The Definition of *(Common) Nouns* and *Proper Nouns*
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Abstract

This article defines common and proper nouns (§5) on the basis of traditional grammars (Grevisse, 1936; Fabra, 1956; §3). The definitions offer two justifications: proper nouns are syntactically equivalent to common nouns with restrictive modifiers; proper nouns do not have semantic meaning (their values are subjective, connotations). The proposal implies that common nouns are the fundamental item, whereas proper nouns are nouns with two particularities (proper nouns do not represent a species of entities, but an entity, known to the listener). The article also shows that the conceptions of proper nouns of Jespersen (1924), Bloomfield (1933), Bally (1965), Lyons (1968), Quirk et al. (1985) and Renzi et al. (1988-1995) are poor and imprecise (§2, §4).

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1. Introduction[1]

Onomastics is based upon the concept of the *proper noun.* Therefore, investigation into this part of linguistic theory should start from an explicit conception of the nature of proper nouns and of their defining properties. I will begin with four questions, most of which are not treated in modern grammars.

What should linguistic theory study first: common nouns or proper nouns? If there is no obvious factor, we should study first that class of nouns which has the simplest definition and is, consequently, more important for linguistic theory. Most linguists imply that common nouns are more important than proper nouns; but the order in which these concepts appear in grammar books should be justified by the properties of the nouns that appear in their definitions.

The question of which nouns are more elementary is linked to another question. Are common nouns and proper nouns hyponyms of a more basic concept? If the answer is affirmative, there should be three concepts: nouns, common nouns and proper nouns. But there is another possibility: the existence of a concept and a particular expression of the concept. In this case, there are two theoretical realities: the definition of the concept (probably, *common nouns*) and the description and the justification of the irregularity (probably, *proper nouns*). The way an author chooses should be reflected in the definition of common and proper nouns.

From an intuitive point of view, we can ask two further questions. If we isolate a common noun, it generally has value by itself. If I say the noun *table*, any English-speaking listener links to that phonic expression a value (more or less the same one). But, if I say *George*, listeners won't think anything or will think of many different people. The definition of common and proper nouns should justify that difference.

There are also differences when we use common and proper nouns in sentences. Common nouns can have restrictive modifiers (*This summer, I have been to [restricted noun a quiet [head town] on the coast]*), whereas proper nouns reject restrictive modifiers (*This summer, I have been to Sheffield*). As stated before, the definitions of common and proper nouns have to justify the difference.

Proper nouns are like many other fields of language: there are basic cases and secondary cases. Thus, proper nouns reject restrictive modifiers, but personal proper nouns can take an

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[1] I'm very grateful for all the commentaries (very precise) and proposals that Steven Earnshaw has made about this paper.

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article: in Italian, *Ariosto* and *l'Ariosto*. Another example: there are proper nouns which have the form of a restricted noun, like *el Palau de la Música* (*the Music Palace*) in Valencia. In addition, we can use proper nouns as if they were common nouns, as in *The Barcelona that we see is not the one I knew*.

We need to justify all these empirical data. But I think that, in order to achieve this, we must first define and understand basic proper nouns. If we lump together *Ariosto* and *l'Ariosto*, *Sheffield* and *el Palau de la Música, Barcelona* and *the Barcelona we see*, we will probably not get very far. The only purpose of this article is to understand and define *common nouns* and basic *proper nouns*. In a previous work, I tried to explain the proper nouns that have the form of a restricted noun (Saragossà, 2010, § 1.1.2) and the use of the article in toponyms (Saragossà, 2010, § 1.3).

I have selected eight grammar books to analyse how they deal with the questions above: two traditional grammar books, two modern ones and four works that have influenced, in my opinion, the formation of modern grammars. I have chosen a French grammar book, by Grevisse (1936), and a Catalan grammar book, by Fabra (1956). The reason is that I know these books expose central traits of common and proper nouns.

Among modern grammar books, I have selected an English one, by Quirk et al. (1985), and an Italian one, by Renzi et al. (1988). I have found that the theoretical treatment of the traditional grammars is better than that of modern grammars. In this situation, it is useful to see how common and proper nouns are treated in some of the works that have influenced the formation of modern grammars. I have selected three European authors of different countries (Jespersen, 1924: Bally, 1965; and Lyons, 1968), and an American (Bloomfield, 1933). The results show that, in these works, the treatment differs little from what I have found in the two modern grammars studied.

