

# **On the presence versus absence of determiners in Malagasy\***

## **Abstract**

This paper explores definiteness as expressed by the determiner system of Malagasy. In particular, noun phrases with and without an overt determiner are compared in terms of identifiability, inclusiveness and other semantic notions commonly associated with definiteness. It is shown that the determiner does not uniformly signal definiteness and that bare nouns can be interpreted as either definite or indefinite. The paper concludes by suggesting that determiners in Malagasy are associated with the semantic notion contrast rather than definiteness.

## **1 Introduction**

In this paper, I examine the distribution and interpretation of determiners in Malagasy, a Western Austronesian language. This language has a dedicated (definite) determiner and also licenses bare arguments (NPs lacking a determiner). Although traditional descriptions claim the determiner encodes definiteness and that the lack of a determiner encodes indefiniteness, it is possible to show that the standard notions of (in)definiteness (identifiability, inclusiveness) cannot account for the full range of data. Given the lack of correlation between a definite interpretation and the overt presence of a determiner and taking into consideration the fact that the presence versus absence of determiners is dictated in large part by syntactic position, I conclude that determiners in Malagasy do not encode definiteness. Although the precise semantic nature of these determiners remains open, I suggest that contrast plays a role in contexts where the syntax does not constrain the appearance of determiners.

## **2 Background**

Malagasy is famous for its rather rigid VOS word order and also for the definiteness restriction in the subject position. In particular, traditional grammars and linguistic descriptions claim that the subject must be definite (pronoun, proper name, NP with a determiner or demonstrative).

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\* Acknowledgements.

(1) a. Lasa ny mpianatra.  
 gone DET student  
 ‘The student(s) left.’

b. \*Lasa mpianatra.  
 gone student  
 ‘Some students left.’

[Keenan 1976]

More recently, however, Law (2006) points out that it is possible to find examples where the subject is not definite, despite the presence of the determiner *ny*.

(2) Ka nandrositra sady nokapohiko ny hazo...  
 then AT.run-away and TT.hit.1SG(GEN) DET tree  
 ‘Then I ran away and hit a tree...’

[Fugier 1999]

(3) Te hanao trano ianao. Tena ananao ve ny sary?  
 want AT.build house 2SG(NOM) really CT.have Q DET picture  
 ‘You want to build a house. Do you really have a plan?’

[Law 2006]

(4) Tonga teto ny ankizy anakiray izay.  
 arrive here DET child one INDEF  
 ‘A (certain) child arrived here.’

[Dez 1990]

Objects, on the other hand, appear to be freely definite or indefinite, as signaled by the presence or absence of a determiner.<sup>1</sup>

(5) a. Tia boky frantsay aho.  
 like book French 1SG(NOM)  
 ‘I like French books.’

<sup>1</sup> Zribi-Hertz and Mbolatianavalona (1999: 186) claim that the definite determiner *ny* is barred from the object position (unless required to license a modifier). They propose that there is a null determiner that is in complementary distribution with *ny*. I have never worked with a speaker with this restriction.

b. Tia ny boky frantsay aho.

like DET book French 1SG(NOM)

‘I like French books.’

[Rajaona 1972]

The questions that arise are: first, what is the semantic content of *ny*? And second, what happens when *ny* is absent? Traditional grammars and generative linguists (myself included) have assumed that *ny* marks definiteness or specificity and that its absence indicates indefiniteness. Based on data such as (2)-(5), the present article questions these assumptions and attempts to find the semantic correlates of determiners in Malagasy. The main conclusion of this paper is that none of the standard notions associated with definiteness are appropriate for Malagasy determiners.

The organization of this paper is as follows. I first provide a basic description of the determiners and demonstratives in Malagasy. Section 4 presents a discussion of definiteness and some of the definitions that have been proposed in the literature. Sections 5 and 6 illustrate the distribution and interpretation of NPs with and without a determiner, respectively, and I show the standard definitions of definiteness fail to account for the Malagasy data. Section 7 concludes.

### 3 Determiners and their kin in Malagasy

Before turning to the issue at hand, I provide an overview of the various kinds of determiners and demonstratives found in Malagasy. Traditional grammars list the following determiners:

- (6) a. *ra, i, andria, ry* – for people
- b. *ilay* – determiner for previously mentioned entities (usually singular)
- c. *ny* – definite/specific determiner (unmarked for number)

(7) Tonga i Koto / ry Rakoto.

arrive DET Koto / DET Rakoto

‘Koto/The Rakoto family arrived.’

