The Heart of a Noun

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The purpose of this paper is to show what happens when nouns lose heart – that is, when they lose those pragmantic properties which are fundamental for the prototypical functioning of nominal elements. In (1), I show some of the steps in the transition from locational nouns – words like top, front, back, side, and so on – to prepositions or adverbial expressions.

(1)  
a. There was water on the (shiny) top(s) of the car(s).
a'. There was water on it, / it, .
b. There was water on (*shiny) top(*s), of the car(s).
b'. There was water on it, / them, .
c. There was water atop (*of) the car(s).
d. He put his walkie-talkie to the side.
e. He put his walkie-talkie aside.

When locational nouns have articles or other determiners, the nouns can be either pluralized or modified, or both; when the article is absent, both of these options also become impossible. A correlated phenomenon is the possibility of coreference: the contrast between (1a') and (1b') suggests that while non-locational nouns like car(s) can always be referred to by pronouns like it and they (and the same would hold true for other proforms like this / that), such presupposed coreference is only possible for locational nouns that are preceded by articles.

Note that the loss of the article is only possible when the locational noun occurs as the object of certain prepositions, as can be seen in (2).

(2)  
a. There was water in/on/by/near/under/etc. the front of the car(s).
b. There was water in/*on/*by/*near/*under front of the car(s).

Thus we see that while front allows the deletion of the article only when it is preceded by in (the same is true for back), and while top only permits articlelessness after on [and can we really believe that the link between inness and the articlelessness before the frontback dimension, and the link between onness and articlelessness before the notion of surface, are unrelated?], side can be articleless after in, and possibly after by, assuming that adequate justification can be given for a derivation like by the side of X → by side of X → by side X → beside X. I am not sanguine about finding evidence for deriving (1e) from (1d), nor for finding plausible and demonstrable sources for adverbs (?) like away, apart, akin, ahead, afoot, asea (there appear to be a fair number of
these - possibly on the order of a few dozen) from prepositional phrases whose objects are the nouns way, part, kin, head, foot, and so on, though it seems fairly uncontroversial to postulate the presence of these elements as morphemes following the prefix a- in the former words.

I would argue that this process of nominal decay can proceed even further, as suggested by the contrast between (3) and (4):

(3) a. [Zulécio is in the side of the car.] \(\rightarrow\) (By Article Drop)
b. (*)Zulécio is in side of the car. \(\rightarrow\) (By Preposition Incorporation)
c. Zulécio is inside of the car. \(\rightarrow\) (By Of Drop [OPT])
d. Zulécio is inside the car.

(4) a. Zulécio is by the side of the car. \(\rightarrow\) (By Article Drop)
b. *Zulécio is by side of the car. \(\rightarrow\) (By Preposition Incorporation)
c. *Zulécio is byside of the car. \(\rightarrow\) (By Of Drop [OBL])
d. (*Zulécio is byside the car.) \(\rightarrow\) (Morphophonemics: by \(\rightarrow\) be)
e. Zulécio is beside the car.

The relevant distinction here, which I would like to draw between inside and beside, appears most clearly in the contrast between (3a) and (3b). In the former case, I would suggest that it makes sense to assign to the noun side, even though it has a preposition in prefixed to it, enough nominality to prevent the dropping of the of which English always likes to have between any two nouns. Thus in English, we can only say a kilogram of butter or a glass of milk, while German allows their of-less variants: ein Kilo Butter and ein Glas Milch. What is interesting, in the context of a discussion of nominal decay, is the difference in optionality of this of between (3a) and (3c): in the former sentence, there would be no question of a possible dropping of the of after the side, whereas in (3c), after the article has vanished, apparently side sinks to a value of nominality that is low enough so that the English noun-separating of need only appear as an option. For some reason that is not clear to me (I wonder if it has to do with the obligatory conversion of by to be before side), beside loses so much of the nominality of side that no intervening of after it is even tolerated as an option.

I would argue that the decay of nominality can continue, so that in forms like behind and beneath, it may even become difficult for the English speaker to see any relationship to such historically derivative words like hindsight and hindquarters. There is no longer any clear motivation for analyzing hind- as a noun, and of course, less still for seeing neth- as one in the probably morphologically related netherworld and nethermost and beneath. In the case of between, probably there are many speakers who no longer perceive any morphological link to such words as twenty, twin, twilight, twain (and twelve and two). I assume that the process has proceeded so far in the case of but that no one but a professional etymologist or historian of English can recognize that this word once contained out.

I want to argue that these processes of nominal decay, which appear to be linked to article loss and preposition incorporation, are not restricted to only locational nouns: consider the facts in (5):
a. Felix went to the bed, (but it was so fluffy that he couldn’t fall asleep).

b. Felix went to bed, (*but it was so fluffy that he couldn’t fall asleep).

c. Felix went to *(the) bed, which was hard as flint.

With nouns like bed, church, school, college, stage, etc., which can become articleless under certain conditions involving prototypical use, and so on, we see that articlelessness brings with it, as was the case for the locational nouns, an associated impossibility of referring to the denuded noun with coreferential pronouns, or of modification by relative clauses referring to the articleless noun itself. Interestingly, it remains possible to have relative clauses referring to the place denoted by the prepositional phrase that contains the articleless noun: cf. (6).

(6) Jairson went to bed, where he fell asleep

My paper will present related facts concerning the behavior of locational nouns in Brasilian and in the Mozambican Bantu language Kitchangana. I will also examine the ways in which predicate nouns (as in (7)) and measure phrases (as in (8)) seem to represent cases of defective noun phrases,

(7) a. Delson is a doctor, (*and I have always wanted to be it).

b. Delson is a doctor, which he has always wanted to be.

c. ?Delson is a doctor, which Eneida has always wanted to be.

d. ??Delson is a doctor, which Edmar is not.

(8) a. The concert has lasted six hours, (*which are passing slowly).

b. The examination will cost six dollars, (*which are on the table).

with an eye to seeing whether there are any general parameters which can be appealed to in studying the ways which nouns “lose heart,” eventually fading from sight even morphologically, as has begun to happen in words like aback, and behind, and has definitely come full cycle in words like window or daisy, which used to mean “the eye of the wind” and “the eye of the day,” respectively.

The problem of loss of heart is of course not restricted to nouns alone; I intend to search for a general theory of the processes which are involved in this phenomenon, to which I hope that the present paper may make an initial contribution.