This article has two aims. First of all, it attempts to show, through the analysis of eight grammars of the twentieth century, that the usual treatment of the issue scarcely formulates the questions mentioned above. Secondly, we will see that some traditional authors have such a precise conception about what common and proper nouns are, that it is easy to formulate a definition which answers the questions made and justifies the differences described.

2. Jespersen (1924) and Bloomfield (1933)

Jespersen (1924) devotes five pages to discuss a distinction from the point of view of logic:
1. Jespersen's summary (1924: 64-71) about Mill's proposal (1843: I.II)
   a. A proper noun "denotes" the individual referred to by the noun.
   b. A common noun "denotes" many individuals and "connotes" features common to all.

The Danish linguist places proper nouns first. Only one other grammar does so (Quirk et al., 1985). Perhaps the reason for this order is that proper nouns refer to one individual, whereas common nouns involve many individuals and, in the linguistic theory, singular comes before plural.

Jespersen does not seem interested in developing a definition of each concept, but wants to show that there is no boundary between proper nouns and common nouns. However, to achieve this in a theoretical way we need to define *common* and *proper nouns* and we need to study the property that does not allow a boundary between the two concepts.

Jespersen discusses common and proper nouns in Chapter IV, before studying nouns in Chapter V. This anomalous method entails that the treatment of the concepts *common* and *proper nouns* is not strictly theoretical: it is pre-theoretical, made outside (and before) his theoretical framework (the concept of *noun*). Perhaps this is the reason why our author does not consider the questions we made at the beginning.

In Chapter 10 (about syntax), Bloomfield (1933) discusses verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc. (§10.13), but there is nothing about proper nouns. This suggests that, according to

Bloomfield, there is an important difference between common and proper nouns: while common nouns are a basic notion of linguistic theory, proper nouns are so secondary that a manual can omit them. Having studied determiners, he says that proper nouns only have singular, don't have any determiners, are definite and represent a species of things with only one element, whereas common nouns represent a species of things with more than one element (§10.14).

3. Contributions: Grevisse (1936) and Fabra (1956)

In some traditional grammar books, there is the conception that nouns designate things: a proper noun represents one thing, and a common noun indicates more than one thing. It seems very simple, but this conception is also very weak, because it implies that proper nouns are more basic than common nouns, because proper noun means singular and common noun means plural. Furthermore, this conception does not solve any of the problems exposed at the beginning (§1), which is not surprising: it does not contain any concepts from linguistic theory, so we can say that it is a *pre-theoretical* conception.

In 1936, a Walloon grammarian, Maurice Grevisse, placed common nouns first and defined them in a more precise way. The observation in (2 a.i) states that the definition of a word's semantic content ("la notion qu'il exprime") always corresponds to a noun, regardless of the syntactic category to which the defined word belongs. Thus, a definition of *to go* that starts with "verb that expresses ..." has a nominal nature because it begins with the word *verb*, which is a noun (like *adjective* or *preposition*). In short, Grevisse reports that *all concepts are nouns*. The observation in (2a.ii) suggests that understanding the semantic content of a noun ("La compréhension de l'idée exprimée par le nom") is understanding "the amount of [defining] notes or elements that there are in the semantic content or idea":