[Dez 1990]

Given the head-initial nature of Malagasy, determiners all occur pre-nominally. The head noun immediately follows the determiner and other modifiers follow, as schematized in (8) (see Ntelitheos 2006).

(8) det/dem + N + poss'r + adj + poss'r + numerals + quantifiers + relative clause +dem

(9) a. ny satroka fosten'ny lehilahy  
 DET hat white'DET man  
 'the man's white hat'

b. ny alika kely fotsy tsara tarehy anankiray  
 DET dog small white good face one  
 'one small white pretty dog'

[Dez 1990]

As well as occurring with nouns, determiners can also combine with other categories to create a noun phrase. In (10a), we see the determiner with an adjective and in (10b) a verb.

(10) a. ny ratsy  
 DET bad  
 'evil' (e.g. good vs. evil)

b. ny nataony  
 DET TT.do.3(GEN)  
 'what he did'

[Rahajarizafy 1960]

Ntelitheos (2006) argues that examples such as these are relative clauses, headed by a null N.

Although the focus of this paper is determiners, I will briefly mention the demonstrative system. We can see in the table in (11) that this system is highly complex, encoding six degrees of distance and invisible vs. visible (note that the grave accent indicates stress).

(11)

	VISIBLE			INVISIBLE		
	SINGULAR	PLURAL	GENERIC	SINGULAR	PLURAL	GENERIC
<b>NO DISTANCE</b>	ito/ity	ireto	itony	izato/izaty		izatony
<b>UNDEFINED DISTANCE</b>	io/in	ireo/ireny		izao/izay/izany		
<b>VERY CLOSE</b>	itsy	iretsy	itsony	izatsy		izatsony
<b>SMALL DISTANCE</b>	itsỳ	iretsyỳ		izatsỳ		
<b>BIG DISTANCE</b>	iròa	ireròa		izaròa		
<b>VERY BIG DIFFERENCE</b>	irỳ	irerỳ	iròny	izarỳ		izaròny

In terms of distribution, demonstratives frame the NP (at the beginning and at the end).

- (12) Ento            any    io    olona ratsy fanahy io.  
take-away.IMP there    DEM    person bad    spirit    DEM  
‘Take over there this mean person.’

[Rajemisa-Raolison 1971]

Certain demonstratives can take on the role of determiners. For example, *ireo* acts like the plural counterpart of *ilay* when it appears on its own. Thus *ilay*, although traditionally unmarked for number, has come to indicate singular.

- (13) Tokony    hitandrina    ireo    zaza    milalao amin’ny    arabe...  
should    AT.be-careful    DEM    child    AT.play P’DET    street  
‘The children playing in the street should be careful...’

[Rajemisa-Raolison 1971]

Dahl (1951) claims that the determiner *ny* is historically related to the proximal demonstrative *ini* that is found in other Austronesian languages such as Malay. This historical connection between

a determiner and demonstratives is very common cross-linguistically – Lyons (1999) claims that definite articles almost always arise from demonstratives. I therefore consider a demonstrative to be a plausible historical source for *ny*.

Before concluding this brief survey of the noun phrase in Malagasy, I note that all quantifier-like elements in Malagasy are positioned after the head noun and after a genitive possessor or adjective. Thus they pattern distributionally with modifiers rather than determiners. In (14), I show the position of *rehetra* ‘all’ and *sasany* ‘some’.

(14) a. Hitako                    ny    tranon-dRabe    rehetra.  
 TT.see.1SG(GEN)   DET    house.GEN.Rabe    all  
 ‘I saw all Rabe’s houses.’

b. Novangiako            ny    zazakely    marary    rehetra.  
 TT.visit.1SG(GEN)   DET    child            sick            all  
 ‘I visited all the sick children.’

c. Efa            lasa    ny    mpianatra    sasany.  
 already    gone    DET    student    some  
 ‘Some of the students have already left.’

[Keenan 2006b]

The above data show that Malagasy appears to have dedicated determiner-like elements that appear in a fixed position (prenominal) within the noun phrase. In the next section, I provide an overview of determiners in general, their semantic and syntactic roles. In sections 5 and 6, I return to Malagasy determiners and discuss them in more detail.

