

Nominal Decay

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"The familiar material objects may not be all that is real, but they are admirable examples."

W.V.O. Quine (1960), p.3.

In an antediluvian squib (Ross (1970)), I called attention to the fact that there is a difference between two types of idioms with nominal(oid) objects: some objects can trigger pronominalization, some can't. (cf. (1))

- (1) a. I stubbed my toe_i, so the doctor will have to look at it_i.
 b. *You can take your time_i if you like, but I doubt that you'll value it_i.

While I then thought of things in an all-or-none way, I would now be inclined to believe that intermediate cases could be found, in line with my general contention that things in syntax (and elsewhere in linguistics, for that matter) are rarely black/white, but are rather usually of varying shades of grey.

Thus in the present case, I would argue that in the idiom to hold one's breath, the object NP(?) is less pluralizable than toe in (1a), but more so than time in (1b). For me, pronominalization is possible for breath with a shared subject, but not with a different one. Thus (2a) works, but not *(2b).

- (2) a. Bellwether held his breath_i and then (he) released it_i.
 b. *Bellwether held his breath_i, so that I could measure it_i's exhalatory velocity with the miniaturized anemometer I grafted onto his pharynx.

Thus I envisage an implicational hierarchy along the lines of (3).

- (3)
- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| to stub one's toe | more nounlike objects |
| to hold one's breath | ↑ |
| to lose one's way | ↓ |
| to take one's time | less nounlike objects |

In passing, I note that this hierarchy may play a role in accounting for why only some of these nouns can be modified by the passive participles of their associated verbs:

- (4) a. A stubbed toe can be very painful.
 b. *Held breath is usually dank and fetid when released.
 c. **A lost way has been the cause of many a missed appointment
 d. ***Taken time might tend to irritate your boss.

Yet another way in which this hierarchy seems to display itself is in interaction with Gapping, the optional rule which can elide a repeated verb in a coordinate clause:

- (5) a. I stubbed my toe, and she ~~stumbed~~ hers.
 b. I held my breath, and she ~~held~~ hers.
 c. ?*I lost my way, and she ~~lost~~ hers.
 d. *I took my time, and she ~~took~~ hers.

Yet another: the object nouns(?) in (3) are less and less incorporable, as we see in (6).

- (6) a. Please make the children all wear steel-tipped boots, to minimize the danger of toe-stubbing.
 b. ?Prolonged breath-holding may lead to an exalted state.
 c. *Way-losing in the woods leads to merit badge cancellation.
 d. *Undue time-taking at the water-cooler will surely rile Mr. Grarlsh.

Mutatis mutandis, the same is true for Object Raising (or *Tough-Movement*):

- (7) a. i. To stub one's toes in the dark is easy → via Object Raising
 ii. One's toes are easy to stub in the dark.
 b. ?One's breath is harder to hold under the water, than above it.
 c. *One's way is almost impossible to lose in a GPS-equipped new SolaraTM.
 d. *One's time is impossible to take on the freeway.

However, the main point of this squib is the interaction of the hierarchy in (3) with a rule which I will call Pluralization. With a plural subject, the higher up an idiom is on the list in (3), the less grammatical is the sentence with a singular NP in object position. Compare the sentences in (7):

- (7) a. Jeanne and Minerva stubbed their [toes / *toe].
 b. Jeanne and Minerva held their [breaths / breath]
 c. Jeanne and Minerva lost their [**ways / way].
 d. Jeanne and Minerva took their [**times / time].

It does not suffice merely to say that for *stub one's toe*, Pluralization is obligatory, that it is blocked for *take one's time* and *lose one's way*, and optional for *hold one's breath*. For in this last case, there seem to be different conceptualizations associated with the presence or absence of the plural on *breath*. With singular *breath*, it is required (for me) that the speaker perceive that there is one event which causes Jeanne and Minerva to either hold their breath physically, i.e., to stop breathing for a while, or, in the metaphorical sense, merely to wait in suspense, and very intently. In short, Jeanne and Minerva are conceptualized as doing this breath-stopping waiting, together, at least at the same time, if not at the same place.

