A survey of noun definitions and characteristics from grammars of Danish

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1 Introduction

Introductory books on any topic don’t agree about everything and this is true of introductory books to the grammar of a particular language. The topic of this paper is to investigate the definition(s) and characteristics of nouns as described in a number of grammars on Danish. The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2 different types of definitions are discussed and in Section 3 an overview of a number of selected grammars on Danish is given and problems with them discussed.

2 Types of definitions

There are many kinds of definitions with one overview listing 7 different kinds, and the author does not consider it exhaustive (Swartz, 1997). However, two are of primary interest here. First, stipulative definitions are definitions that stipulate that the author intends to use a certain term in a certain way no matter what use it otherwise has (if any). A such definition cannot be wrong, since it’s not a claim about reality but merely an expression of intention. Stipulative definitions are often found in math and logic.

Lexical definitions are the ones people typically argue about, they are found in dictionaries (among other places) and attempt to describe how a word is actually being used by people. Whether people do in fact use the word that way is a matter of fact, and a definition that fails to properly describe how people use a particular word is a wrong/false definition.

For definitions of common nouns, there are two ways they can be wrong. First, they can be too broad by including things that shouldn’t be included. E.g. defining “birds” as ‘animals that fly’ is too broad because it includes insects in the category where they don’t belong. Second, they can be too narrow by failing to include all things that should be included. The example from before is too narrow because penguins are birds but they cannot fly. This also illustrates that a definition can both be too broad and too narrow at the same time.

2.1 Classical and non-classical definitions

In philosophy, logic, and math it is common practice to discuss the definition of this or that word or concept, and often it is taken for granted that this is to be done using what we might call classical definitions. Classical definitions consist of necessary and/or sufficient conditions for defining something. For instance, in logic a valid argument is often defined as: for any argument, that argument is valid if and only if, it is impossible for all the premisses and the conclusion to be false at the same time (Bradley & Swartz, 1979). Another example is in the discussions of how to best define ”S knows that P”, with the old Justified True Belief definition still being discussed. The JTB definition states that: S knows that p if

1. p is true;
2. S believes that p;
3. S is justified in believing that p.

In other words, ”knowledge” is defined by the jointly necessary and sufficient condition of the above (Ichikawa & Steup, 2013).
However, after the linguistic turn in philosophy, the assumption that it was a fruitful endeavour to try to define all problematic terms like this has been criticized and some argue that we need to use alternative ways of defining terms or perhaps that they are not to be more precisely defined (Preston 2006). In linguistics, one influential theory is prototype theory (Lakoff 1987). In classical definitions, something either is or isn’t a member of some category, but this assumption is not found in all prototype definitions. Here membership can be gradual. For instance, with respect to the category ‘tallness’, instead of everybody either being tall or not, which requires some necessarily somewhat arbitrary cut-off point, we can instead say that someone is tall to some degree. An obvious idea is that people who are at the average of their height are have a membership degree of 0, and the tallest person has one of 1. Everybody who is below the average person is tall to a negative degree and everybody who is between the average height and the maximum height are tall to some intermediate degree.

Another fundamental idea of prototype theory is that some members of a category are more central (better examples of the category) than others. For instance, speaking of the category ‘bird’, a robin would be a good example, while a penguin or an ostrich would not be. The reason is that these birds both lack an ability that is very common among the members of the category (being able to fly). In the case of birds, following standard practice in biology, membership is not gradual, but is based on evolutionary history (Wikipedia 2013).

**“Bird” class**

![Figure 1. A very simple illustration of the “bird” class, with three central members and two peripheral members. Image credit: Wikipedia.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_semantics)

**Figure 2.** Generalized prototype theory model for up to 3 criteria. Items meeting all criteria are central members, items lacking in 1, 2, or 3 criteria are in the respective area, further from the center.
In math and logic, there is another common way to define certain things, namely by formation rules. This method is often used for distinguishing between well-formed/grammatical and non-well-formed/ungrammatical expressions in logic and math. For instance, in a given formal system, we might define any capital letter by itself as a WFF (well-formed formula). And then we might make another rule which is that if $\alpha$ and $\beta$ are WFF’s, then so is $\alpha \land \beta$. As one can see, following these rules, one can deduce that e.g. the formula “$\land \land AB$” is a WFF, while the formula “$\land AB$” isn’t (Priest, 2001). This is quite applicable to derivation in linguistics, although that is a subject for a different paper.

3 Survey of grammars of Danish

Every survey needs something to survey, in this case grammars of Danish. Since this wasn’t to be a systematic review due to the very limited character limit (see e.g. Murow (1994)), I did not search as exhaustively for material as I could have done.

**Inclusion criteria.** It must be a grammar on Danish. This could be of any kind (e.g. both academic grammars, textbooks for foreign students, and textbooks for Danish students).

**Search strategy.** I included the books the lecturer deemed mandatory (1-2). Then I looked through all books on Danish included in a large collection of textbooks on language learning available on the Internet via a Torrent (Anonymous, 2012) (3-8). Finally, I googled the search term “dansk grammatik”, and visited all promising sites. This was done until no more promising sites appeared (9-15).