#### 4 What are determiners?

Determiners are commonly assumed to play two key syntactic and semantic roles: as the head of DP and as the indicator of definiteness. The goal of this section is to describe some of the definitions of definiteness that have been proposed in the literature to serve as the basis for my discussion of Malagasy determiners.

#### 4.1 *Syntax*

Since Abney's (1987) seminal work, many syntacticians analyze nominal arguments as DPs rather than NPs. That is, they are projections of the head D (for determiner), whose complement is NP. This line of thinking typically assumes that the determiner turns an NP into an argument, in other words, into something that the syntax can manipulate. Along with this syntactic analysis is a semantic parallel: nouns (and noun phrases) are considered to be predicates, type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ , and the addition of a determiner creates an entity, type  $\langle e \rangle$ .

#### 4.2 *Semantics*

As mentioned above determiners are typically taken to indicate (in)definiteness. Definiteness has long been discussed in both the linguistic and philosophical literature and remains the subject of much debate. I limit myself here to a very brief overview of some of the recurring themes that arise in analyses of definiteness, following closely the description in Lyons (1999). Simplifying his discussion, definiteness can be seen to indicate either identifiability or inclusiveness (or both). "Identifiability" is similar to the notion of familiarity, and Lyons defines it as follows:

- (15) The use of the definite article directs the hearer to the referent of the noun phrase by signaling that he is in a position to identify it. [Lyons 1999]

Inclusiveness (or maximality; preferred over "uniqueness" because of plural and mass noun phrases) can be described as:

- (16) The reference is to the totality of the objects or mass in the context which satisfy the description. [Lyons 1999]

As Lyons points out, some uses of the definite determiner in English show identifiability (and not inclusiveness) while others show inclusiveness (but not identifiability). He proposes that definiteness is the grammaticalization of identifiability and can develop other uses (as is typical with grammatical categories).

A third notion that has been connected to definiteness and determiners is domain restriction (Westerståhl 1984, von Stechow 1999, inter alia). It is well known that quantifiers typically do not

quantify over the entire domain (the world), but rather are sensitive to the context. For example, in (17), *every freshman* is not used to refer to all the freshmen in the world, but instead to the freshmen in a contextually relevant domain.

(17) Every freshman is from out of state.

[von Stechow 1999]

This is also true for other DPs, such as *the freshmen*, and Westerstähl (1984) claims that the determiner *the* is itself domain restriction. Gillon (2006, this volume) develops this line of analysis and argues that D-determiners in Salish introduce domain restriction and that they are associated with implicatures of inclusiveness; in English, on the other hand, *the* introduces domain restriction but in addition, it asserts inclusiveness. Moreover, she claims that identifiability (familiarity) can be derived from domain restriction plus the inclusiveness assertion (in English).<sup>2</sup> In fact, one of Gillon's central claims is that cross-linguistically D-determiners always introduce domain restriction. Note here that her conclusions mesh well with Lyons', if we take domain restriction to be connected to identifiability.

#### 4.3 Summary

Taking the above discussion as our guide, we can ask whether determiners in Malagasy play a key role in creating arguments from predicates, whether they encode definiteness (identifiability, inclusiveness, domain restriction) and whether their absence signals indefiniteness. I should also point out that Massam, Gorrie and Kelner (2006) explore the Niuean determiner system and show that no one group of morphemes in this language plays the role of determiner, as we understand it. Instead, the case+article particles are the top-level category within DP that ensures referentiality or argumenthood, while the quantifiers encode notions such as backgrounding and focus, rather than definiteness. Thus any study of determiner-like elements in a particular language must be open to the presence of novel meanings and uses, as well as language-specific division of labour.

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<sup>2</sup> Kehler and Ward (2006) claim that the failure to use a referring expression (e.g. the use of 'a dog' over 'the dog') conversationally implicates nonfamiliarity.



## 5 Malagasy determiners

We are now in a position to consider the syntax and semantics of Malagasy determiners. Although determiners are the highest functional projection within the Malagasy noun phrase, their overt presence is not obligatory for argumenthood. That is, bare nouns can be arguments in Malagasy (see section 6 for many examples). If arguments do require the presence of a determiner, in Malagasy this determiner can be null. For this reason, in this section, I focus on the semantics correlates of Malagasy determiners.