By contrast, while *breaths* admits of this joint reading (as I hear the sentence), this plural also allows for a reading in which there are two, non-simultaneous, waitings. As would be the case in a context like (8).

- (8) As the swimming teacher went slowly down the list of names, checking each child's breath-holding ability individually, it turned out that Jeanne and Minerva had held their [breaths / ??breath] the longest of any of us.

Another way of forcing a non-joint reading, as noted in Lakoff and Peters (1969), in which the semantactic consequences of jointness are gone into in depth, is to append the quantifier *both*:

- (9) Both Jeanne and Minerva held their [breaths / ?*breath]

For me, however, the clearest ungrammaticality results when one collapses such sentences as (9a) into (9b) by means of the operation that produces/sanctions the adverb *respectively*:

- (9) a. Jeanne held her breath on Tuesday, and Minerva held her breath on Wednesday.
 (9) b. Jeanne and Minerva held their [breaths / *breath] on Tuesday and Wednesday, respectively.

I have been discussing these contrasts in jointness as if they were to be accounted for by a semantactic rule which, under conditions of non-joint interpretation, changes a non-plural -form *breath* (as in (9a)) into a plural one (as in (9b)). Such a view of matters is by no way forced by the facts – it merely is my personal lineage as a transformationalist speaking. Those whose predilections and training have inclined them to a descriptive apparatus involving filters or interpretive rules should encounter no difficulties in constructing a functional equivalent for *Pluralization*. Nor are they intended to, for the main purpose of this note is not to champion some theoretical framework, but rather to call the attention of all researchers to a mutual problem.

I will close with some final observations about the object nouns in (3). In related uses of these nouns, even when they are not in construction with the idiomatically collocated verbs of (3), these nouns seem to differ with respect to how well they can occur in the plural. This becomes clear from such data as those I cite in (10).

- (10) a. Hans stubbed both big toes. But since these toes are crucial equipment for a rock-climbing instructor, he'll probably be fully compensated by his insurance company.
 b. ?Even though pearl-divers in the laboratory were able to hold their breath 3 times longer than normal citizens, pneumometer tests performed on the breaths from both groups of subjects revealed no significant differences in fetidity.
 c. ?*The way to Pike's Peak through the city is far less scenic than the way through the stockyards, but the two ways are about equal in number of beer cans per square meter.
 d. ***Even if you take your time slicing the carrots and I take my time peeling the onions, these times will still feel like work.

That is, it would be refreshing if the declining acceptabilities in (10) could provide a basis for the differences which have formed the main topic of this paper, and I am hopeful that such a demonstration will one day be feasible.

There is an extremely important issue lurking in the wings here – the question of the conceptual, or possibly perceptual, basis for the count/mass distinction. Let us return to the contrast between (9a) and (9b), which I repeat for convenience.

- (9) a. Jeanne and Minerva stubbed their [toes / *toe].
 b. Jeanne and Minerva held their [breaths / breath].

The question which this contrast raises, in my mind, is why we refuse to perceive a simultaneous toe-stubbing (say, one in which Jeanne and Minerva both kick a rock at the same time, as part of a prearranged plan) as codable with a singular *toe*, as in (11).

- (11) ?*On Tuesday, June 9, at 5:17 a.m. precisely, Jeanne and Minerva deliberately stubbed their toe together, precipitating a constitutional crisis unparalleled in recent legal history.

It seems unsatisfying to me to rejoin along the lines of (12):

- (12) “But there are two physically distinct toes (except in the rather grotesque case of Siamese twins)! Obviously, it was not one physical object that was injured, but two. Hence the plural.”

The reason is that the way I conceive of the referent of *her breath* in (13):

- (13) Jeanne held her breath.

is as a physical, bounded entity: the gaseous contents of Jeanne's lungs. To be sure, this is not a physical object, but rather, as we “know” from physics, a collection of molecules. Still, English does not scruple at viewing it as a singular entity, as we can see (in (2a)). And obviously, the set of molecules in Jeanne's lungs is not the same as the set in Minerva's, so why should we be able to “fuse” the two distinct volumes, as it were, in the case of a simultaneous breath-hold, to say (14)?