2. Proposal of Grevisse (1936: §235-§236)
   a. §235. Définition du *nom*. Le nom o substantif est le mot que sert à designer, à «nommer» les êtres animés et les choses; parmi ces dernières, on range, en grammaire, non seulement les objets, mais encore les actions, les sentiments, les qualités, les idées, les abstractions, les phénomènes, etc. [examples].
      i. Tout mot du langage peut devenir *nom* dès que l'on considère ontologiquement, en la faisant passer sur le plan de l'«être», la notion qu'il exprime.
      ii. Remarque. La compréhension de l'idée exprimée par le nom est le nombre plus ou moins grand des notes ou éléments que comprend cette idée. Son extension, ou l'étendue de la signification du nom, est le nombre plus ou moins grand des êtres auxquels l'idée peut s'appliquer.
   b. §236. Espèces de noms. Au point de vue de leur extension logique, les noms se divisent en noms *communs* et noms *propres*.
   c. Le nom commun est celui qui s'applique à un être ou à un objet en tant que cet être ou cet objet appartient à une espèce; ce nom est «commun» à *tous* les individus de l'espèce. [examples]
      i. Il peut se faire qu'une espèce ne comprenne qu'un seul individu: *lune, soleil, nature, firmament*. Le nom qui désigne cet individu n'en est pas moins un nom commun.
   d. Le nom propre est celui qui ne peut s'appliquer qu'à un seul être ou objet ou à une catégorie d'êtres ou d'objets pris en particulière; il individualise l'être, l'objet ou la catégorie qu'il désigne. [examples].
   e. [Description sur comme un nom commun peut être usé comme propre, et viceverse.]

But what we are more concerned with in the francophone grammarian's definition of common nouns is that it introduces the concept *species* (2c), which appears in a Catalan grammar in 1796 (Moran, 2009: 30). Grevisse could have developed his proposal (which has very positive properties) a bit more. As dictionaries say, a species is a set of entities that have properties in common, and the name we give to it (e.g. *lion*) represents the species. Based on that conception, our grammarian makes a relevant operation: he justifies the theoretical expression *common noun* ("ce nom est 'commun' à *tous* les individus de l'espèce", 2c).

Why did Grevisse define common nouns with the biological concept *species*? It seems obvious, perhaps: when we look at the world, there are countless objects or entities; and, if each entity had to have a name, we wouldn't be able to speak. Therefore, we classify the entities that we perceive and, with only a thousand nouns, we can talk about any entity of the world, about any part of the world. This explanation is very simple, but a grammarian should offer it, because the vast majority of readers will not deduce by themselves why people need to create nouns to be able to speak about the world around us.

A very important feature of Grevisse's proposal is that, by using a theoretical property, it draws a clear boundary between common and proper nouns. He does not have that vague idea that a proper noun represents an object and a common noun indicates more than one. For him, a common noun represents "un être ou un objet *en tant que cet être ou cet objet appartient à une espèce*". That definition implies that a proper noun indicates an entity *without regarding the species it belongs to*. The Walloon grammarian repeats this information when he says that there are species that consist of only one entity (2c.i). More than one sun could rise over the horizon; but we only have one sun. Consequently, the word *sun* ('star that rises over the horizon and illuminates the earth') represents a species and, therefore, is a common noun.

Grevisse's conception has another important consequence. We have seen that to distinguish between common nouns and proper ones, it is useful to look at a biological concept, *species*. If we want to relate the definition in (2c) to linguistic theory, we only need to make two observations. The dictionary's definition of *species* says that the grouped entities have "common attributes". In linguistic theory, that expression corresponds to the *semantic content* of a noun, the value that dictionaries seek in order to define each word. The concept of *semantic content* is expressed, in traditional grammars, with the term *idea*, already mentioned in Grevisse's definition (2a.ii).

Once biological terminology is imported into linguistic theory, we are able to look at the second important consequence of Grevisse's proposal. If the semantic content of a noun consists of the properties that define the species represented by this noun, and if proper nouns are independent of species (2c.i), it turns out that proper nouns have no semantic content. Let us consider this carefully.

A *species* is a concept because it is the result of searching the properties that a set of entities has in common. On the contrary, an *entity* is not a concept: it is a thing. Entities do not belong to the theory, they belong to the world we study and want to understand. In short: an entity is an empirical datum. Consequently, if a common noun represents a concept, we will need to define every common noun (as dictionaries do). On the other hand, a proper noun represents an entity, an empirical datum, and as a result it has nothing to define. That is why ordinary dictionaries do not include proper nouns. If we look at the initial questions, we realize that we have already explained why common nouns generally have value by themselves, whereas proper nouns do not.

We have to say that the fact that proper nouns do not have semantic content does not mean that they cannot express values for the speaker. But the values that a proper noun has are very different from the ones that common nouns have. The properties that define the semantic content of a noun (like *table*) are shared by the speakers who know that noun and, therefore, are objective in two senses: they represent a concept and are supraindividual. A

proper noun, instead, does not represent a concept, but a thing (a person, a river, etc.), with respect to which the speakers who know it may have feelings. So, a proper noun may have connotations (not necessarily the same ones) for a part of speakers.