### 5.1 *Ny*

As mentioned earlier, *ny* is usually described as a specific or definite determiner, one that can also appear with generics.

(18) Biby ny alika.

animal DET dog

‘The dog is an animal.’

[Domenichini-Ramiaramanana 1977]

As also noted, subjects must be definite (be headed by a determiner). But we have already seen that the determiner doesn’t always mark definiteness or even specificity. Let us consider the following textual example, cited earlier:

(19) Ka nandrositra sady nokapohiko ny hazo...

then AT.run-away and TT.hit.1SG(GEN) DET tree

‘Then I ran away and hit a tree...’

[Fugier 1999]

Here the referent of *ny hazo* ‘the tree’ is neither identifiable (it need not be a tree that is salient in the discourse or context) nor is it inclusive (there could have been several trees). Similarly, in the following example, the response in (20b) has a definite determiner, but the noun phrase is clearly indefinite (it doesn’t mean “I sold the five”).

(20) a. Firy ny vorom-bazaha lafonao?  
 how.many DET bird-foreigner sold.2(GEN)  
 ‘How many ducks did you sell?’

b. Lafo ny dimy.  
 sold DET five  
 ‘I sold five.’

[Dez 1980]

The referent of *ny dimy* ‘the five’ is not identifiable or inclusive (from the context it is likely that there were several ducks, of which an unspecified group of five were sold).

In fact, it seems to be the case that when a noun phrase must be definite (e.g. in the subject position), then the interpretation may be either definite or indefinite. This effect is illustrated in the following example, where the noun phrase *ny sotro mahamay* ‘a hot spoon’ must have a determiner because of the preposition *amin’* ‘with/at/in/etc.’.<sup>3</sup>

(21) ...misy mpampiasa karany iray nandoro ny tava  
 exist employer Pakistani one AT.burn DET face  
 sy ny fen’ny mpiasany tamin’ ny sotro mahamay.  
 and DET thigh’DET worker.3(GEN) P’ DET spoon hot  
 ‘... there is an Indo-Pakistani employer who burned his servant’s face and thigh with a hot spoon.’  
 [Jedele and Randrianarivelo 1998]

Again, the referent of this noun phrase is neither identifiable nor inclusive. The following example, taken from a short story, illustrates a similar effect in the genitive position (possessor) to a noun:

(22) Nilalao teo am-pototr’ilay harambato i Volanoro sy ny ankizyvaviny.  
 AT.play there P-base’DEF mountain Volanoro and DET servant.3(GEN)  
 ‘Volanoro and her servants were playing at the bottom of a mountain.’

<sup>3</sup> There are some exceptions to this, but overwhelmingly the complement of *amin’* occurs with a determiner/demonstrative. This is likely related to case: the complement of *amin’* is in the genitive case and, as Keenan (2006a) points out, text counts show that 94% of genitives are formally definite.

This sentence is taken from the near the beginning of the story – the mountain is a new referent and yet is marked with the definite determiner *ilay*.<sup>4</sup>

Turning to the object position, (23) illustrates the lack of inclusiveness of the determiner. In other words, *ny vehivavy iray* in this context doesn't mean 'the one woman', but rather 'one of the women', a partitive reading.

- (23) Niditra ny vehivavy telo. Nahalala ny vehivavy iray aho.  
 AT.enter DET woman three know DET woman one 1SG(NOM)  
 'Three women entered. I knew one of the women.'

In a recent discussion of the definiteness restriction on subjects, Keenan (2006a) claims that subjects are only "definite" in that they presuppose existence and therefore always scope over negation.

- (24) Tsy nandeha tany an-tsekoly ny mpianatra telo.  
 NEG AT.go there P-school DET student three  
 'Three students didn't go to school.'  
 \* 'It is not the case that three students went to school.'

Keenan claims that subjects take wide scope even when indefinite (not previously mentioned, not an identified group). In (24), for example, the interpretation is that the speaker is merely making a claim about some three students; these students need not be under discussion.

I should point out here that *ny* doesn't uniquely mark wide scope – the wide scope likely comes from the high structural position of the subject. As shown in (25), objects with *ny* can take narrow scope.