**Included sample.** The entire sample of grammars of Danish is cited below. The works will be referred to by their listed number here for convenience.

2. Hansen & Heltoft (2011)
3. Univerb (200?)
4. Bredsdorf (1958)
5. Planck (1982)
7. Lundskaer-Nielsen & Holmes (2011)
8. Rask (1830)
10. Stenbæk (2013)

In the sections below the grammars listed above will be referred to by their listed numbers.

3.1 Definitions and characteristics of nouns

Most of the grammars did not discuss characteristics of nouns, they assumed the reader was familiar with the idea of a noun, and went straight on to talk about e.g. grammatical gender, definite articles/suffixes, or inflections for plurality. This is not so surprising since a lot of them were written for foreign students who are assumed to already be familiar with a similar language, English. Anyone who has a strong knowledge of English can easily recognize nouns in Danish without understanding theoretical definitions.

Some of the grammars did discuss what nouns are, their definition, and characteristics. (1) discusses nouns by their structure, function, and semantics. Structurally, it is the word class that shows the highest variation. They can be made by compounding (e.g. "brand" + "bil" → "brandbil") or by derivation
from words from other word classes (e.g. "(at) skyde" + "-(n)ing" → "skydning"). Function-wise, their function according to (1) is to be the head of the noun phrase. Semantically, their function is to refer to things, whether they are concrete or abstract, real or fictive.

(2) explicitly opts not to use the traditional way of defining nouns, but mentions the same three criteria mentioned by (1). (2) instead wants to use a prototype definition based on concrete things e.g. dreng 'boy', hammer, bord 'table'. These are the prototypical (central) members. More peripheral members include those for the fabric of things e.g. træ 'wood', guld 'gold'. Another category involves abstract nouns like frihed 'freedom', mørke 'darkness'. They claim that it has been shown to be impossible to find necessary and sufficient conditions that are neither too broad or too narrow. They continue by citing other properties of prototypical nouns, namely that they can be inflected for numerus (number), they can function as both nominals and predicates (e.g. "hunde er pattedyr" 'dogs are mammals'). Their syntactic function is to be the head of (noun) phrases.

(2) is unclear on one important matter, namely whether word classes/parts of speech are gradual categories in their view or not. If so, then words like Peter would not only be less central members of the noun class, but also less of a noun than, e.g. bil 'car'. As can be seen, (1) and (2) agree in practice (i.e. they agree which words are to be classified as nouns), but not in theory. Where (2) explicitly accepts prototype theory, (1) does not express any view on the matter.

(10) comes close to attempting a direct definition when they write "Substantiver defineres mest entydigt som: de ord der udfylder substantivernes rolle i sproget." (Substantives are most clearly defined as: those words which fulfill the role of the substantives in language). It is however circular, and thus not a good definition. The reason why circular definitions are not good is not that they are wrong (they are often right), but that they use the very word they attempt to explain, and so a person who lacks understanding of the word in question cannot understand the definition (assuming s/he needs to understand every word in the definition in order to understand it).

(10) also gives another definition "Substantiver beævner konkrete ting og steder i virkeligheden eller fantasien, levende væsener, begreber." (Substantives describe concrete things and places in reality or fantasy, living beings, concepts) (quote slightly edited). This quote is right in line with (1 and 2). (12, 14, 15) also give a similar definition. The thing that sets (10) apart from (1 and 2) is that it explicitly gives rules for identifying nouns. I have altered them and repeated them below:

**Indefinite article test.** If you can put et or en in front of a word and get a grammatical result, it is a common noun.

**Plural inflection test.** If you can put -(e)t or -(e)n after a word and get a grammatical result, it is a common noun.

**Capital letter criterium.** If the word is written with an initial capital letter that isn’t due to being the initial word in a sentence, then it is a proper noun.

And we might add to the above, that any word that’s a common noun, is a noun. Perhaps it is possible to define the noun class by a number of tests or criteria for defining each subclass of nouns. If so, we are still missing some, namely uncountable nouns. To include them, we could add this rule:

**Uncountable noun test.** If you can put noget before a word, and get a grammatical result, then that is word a common noun.

Still, there are some misses. Previously I mentioned some proper nouns that weren’t written with initial capital letter, there are currently no criteria that imply that they are nouns, and a joint definition based on all the above criteria would therefore be too narrow. One would have to attempt to find a rule for this specific class of proper nouns, which also must not include non-nouns. This illustrates the trouble with relying on strict definitions for defining word classes/parts of speech.

Another problem with the test-based definition approach is that it has very limited between-language applicability. Rules have to be fitted to a particular language, and even at a particular time. For instance, relying on the Capital letter criterium above will not work for German, since all nouns are capitalized not just proper nouns. The Scandinavian languages also used to have capitalized nouns, which Danish removed as late as 1948 [Jacobsen 2010] so the rules doesn’t even work for slightly old Danish texts. Prototype theory based definitions do not have this obvious lack of cross-language applicability, but the price they pay for it is that they are more vague and there could be words that seem to have properties typical of two different classes, making it very difficult to classify them on prototype theory.
References

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