On the basis of Grevisse's proposal, we can easily make a third important deduction. We know that each proper noun represents one entity. If a grammar book explains that restrictive modifiers make a common noun represent one entity (or some entities), then the consequence is clear: proper nouns reject restrictive modifiers because proper nouns already represent one entity. Let us bring together the deductions:

3. Positive consequences of Grevisse's proposal
    a. Justification that common nouns go first in linguistic theory.
    b. Demarcation, through a theoretical property, of the boundary between common nouns (they represent a species, which can be composed of only one member) and proper nouns (they represent an entity of the world, without regarding the species it belongs to).
        i. Common nouns: they have semantic content (in other – more traditional – words, "they express an idea").
        ii. Proper nouns: they do not have semantic content; they may have   subjective connotations.
    c. Restrictive modifiers: they make a common noun represent entities of its species
        i. As proper nouns indicate one entity, they are incompatible with restrictive modifiers.

So far, we have dealt with the positive features of Grevisse's proposal. I think that there is also a negative factor: the first part (2a: "definition") is not necessary. A grammar should explain why people need to classify the entities that we perceive in species. After doing that operation, it should show its readers that there are some special nouns (proper nouns) which do not represent a species; they represent an entity without regarding the species it belongs to. In this way, there are only two notions: one is a fundamental concept of the linguistic theory (*noun*); the other consists of a particular use, an irregularity (*proper nouns*).

At this point, we can explain a paradox: although proper nouns are much simpler than common nouns, the basic notion of linguistic theory is not the simplest or the more elementary one (*proper noun*), but the more complicated one (*common noun*). The background of that paradox is the fact that the simplicity of proper nouns is extralinguistic. One of the conditions necessary to build a human language is the ability to reduce entities to species. In consequence, we could say that the nature of proper nouns is *pre-linguistic*. That is the objective characteristic associated with the simplicity of proper nouns.

In Grevisse's proposal, something is missing. When a speaker uses a proper noun, the listener needs to know which entity is represented by the proper noun. This is similar to the pronouns *she* and *he*. We cannot use *she* if the listener does not know who the woman referred to by that pronoun is:

4. Second condition to define proper nouns
    a. The listener must know which entity is represented by the proper noun, similar to the use of the pronouns *he* and *she*.

The author we are going to study now, the Catalan Pompeu Fabra, improves the framework of Grevisse's proposal by placing the creation of nouns within the exposition of syntactic theory. Fabra (1956) begins the study of syntax aiming at explaining why we need to create nouns (5a). This author uses the term *class* first ("class of animals, of trees", 5a) and, later on, the term *species* (6):

5. Fabra's first methodological contribution. We should start dealing with syntax by explaining why people need to create nouns and how they create them

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a. La llengua no posseeix un *nom* distint per a cadascun dels éssers o coses que se'ns escaigui designar en comunicar els nostres pensaments a altri per mitjà de la paraula. Hi ha, per exemple, una classe d'animals cadascun dels quals és anomenat *camell*: un mateix nom –*camell*– serveix, així, per a designar qualsevol individu d'aquesta classe d'animals, com el nom *roure* qualsevol individu d'una certa classe d'arbres. (Fabra 1956: §24)

Fabra's procedure can be better understood if we take into account that he divides his syntax in two parts: the formation of the subject and the formation of the predicate. He must have been aware of the fact that subordinating restrictive modifiers to a noun is the opposite of creating nouns. In the creation of a noun, we go from entities to a species, whereas in the formation of a subject we go from the species that the noun represents out of the communication towards an entity (or towards some entities). In short: in syntax, we go from a species to entities; in nominal semantics, we go from entities to a species. Fabra (1956: §24) devotes two pages to explaining the process of syntactic restriction.