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I set aside the determiner *ilay*. It is typically described as being used for previously mentioned entities, but as the example in (22) illustrates, this is not always the case. Instead, much like *ny*, *ilay* can be used to introduce new entities into the discourse. Further research is required to determine the differences between *ny* and *ilay*.

(25) Izao aza aho mbola tsy nahazo ny akanjo mafana  
 now even 1SG(NOM) still NEG AT.get DET clothes hot  
 ho an-janako.

for P-child.1SG(GEN)

‘Even now I still haven’t gotten (any) warm clothing for my child.’

[Jedele and Randrianarivelo 1998]

From the context (and from native-speaker judgements), it is clear in (25) that negation scopes over the object. Wide scope is of course possible, as seen in (26), where the object scopes over the adverb.

(26) Mamaky ny boky roa lalandava Rabe.  
 AT.read DET book two always Rabe

‘Rabe always reads two books.’ (the same two books)

Summing up, the determiner in Malagasy does not always indicate definiteness. Moreover, although subjects take wide scope, wide scope is more likely a result of the position of subjects, rather than a property of the determiner. Outside of the subject position, NPs headed by the determiner can take either wide or narrow scope.

## 5.2 *Demonstratives*

I mention here demonstratives only in passing and only because there are some demonstratives in Malagasy that can be used as determiners. Demonstratives are typically definite and also encode deixis (spatio-temporal context). As mentioned earlier, Malagasy demonstratives typically frame the NP, but certain ones can also be used in a determiner-like fashion (no framing). In these cases, even demonstratives can receive an indefinite interpretation, as seen in (27).

- (27) ...mahasarika azy            kokoa ny        maka sary        ireo olona  
 CAUSE.attract 3(ACC)    most    DET    take    picture    DEM    person  
 eo       amin'ny    fianinana    andavan'andro.  
 there    P'DET       life            everyday  
 '... he is most interested in photographing people in daily life.'  
 [Jedele and Randrianarivelo 1998]

As is clear from the translation, the meaning is simply 'people', not 'these people' or even 'the people'. The indefinite reading of demonstratives appears to be limited to uses of *ireo* as a plural determiner.

A related use of demonstratives as indefinites can be seen in the following example, where the clausal subject is framed by the demonstrative *ity* 'this':

- (28) ... zary    fidiram-bola    ho an'ny        olo-marobe    teny  
           become source-money for P'DET    person-many    there  
 amin'iny    faritr'i Manandriana-Avaradrano    iny  
 P'DEM       area'    Manandriana-Avaradrano    DEM  
ity    fakana tany    hosivanina    any    anaty rano    ity...  
 DEM    taking earth    TT.sieve        there    in        water    DEM  
 '... taking soil to sieve it in water has become a source of income for a great many people  
 in the Manandriana-Avaradrano area...'            [Jedele and Randrianarivelo 1998]

This example is from the first sentence of a newspaper article about people looking for gold, so it provides the first mention of taking earth. This use of *ity* is cataphoric – it introduces a new entity that will be important in the remainder of the article. Note that colloquial English *this* has a similar use (Prince 1981).

## 6 The absence of determiners

In the preceding section, we have seen the presence of the determiner *ny* does not consistently signal a definite interpretation. We can now ask the opposite question: does the absence of *ny* consistently mark indefiniteness? What I show in the next subsections is that a bare noun can be

interpreted as definite or indefinite. Thus neither the presence nor the absence of determiners is correlated with definiteness.

It should first be noted that bare DPs (DPs without a determiner or demonstrative) are somewhat limited in distribution in Malagasy. They are barred from the subject position and are usually absent in positions marked by genitive case (e.g. the non-active agent and the complement to certain prepositions). They are acceptable in other positions: direct object (29a), predicate (29b), accusative object of a preposition (29c).

- (29) a. Mividy boky aho.  
 AT.buy book 1SG(NOM)  
 ‘I am buying a book/books.’
- b. Vorona ratsy feo ny goaika  
 bird bad voice DETcrow  
 ‘The crow is a bird with an ugly voice’
- c. Ampirimo ao an’efitra ny kitaponao.  
 put-away there P’room DET bag.2SG  
 ‘Put your bag away in the room.’

Unlike “definites” they can’t scramble: compare (30) with (31) (Rackowski (1988), Rackowski and Travis (2000)).

