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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 a squib hoary with antiquity (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))

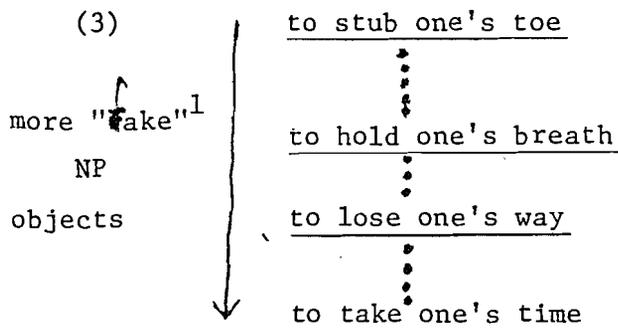
- (1)a. I stubbed my toe_i, so the doctor will have to look at it_i.
 b. *You can take your time_i; if you like, but I doubt that you'll enjoy it_i.

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 its_i exhalatory velocity with the miniaturized anemometer I grafted onto his pharynx.

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



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:

idiomatic verbs of (3), they 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 these toes are crucial equipment for a rock-climbing instructor, so he'll probably be fully compensated by his insurance company.
- b. Even though pearl-divers in the laboratory were able to hold their breaths 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 parallels 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 $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{toes} \\ *toe \end{array} \right\}$.
- b. Jeanne and Minerva held their $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{breaths} \\ \text{breath} \end{array} \right\}$.

The question which this contrast raises, in my mind, is why we refuse to perceive 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)).

- a. Solid
- b. Spatio-temporally contiguous
- c. Not aggregates (like piles, sets, etc.)

We are willing to depart from all of these: we refer to liquids as objects (the tear-drop), and volumes of gas (the cloud), 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 his tail.

(16). My pet chameleon got his ^{tail/} caught in the door, but it 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

- a. be pluralized
- b. be modified by numbers and many/few, and each
- c. trigger pronouns
- d. 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 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, pretty much.

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-izability	Plural w/o idiom
<u>stub one's toe</u>	OK	OK	OBL	OK (cf. (1a))	OK
<u>hold one's breath</u>	*	?	"OPT" (but cf. (7)-(9))	OK w/= subject (cf. (2))	OK
<u>lose one's way</u>	*	?*	BLOCKS	% ³	??
<u>take one's time</u>	*	?*	BLOCKS	* (cf. (14))	*
	(cf. (4))	(cf. (5))	(cf. (6))		(cf. (10))

INCREASING TAKENESS

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
two sets of } burglar's tools.
*a set
*a setta

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

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

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

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

e. i. Tom bought { a lot of
*two lots of } burglar's tools.
*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 } the box
afront }

(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
 *by side 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

*This work was supported by a grant from the Sloan Foundation to the Berkeley Cognitive Science Program, for which I am very grateful. It's nice out here.

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, but he saw some signs and found it again.

Bibliography

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6. Ross, John Robert (1973) "A Fake NP Squish", in Charles-James N. Bailey and Roger Shuy (eds), New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C. p.96-140.