

When Do Bare Nouns Encode Anaphoric Definiteness? A Study Based on Chinese Translations of *Le Petit Prince*

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1 Research questions and goals

How do article-less languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, and Korean express different types of definiteness, namely unique/weak and anaphoric/strong definiteness? Recent studies have examined when bare nouns can mark anaphoric definiteness and when demonstratives are required (cf. Jenks 2018, Dayal and Jiang 2023, Kang 2021, Nemoto 2015). Kim (2024), based on Korean data, argues that bare nouns can encode anaphoric definiteness when the spatiotemporal location is maintained in a narrative sequence or when they function like proper names in storytelling contexts.

This paper investigates Mandarin Chinese through two Chinese translations of *Le Petit Prince*, focusing on how French definite articles in anaphoric contexts are rendered. Our findings confirm Kim's (2024) observations, showing that anaphoric bare nouns are licensed in narrative sequences with the same spatiotemporal location (see also Simpson and Wu 2022) or quasi-name contexts, while demonstratives are preferred when the spatiotemporal location shifts.

2 Background

Languages distinguish between so-called unique/weak definites (cf. (1a)) and anaphoric/strong definites (cf. (1b)). While English uses the same article *the* to mark both types, Fering (a dialect of Northern Frisian, cf. Ebert 1971) and German (in certain environments, cf. Schwarz 2009) use different articles. Recent work on article-less languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Korean, and Japanese has explored whether they also differentiate between the two types of definiteness in the absence of articles. Jenks (2018) claims that Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese use bare nouns to express unique definiteness,

and demonstratives to encode anaphoric definiteness—with the exception of subject position, which serves as a “continuing topic” and does not require demonstratives for anaphoric definiteness.

- (1) a. Unique/weak definites in English
 - i. Please open **the door**. (immediate situation use, cf. Hawkins 1978)
 - ii. **The moon** has risen. (larger situation use, cf. Hawkins 1978)
- b. Anaphoric/strong definites (Schwarz 2009, (3); 132, (95a))
 - i. John bought a book and a magazine. **The book** was expensive.
 - ii. Every farmer that owns a donkey beats **the donkey**.

However, Simpson and Wu (2022) and Dayal and Jiang (2023) have shown that bare nouns in Mandarin Chinese can also be used anaphorically in other syntactic positions, such as direct and indirect objects. The former convincingly argue that bare nouns can be used anaphorically when the same spatiotemporal location is maintained in a narrative sequence, whereas demonstratives appear when there is a shift in spatiotemporal location. The latter claim that demonstratives in Chinese are plain demonstratives, as in English, rather than definite articles. Nevertheless, there is no consensus as to when bare nouns are licensed and when demonstratives are required in anaphoric uses.

3 Why *Le Petit Prince*?

We chose to study translations of *Le Petit Prince* for several reasons. First, to our knowledge, no previous corpus study based on *Le Petit Prince* has specifically examined the anaphoric use of bare nouns in comparison with demonstrative phrases. Second, unlike previous studies, which rely mainly on elicited judgments or scattered corpus examples (Jenks 2018; Simpson & Wu 2022; Dayal & Jiang 2023), our study is based on a literary text that combines narrative and dialogue, offering a rich source of naturally occurring anaphoric contexts. Third, variation across translators provides indirect grammatical evidence, which we supplement with native speaker judgments to test whether demonstratives are obligatory.

4 Data and observation

We focus on two translations by highly reputable translators, namely Li Yumin (2024) and Ma Zhencheng (2013), with particular attention to Li’s version. First, Table 1, based on Li’s translation, presents the distribution of bare nouns and demonstratives across four types of syntactic contexts. In addition to subject and object positions, many examples occur in the left periphery and in positions following preverbal prepositions such as *gēn* ‘with’ or coverbs such as *bǎ* and *bèi* (cf. Li & Thompson 1981). The examples in (2) and (3) illustrate that anaphoric bare nouns appear both in subject and object position. Surprisingly, in object position, bare nouns occur more frequently than demonstratives (*contra* Jenks 2018).

	Dem-NPs	Bare NPs
Subject position	24	22
Object position	7	12
Left periphery	3	2
Preverbal PPs or coverbs	17	8

TABLE 1 : the distribution of bare nouns and demonstratives across four types of syntactic contexts

- (2) Il rit, toucha la corde, fit jouer la poulie (轱辘 *gúlu*). Et **la poulie** (轱辘 *gúlu*) gémit comme gémit une vieille girouette quand le vent a longtemps dormi. (cf. Chapter 25: Li 2024, 123)
- (3) La réponse est bien simple : J’ai essayé mais je n’ai pas pu réussir. Quand j’ai dessiné **les baobabs** (猴面包树 *hóumiànbāoshù*) j’ai été animé par le sentiment de l’urgence. (cf. Chapter 5; Li 2024, 30)

Second, comparing the two translations of anaphoric definites, we observe that in many cases Li (2024) uses demonstratives, whereas Ma (2013) opts for bare nouns, as exemplified by – *la planète* in (4). Table 2 summarizes these occurrences. By contrast, we identified only one case where Ma uses a demonstrative and Li does not (cf. chapter 25). The data suggest that Ma (2013) deliberately treats certain definite noun phrases as proper names (cf. “quasi-names” in Kim 2024), thereby allowing bare nouns to refer back freely to entities or individuals mentioned earlier in the same or in different chapters.

- (4) Et, depuis cette époque, la consigne a changé ? (cf. Chapter 14)
- La consigne n’a pas changé, dit l’allumeur. C’est bien là le drame ! **La planète** d’année en année a tourné de plus en plus vite, et la consigne n’a pas changé !
- i. Li (2024, 78): *zhè-kē xīngqiú* ‘DEM-CLF planet’
- ii. Ma (2013, 52): *xīngqiú* ‘planet’

	Anaphoric definites
Subject position	20
Object position	4
Left periphery	2
Preverbal PPs or coverbs	11

TABLE 2 : Li (2024) uses demonstratives, whereas Ma (2013) opts for bare nouns

Third, focusing on Li’s translation, we identify certain contexts where demonstratives are obligatorily used for anaphoric reference, as confirmed by grammaticality judgments from

native speakers. As shown in (5), the second instance of *la fleur* requires a demonstrative to be interpreted anaphorically. This can be explained by the fact that the sequence in (5) does not maintain the same spatiotemporal location (cf. Simpson & Wu 2022; Kim 2024): the sentence containing the second instance of *la fleur* is set in the past, rather than at the time of the dialogue, unlike in (2), where the same spatiotemporal location is maintained in a narrative sequence.

(5) – Bonjour, dit le petit prince.

– Bonjour, dit **la fleur** (花儿 *huār* ‘flower’).

– Où sont les hommes ? demanda poliment le petit prince.

La fleur (这朵花儿 *zhè-duǒ huār* ‘DEM-CLF-flower’), un jour, avait vu passer une caravane :

– Les hommes ? Il en existe, je crois, six ou sept.

(cf. chapter 18, *Le Petit Prince*; Li (2024, 64))

Our study confirms Kim’s (2024) observation that bare nouns can encode anaphoric definiteness when the spatiotemporal location is maintained in a narrative sequence (cf. situation-internally licensed definites) or when they function like proper names in storytelling contexts (cf. quasi-names licensed at the text level). These two contexts can be explained by Kim’s analysis, according to which bare noun languages employ two distinct null anaphoric type-shifters.

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