- (30) a. Mamitaka ny ankizy matetika Rabe.  
 AT.trick DET child often Rabe  
 ‘Rabe often tricks children.’
- b. Mamitaka matetika ny ankizy Rabe.  
 AT.trick often DET child Rabe  
 ‘Rabe often tricks children.’

(31) a. Mamitaka ankizy matetika Rabe.  
 AT.trick child often Rabe  
 ‘Rabe often tricks children.’

b. \* Mamitaka matetika ankizy Rabe.  
 AT.trick often child Rabe

Paul (in press) argues that the linear dependency between a verb and its bare noun complement, as seen in (31), is a result of pseudo noun incorporation (Massam 2001), and not derived via movement or compounding. While pseudo noun incorporation explains the syntactic distribution of bare noun objects, it leaves open their semantics. I therefore turn now to the interpretation of bare nouns.

### 6.1 Scope

When looking at typical examples with scope-bearing elements, bare nouns in Malagasy typically act like bare plurals in English: they obligatorily take narrow scope. This contrasts with what we have seen for definite DPs. In (32), for example, the bare noun scopes under the adverbs *indroa* ‘twice’ and *lalandava* ‘always’, as well as under the modal particle *tokony* ‘should’.

- (32) a. Namaky boky indroa Rabe.  
 AT.read book twice Rabe  
 ‘Rabe read a book twice.’ (not the same book)
- b. Nianatra lesona lalandava Raso.   
 AT.study lesson always Raso  
 ‘Raso always studied a lesson.’ (not the same lesson)
- c. Tokony hamaky boky ianao.  
 should FUT.AT.read book 2(NOM)  
 ‘You should read a book.’ (any book)

The data in (33) shows that bare nouns also scope under negation:

- (33) a. Tsy namaky boky Rasoa. #Saroitra loatra ilay izy.  
NEG AT.read book Rasoa difficult too DEF 3(NOM)  
'Rasoa didn't read a book. It was too difficult.'
- b. Aza manolotra boky azy!  
NEG-IMP AT.offer book 3(ACC)  
'Don't offer him a book!' (any book at all)

Thus far, bare nouns in Malagasy behave like weak indefinites. But just as we have seen that definites can be interpreted as indefinite, there seem to be examples where bare nouns encode definiteness.

## 6.2 Body parts

Keenan and Ralalaoherivony (2000) discuss possessor raising in Malagasy, a very productive phenomenon where a body part (or other inalienable possession) surfaces as a bare noun, such as *nify* 'tooth' in (34a) and *kibo* 'belly' in (34b).

- (34) a. Fotsy nify Rabe.  
white tooth Rabe  
'Rabe has white teeth.'
- b. Marary kibo aho.  
sick belly 1SG(NOM)  
'I am sick in the stomach.'
- [Keenan and Ralalaoherivony 2000]

As is clear from these examples, the bare noun is semantically definite – in particular these examples show inclusivity. (34a) states that all of Rabe's teeth are white, not one or some. Not surprisingly these bare nouns can scope over negation, unlike what we saw in (33):



- (35) Tsy maty filoha ny firenana. Sitrana izy.  
 NEG dead president DET country cured 3(NOM)  
 ‘The country’s president didn’t die. She is cured.’

I set aside possessor raising here given that the semantics of the bare nouns in this context arises from semantics of the construction as a whole (see Paul in press for some discussion).

### 6.3 Objects of prepositions

In looking through texts, I have found several examples of a bare noun referring to a previously identified or contextually salient entity. One example is from a newspaper article about people sieving for gold. In the first clause, locked houses are mentioned (with a determiner); in the second clause refers to the same houses with a bare noun.

- (36) Lalina aza fa ny tranon’olona mihidy mihitsy no nisy namoha,  
 deep even C DET house’person AT.lock indeed FOC exist AT.open  
 ka alain’dry zalahy ny tany ao anaty trano...  
 and TT.take.DET 2PLM DET earth there in house  
 ‘Even more serious, locked houses had people breaking in; the scoundrels took the soil from inside the houses...’ [Jedele and Randrianarivelo 1998]

In fact, looking through texts, it appears that the preposition *anaty* ‘in’ is always followed by a bare noun, even if that noun is definite.<sup>5</sup> The same is true of certain other locative prepositions, for example *an*.