Let us see how the Catalan grammarian deals with proper nouns. In the two pages where he explains the formation of the subject, he uses the term *noun* alone, without a qualifying adjective. After this, he devotes a section to proper nouns. He reminds us that "nouns" depend on the concept *species*:

6. Fabra's second methodological contribution. Having studied how the subject is formed, he deals with proper nouns
    a. Tots els individus pertanyents a una mateixa espècie poden ésser designats per un mateix nom, *comú* a tots ells; però sovint per a distingir un individu determinat dels altres de la mateixa espècie, li és posat un nom que facilita la seva designació: és el seu *nom propi*. Ex.: *riu* és un nom comú; *Segre, Llobregat, Cardener, Ter, Tec,* etc., (els noms amb què han estat batejats els diferents rius de Catalunya) són noms propis. (Fabra 1956: §25)

Grevisse's theory is more accurate than Fabra's, since the Catalan author places proper nouns *within* the species (a proper noun "distinguishes a particular individual from others of the same species"). However, in Fabra's proposal there is a positive factor: *individu determinat*. If the qualifying adjective *determinat* indicates that the listener must know which entity is represented by the proper noun, it would be acceptable. But if this is the case, it should be made clear.

We will finish with a terminological detail. In traditional grammars, it is usual to refer to the representation of common nouns with several terms (*individuals, beings, things, people*, etc.), as we have seen in Grevisse (2a). In close descriptions, we can use the noun *things* (or *objects*); but, in order to achieve a more precise wording, we should use the hyperonym that Fabra used in the first section of his syntax, *entity*:

7. The term *entity* in the description of the representation of nouns
    a. La llengua posseeix noms, no solament per a designar els éssers i les coses reals, sinó, encara, per a designar tot allò altre que concebem com una entitat, ço és, abstraccions que no tenen existència sinó en idea (qualitats, estats, accions, etc., per exemple, *bondat, pobresa, caiguda*). (Fabra 1956: §24)

If we put together the theoretical contributions of Grevisse and the methodological ones of Fabra, we will have a good framework to deal with nouns and the specific subset of proper nouns:

8. Framework for dealing with nouns and proper nouns: within the formation of the subject (noun + restrictive modifiers)
    a. Why we need to create nouns.

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b. How to create them (species; the defining properties of a species are the semantic content of the noun which represents that species). Process of abstraction (from entities to species).

c. Formation of the subject: process of concretion (from the species towards entities).

d. Proper nouns: they do not represent a species, but an entity which is independent of the species it belongs to; the listener must know which entity is represented by the proper noun.

   i. As they do not represent a species, they do not have semantic content.

   ii. Given that they represent an entity (known by the receiver), proper nouns are incompatible with restrictive modifiers.

4 Modern works: little theory

In Bally's "index des notions" (1965), the entry *nom propre* has seven references, but there aren't any for the definition of the concept (p. 401). The entry *nom* does not refer to the syntactic category, which is expressed by *substantive*. The entry for *substantive* has 27 references, two of which are "caracterisation" and "dans les catégories lexicales" (p. 414). The information has no links to the properties which define the concept *nom*:

1. «substantif: caracterisation: 135, […] dans les catégories lexicales, 175» (Bally 1965: 414)

   a. «caracterisation»: Il faut réserver à une étude spécial la classification des motivations par cumul; on en signale ici quelques-unes en passant. (Bally 1965: 135)

      i. Nom désignant des petits d'animaux [examples] / Noms d'agent [examples] / Noms d'instruments [examples] / Noms de parenté [examples] / Collectifs [examples]

   b. «dans les catégories lexicales»: treated concepts: *homonym, antonym, synonym…*

As we stated before regarding Bloomfield, we can say that if Bally does not include the concept of *proper noun* in a 400-page manual, we can think that, for him, it is a very secondary notion in linguistic theory.

Let us now look at Lyons (1968). We know that, in order to define proper nouns, we should make the proposal that common nouns represent a species of entities. But Lyons' theory abstains from the "notional" definitions of grammatical categories. He considers that there would be "a circularity" in the "notional" characterizations (2a-b) and proposes to solve the problem by focusing on "formal definitions":

2. A circularity in the definition of nouns (Lyons 1968: §7.6: parts of speech)

   a. Nouns in traditional grammars: class of lexical items whose members denote persons, places and things.

   b. The circularity notion lies in the fact that the only reason we have for saying that *truth, beauty* and *electricity* are things is that the words which refer to them in English are nouns.