- (14) Jeanne and Minerva held their breath together.

I do not think that we can look to physics for an answer here. Rather, I believe that what is at issue is a psychological matter: what are the properties of prototypical objects? The provisional answer I would suggest appears in (15).

- (15) Objects are prototypically (for a discussion of this crucial psychological, and linguistic, notion, cf. Rosch (1975) and Lakoff (1987)).
- a. Solid
 - b. Spatio-temporally contiguous
 - c. Not aggregates (like piles, sets, etc.)
 - d. Not inalienable parts of larger objects (thus elbows and necks are not great objects, though toes and fingers and perhaps tongues, perhaps because they protrude, seem to be far closer to attaining object-citizenship).

We are willing to depart from all of these: we refer to some spatially-bounded liquids as objects (*tear-drop, lake, river*), and volumes of gas (*cloud, column of smoke*), and sometimes temporally but not spatially contiguous event parts, as in a joint breath, and even, wildly, in cases of morphological regeneration, as Postal (1976) has pointed out - cf. (16), in which the *it* refers to an object (?) that is neither spatially nor temporally contiguous with the chameleon's tail.

- (16) My pet chameleon got his tail_i caught in the door, but it_i will grow back.

But none of these are garden-variety, prototypical objects, and when we depart from the prototype, we find that certain morphosyntactic properties which go with the psychological prototype, such as those in (17), may be absent.

- (17) The Count Noun Syndrome (in part)
- Count nouns can
- be pluralized
 - be modified by numbers and *many/few*, and *each*
 - trigger pronouns
 - not occur articlelessly in the singular (*I kissed *(a) dog.*) etc.

What appears to be beating the drum which the constructions I have been discussing dance to is a gradual departure from the experientially based prototype in (15) – thus a toe is a better match to the prototypical object than is a breath, and a breath (which is still physical, anyway) is better than is a way – whose physicality or not I will leave to my colleagues in philosophy to debate) and *way* (which is visualizable, anyway) is better than *time*. So far, so good, perhaps.

What I have yet to understand is how the factors in (17) are arranged – why does the more or less monotonic decline in experienceability of the nouns in (3) pick one or the other of the morphosyntactic properties in (17), and the others that the discussions of this paper presuppose, as criterial? Tersely, why all the fuss about pluralizability?

To sum up the discussion above, I think that the following squish² is adequate, to the limited extent that I have been able to explore the phenomenon to date.

(18)

		Less Restrictive				
		Ven N	Gapping	Plural w/ idiom	Pronounal-inability	Plural w/o idiom
a.	<i>stub one's toe</i>	OK	OK	OBL	OK (cf. (1 a))	OK
b.	<i>hold one's breath</i>	*	?	"OPT" (but cf. (7)- (9))	OK w/= subject, (cf. (2))	OK
c.	<i>lose one's way</i>	*	?*	BLOCKS	% ³	??
d.	<i>take one's time</i>	*	?*	BLOCKS	* (cf. (1b))	*
		(cf. (4))	(cf. (5))	(cf. (6))		(cf. (10))

The problem for future research, as I see it, is to provide an explanation for the ordering of the columns of (18), assuming, that is, that the basis I have suggested for the explanation of the rows – namely, departure from the prototypical notion of physical object – can be made to stand up under detailed scrutiny.

And there is a more general problem, which I can only indicate here: how do nouns lose their identity? What I am thinking of can be suggested by the facts in (19) and (20).

(19)a. Tom bought a set of burglar's tools.
 two sets of
 *a set of
 *a setta

b. Tom bought a number of burglar's tools.
 *two numbers of
 *a number
 *a numbera

c. Tom bought a couple of burglar's tools.
 *two couples of
 a couple
 a coupla

d. i. Tom bought a bunch burglar's tools.
 *two bunches of
 *a bunch
 a buncha

ii. There is a bunch of pears, in the fridge.
 *wine
 a buncha {pears/wine}

e. i. Tom bought a lot of burglar's tools.
 *two lots of
 *a lot
 a lotta

ii. There is a lot of {pears/wine} in the fridge.
 a lotta [pears/wine]

(20)a. It is on the top of the box
 on top of the box .