- (37) Mandeha eny an-dalana izy.  
 go there P-road 3(nom)  
 ‘She is walking in the street.’

<sup>5</sup> The title of one of the stories in the collection I looked at is “*Anaty ala*” (‘In the forest’). As a complicating factor, *anaty* is morphologically complex, made up of the preposition *an* and the noun *aty* ‘the interior’. The category of *an* is in fact not clear. It surfaces between locative elements like *eny* ‘there’, *eo* ‘here’ and their complement and also productively creates locatives (e.g. *havia* ‘left’ -> *ankavia* ‘to/on the left’). Abinal and Malzac (1888) list it as a preposition and compare it with *amin*, another all-purpose preposition; Dez (1980) follows this classification and claims that there are only two prepositions in Malagasy: *amin* and *an*. Given that *an* creates manner adverbs (e.g. *tselika* ‘nimble’ -> *antselika* ‘nimbly’), it seems reasonable to classify it as a preposition.

- (38) a. an-trano  
           P-house  
           ‘in the house’
- b. an-tampony  
           P-summit  
           ‘at the summit’
- c. an-dakana  
           P-canoe  
           ‘in the canoe’

[Abinal and Malzac 1888]

Thus we have the mirror image of the subject position: subjects must be formally definite (but can be interpreted as indefinite) and the complements of certain prepositions must be formally indefinite (but can be interpreted as definite).<sup>6</sup>

The more interesting situation, therefore, is for positions where the determiner is truly optional. In instances of apparent free variation, is there still no correlation between the presence of a determiner and definiteness?

#### 6.4 *Objects*

As mentioned in section 2, direct objects in Malagasy can appear either with or without a determiner. I repeat example (5), taken from Rajaona (1972).

- (39) a. Tia boky frantsay aho.  
           like book French 1SG(NOM)  
           ‘I like French books.’

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<sup>6</sup> The parallel is not quite perfect, however. The complement of *anaty* (and the other prepositions) can in fact be definite (see also footnote 3). There is, however, a preference for indefinites. Subjects, however, are truly restricted to definites.

- b. Tia ny boky frantsay aho.  
 like DET book French 1SG(NOM)  
 ‘I like French books.’

Rajaona’s discussion of these examples does not immediately make clear what the difference in interpretation is. But at the end of this section and in the conclusion we will return to the opposition and contrast connected with the presence of the determiner in (39b).

One potentially relevant comes from a newspaper article about cyclones: from the context (and the translation provided) it was all the streets that were blocked, but *arabe* ‘street’ is bare.

- (40) ... sy nanapaka arabe mihitsy tany amin’io toerana io ...  
 and AT.cut street absolutely there P’DEM place DEM  
 ‘... and completely blocked the streets there in that area...’

[Jedele and Randrianarivelo 1998]

The apparently definite interpretation of *arabe* ‘street’ may, however, be a result of *mihitsy* ‘completely’ acting like an adverbial quantifier, binding the bare noun.

Working with speakers, however, I have found what appear to be relevant examples of bare nouns that can be used to refer to clearly identifiable/inclusive entities.

- (41) a. Nahita solom-bavam-bahoakan’Antsiranana I aho omaly.  
 AT.see deputy’Antsiranana I 1SG(NOM) yesterday  
 ‘I saw the deputy of Antsiranana I yesterday.’ (there is only one deputy)
- b. Nijery kintana aho tamin’ny alina.  
 AT.watch star 1SG(NOM) P’DET night  
 ‘I looked at the stars last night.’
- c. Nahita volana aho tamin’ny alina.  
 AT.see moon 1SG(NOM) P’DET night  
 ‘I saw the moon last night.’

The example in (41a) could be discounted as being not identifiable (hearer-unknown), but (41b,c) are clear instances of referring to a definite object (or objects) with a bare noun.

On the other hand, it is clear that bare nouns cannot be used to refer to entities that have been mentioned in the immediately preceding discourse. For example, the bare noun *mananasy* ‘pineapple’ in (42b) cannot be used refer back to the previously mentioned pineapple in (42a).

