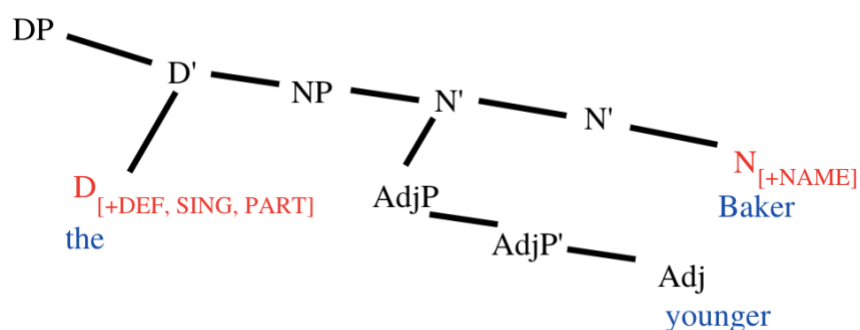


Figure 4: Tree diagram of (23a)

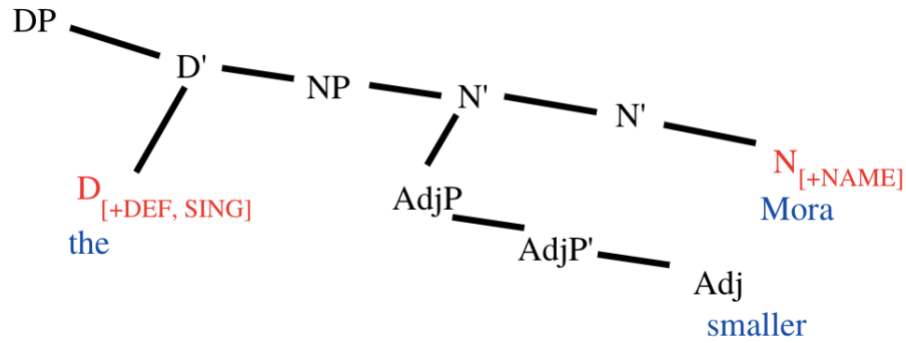


Figure 5: Tree diagram of (23b)

Utterances (24a-b) support Ghomeshi & Massam’s (2009) claim that “the expression of proper names involves complex interactions between syntax, semantics, and convention,” and, I add, pragmatically as well, considering the ambiguity in the comparative adjective made clearer by watching the games in which the utterances were spoken.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, I argue MCNCs are a syntactic feature of SAT that allows commentators to convey modifier phrases within determiner phrases more efficiently, demonstrating the effect of extra-linguistic pressures on syntax, both written and spoken.

Work from Matushansky (2006), Ghomeshi & Massam (2009), Jambrović (2021) supports the argument that what distinguishes names of people — an example of a proper noun — from common nouns is a [NAME] feature on names. The former pair of those three make a bold, further distinction, suggesting that there is a [PROPER] feature on the determiner such that in addition to common and proper nouns, there are also common names and proper names in a four-way classification of nouns.

In this paper, I have expanded on the literature arguing for common name phrases by coining the term modified common name constructions — construction comprised of a determiner phrase that includes an article, modifier or modifier phrase and a common name. In the MCNC, the determiner has the feature [PROPER] and the noun has the feature [NAME]. An example of what I call the MCNC appears in Matushansky (2006: 291) — see example (4). I have focused on its common usage in sports commentary — what Ferguson (1983) calls the register of Sports Announcer Talk (SAT).

Furthermore, I conclude the paper by taking Ghomeshi & Massam's (2009) use of the feature [PARTITIVE] on determiners to show how it differentiates meaning on ambiguous sentences that include the MCNC when the modifier is a comparative adjective.

The study leaves unanswered why the MCNC is used by sports announcers and sports writers alike, given that writers have more freedom to describe action without the time constraints of live commentary — especially with the prominence of online sites which are not bound by the spatial limitations of newspapers or magazines. Likely, the reason for overlap in language across mediums is that there is a similar overlap in audience; the people who watch the games and are accustomed to the syntax of live commentary then read the stories written after the fact. Similarly, the commentators themselves may write or tweet about the game, further cementing the features of SAT across mediums. This hypothesis is supported by Lewandowski (2012: 23), who suggests that features of syntax develop among people who “participate in recurrent communication situations.”

A further investigation likely would analyze the semantic impact of the definite vs. indefinite determiner usage given the rest of the syntactic structure remains the same. The study focused much more on written sentences and spoken utterances that use the MCNC with definite rather than indefinite articles.

My contribution — formalizing the MCNC — to the long-running debate among syntacticians and logicians about the categorization (and subcategorization) of names also highlights how meaning is affected by a combination of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. From a macro perspective, the paper also includes empirical evidence from Augendre et al. (2018) which shows that extralinguistic pressure of various mediums of communication affect syntax such that certain constructions become common in specific contexts.

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