*ontop the box
 (but. cf. *atop*)

b. It is (*in the front of the box (out with the meaning of “before the box”)
 in front of the box
 *{infront/afrent} the box

- (20)c. It is *in the side of the box (out with the meaning *within the box*)
 *in side of the box
 inside of the box
 inside the box
- d. It is *by the side of the box (out with the desired meaning of *next to*)
 *by side of the box
 *byside of the box
 *beside of the box
 beside the box

It should be pretty clear, intuitively, what is going on in these two examples. In (19), we see a number of collective nouns which are in various stages of ego-loss. In (19a), it is clear that we simply have two full nouns, *set*, and (*burglar's*) *tools*, while in (19e), the original noun *lot*, which originally denoted a two-dimensional array, as in *a lot of stamps* (cf. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*), has vanished entirely, as we can see from the fact that it now accepts mass nouns as objects (*a lot of wine*), which would be deviant if *lot* still had only its “array” meaning. *Bunch* is, for some speakers, on the road down the tubes: when it has contracted with its following *of*, it too can modify (?) mass nouns (cf. (19dii)). And it is already so far gone that it can no longer be pluralized: cf. (19di). Of all the nouns in (19), only the nouniest, *set*, retains this property (but why is *lots of* OK?). Although I have not indicated, this property in (19), the higher the noun is located in (19), the more easily (and variegatedly) it can be modified adjectivally: [*a large number of* / **a large lot*] *of pears*.

In (20), we find a similar slide toward ego-loss for such spatial nouns (N_{space}) as *top*, *front*, and *side*. Without going into details, it is obvious that the stages in this nominal decay are those sketched in (21).

- (21). **A Scenario for N_{space} Doom**
- a. Loss of article preceding N_{space} : first optional (cf. *top*), then obligatory (cf. all other examples in (20))
 - b. Fusion of N_{space} with preceding locative preposition (obligatory for *side*)
 - c. Loss of following *of* (optional for *inside*, obligatory for *beside*)

Some N_{space} have slid so far that we only find them as bound forms: *behind*, *beneath* and *underneath*; and *between*. Although I have not chronicled this factor in (20), it is my belief that the “application” of (21a) – the loss of the definite article – is correlated with unpluralizability: cf. *on the tops of the boxes* vs. **on tops of the boxes*.

It would be tempting to conclude that pluralizability correlates with some semantico-pragmatic notion like “usable to refer with.” However, there are counterexamples: plural nouns which seem not to refer to plural sets: *lots of wine*, or *she is keeping tabs on him*. Thus I think that a lot of careful work will be necessary here, to remove the chaff from the undeniable grain of truth in such an idea.

So to return, for a brief farewell, to the problem raised by the dwindling compositionality of the idioms in (3), and to the mystery surrounding the ordering of the columns in the squish of (18), it seems we are in deep waters here. We must, as I have argued in a buncha papers on squishes, have a flexible set of metalinguistic predicates, so that we will be able to talk about the mores and lesses of idiomaticity, and of the egohood of nouns. Whether or not we will unearth a single generalized

“scenario” for ego-loss in nouns in a wide range of categories remains an enticing, but open, beckon. Schön wär's.

Meet you over there.

Footnotes

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1. In Ross (1973), I explore the notion of *fake NP's*, to account for various facts concerning the objects of such idiomatic verbs as *take a tack on*, *make headway on*, *keep track of*, *keep tabs on*, and *pay heed to*. I argue that these are all less than fully NPish, and that *heed* is the fakest NP of them all. As will become apparent as we proceed, something quite similar seems to have to be sayable about the nouns in (3).

2. This term is defined in Ross (1973).

3. The symbol % indicates that some speakers (though not me) will accept sentences like the following:

Peter lost his way_i, but he saw some signs and found it_i again.

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