- (42) a. Nahita mananasy naniry tery an-tsefatsefa-bato ilay zazavavy.  
 AT.find pineapple AT.grow there P-broken-rock DEF girl  
 ‘The girl found a pineapple growing in the talus.’
- b. # Nandeha nanapaka mananasy izy.  
 AT.go AT.take pineapple 3(NOM)  
 ‘She went to get a pineapple.’

Similarly in (43b), the second mention of *sifaka* is to a new group, not the four mentioned in (43a).

- (43) a. Nandeha tany an-ala aho omaly ary nahita sifaka efatra.  
 AT.go there P-forest 1SG(NOM) yesterday and AT.see sifaka four  
 ‘I went to the forest yesterday and saw four sifakas (lemurs).’
- b. # Nanaraka sifaka aho.  
 AT.follow sifaka 1SG(NOM)  
 ‘I followed sifakas.’

### 6.5 Summary

This section has overviewed the distribution and interpretation of the lack of the determiner and shown that the absence of a determiner does not always signal indefiniteness. Instead, bare nouns can be interpreted as either definite or indefinite. These results fit with what we saw in section 5, where nouns headed by determiners can also be interpreted as either definite or indefinite. The

syntax requires determiners in certain positions (e.g. the subject) and bars them in others, but even in contexts where determiners have a freer distribution (e.g. the object), we can see both definite and indefinite readings of bare nouns. This leaves us with a puzzle: what is the determiner doing if it doesn't signal definiteness? I suggest an answer to this puzzle in the final section.

## 7 Is it chaos?

At this point, the reader may wonder what role, if any, the determiner plays in interpretation. Up until now, we have only seen certain syntactic reasons for the determiner, but no semantic correlates. Based on the data and on native-speaker judgements, I suggest when the determiner is not obligatory it signals contrast. The notion of contrast will unfortunately remain somewhat vague, but I offer some illustrative examples. Consider again Rajaona's examples:

- (44) a. Tia boky frantsay aho.  
           like book French 1SG(NOM)  
           'I like French books.'  
           "J'aime les livres français" – valeur généralisante
- b. Tia ny boky frantsay aho.  
           like DET book French 1SG(NOM)  
           'I like French books.'  
           "J'aime les livres français" – valeur catégorisante (la catégorie de livres qui sont écrits en français – par opposition implicite aux livres non écrits en français)

In his translation, he notes that when the determiner is present there is an implicit opposition with other kinds of books, non-French book. I have found a similar effect in the following pair:

- (45) a. Fotsy ny        volon'akoho.  
           white DET hair'chicken  
           'Chicken feathers are white.'  
           generic statement about chicken feathers

b. Fotsy ny volon'ny akoho.

white DET hair'DET chicken

i. 'Chicken feathers are white.'

generic, but in context of talking about the coats of various animals

ii. 'The chicken's feathers are white.'

statement about a particular chicken

In (45bi) the determiner signals that chicken feathers are being discussed, not the feathers (or coat) of any other animal. The interpretation of these examples bears some similarity to examples of identificational focus, discussed by Kiss 1998: a contextually presupposed set (e.g. books) is restricted to an exhaustive subset (French books).

Finally, we see a slightly different type of contrast below:

(46) a. Nahita volana aho tamin'ny alina.

see moon 1SG(NOM) P'DET night

'I saw the moon last night.'

b. Nahita ny volana aho tamin'ny alina.

see DET moon 1SG(NOM) P'DET night

'I saw the moon last night.'

While (46a) is an unmarked utterance, describing what I did last night, (46b) is more marked. One speaker suggested that (46b) would be appropriate in a context where it was surprising that I saw the moon. Perhaps it was cloudy or there was some other reason why the moon shouldn't have been visible. Another speaker felt that in (46b) it is understood that I saw other things as well as the moon (for example, the stars). Here, there is no exhaustivity, unlike in examples (44)–(45).

What is clear from examples (44)–(46) is that determiners in Malagasy cannot be markers of definiteness, as traditionally defined. Although I leave the notion of contrast undefined, I note that this use of the determiner recalls the Niuean situation, described by Massam, Gorrie and

Kellner (2006), where the quantifiers signal certain discourse properties, such as focus and backgrounding. Although the Malagasy facts are not identical, they do suggest that in some languages, determiner-like elements may have a different set of discourse properties than those found in more commonly studied languages. What the range of possible properties is across languages remains a rich area for future research.

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