In my opinion, the previous words are the result of an inappropriate interpretation of the European tradition for the reason I will try to explain. In this tradition, noun, adjective, etc., are known as "grammatical categories" (in English, *parts of speech*) because they are the fundamental concepts of four parts of the linguistic theory. Syntax describes how the grammatical categories function in the construction of sentences. Morphology studies the flexion of nouns, adjectives and verbs. Derivation and composition deal with the formation of nouns from adjectives and verbs; etc. Semantics describes the semantic content of words, which are distributed in grammatical categories.

In this framework, the definitions which Lyons labels as "formal" correspond to functional definitions, which are syntactic concepts. So, adjectives are a grammatical category that must be subordinated to nouns (*round table, three tables, that table*). The

definitions described as "notional" provide the hyperonym of the words of each grammatical category:

3. The "notional" or semantic definitions show the hyperonym of the words of each grammatical category
   a. Nouns: entities that exist or have been created by our mind. They have their own existence. This is what Aristotle named *substance*. The accidents of the substance (b-d) do not exist outside the entities.
   b. Adjectives: internal and external features of an entity; qualities and quantities.
   c. Prepositions: they result from the consideration of two entities. Their basic values are locative: interiority, adjacency, proximity, distance, etc.
   d. Verbs: consideration of entities over time. Any entity has only two possibilities of being: it either changes or endures.

By dividing and specifying the four values, we get the meaning of specific words. So, these values are the foundation of semantics. In this framework, "notional" definitions are as necessary as "formal" ones. We could summarize this by saying that as a result of the lack of explanation that traditional grammars usually show, Lyons proposes to abstain from the semantic definitions of grammatical categories ("parts of speech").

As for the entry *proper noun*, it refers to a page that contains a fragment ("They are *particular* – or 'singular' – terms") which suggests the conception "proper noun: one entity; common noun: plurality of entities" (§3):

4. Proper names = pronouns and phrases which identify a definite person or thing
   a. Proper names, as well as pronouns and phrases which identify a definite person or thing (like *John, he* and *my friend*, in the examples of the previous paragraph) are to be regarded as the most 'substantival' – the most truly 'nominal' – of the expression in a language (hence the traditional term 'substantive' for 'noun'). They are *particular* (or 'singular') terms, denoting some definite, *individual* substance (Lyons 1968: §8.1.3: Universals and particulars).

A positive factor in 4 is that Lyons deals with a property that Grevisse didn't consider: the one shared by proper nouns and the pronouns *he* and *she*. On the other hand, the concept *species* is missing. I think that if we contrast Grevisse's proposal with Lyons' one, the earlier author's overall result is much better. Indeed, if a linguist does not define properly what common nouns are he won't be able to define properly a special kind of nouns, *proper nouns*.

The third modern grammar that we will analyse is that of Quirk et al. (1985). This manual deals with proper nouns in a peculiar way for two reasons: first, because they are placed before common nouns (*Sid* against *book*, 5a.i-ii); and, secondly, by the kind of means it uses to define our concepts:

5. Quirk et al. (1985: §5.2: Noun classes: count, noncount, and proper nouns): treatment of empirical data as if they were theory
   a. It is necessary, both for grammatical and semantic reasons, to see nouns falling into different subclasses. That this is so can be demonstrated by taking the four nouns *Sid, book, furniture*, and *brick* […]
      i. *I saw Sid / *the Sid / *a Sid / *some Sid / *Sids*
      ii. *I saw *book / the book / a book / *some book / some books*
      iii. […]
   b. Nouns that behave like *Sid* are proper nouns […].
   c. The nouns in the other columns are common nouns.

The proposal on proper nouns limits itself to this statement: proper nouns are incompatible with the article, quantifiers and the plural (5a.i). Is this statement a definition of proper nouns? We will be able to answer the question if we consider that the words in 5 state empirical data, which we have to justify with a theory or a definition. We know that proper

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nouns represent an entity and, as a result of this, they exclude restrictive modifiers (5a.i). Therefore, we can say that there is a poor theoretical treatment in 5 of proper nouns, because it presents the empirical data as if it were the theory.

Later on, there is a section on proper nouns:

6. Quirk et al. (1985: §5.60: Proper nouns)
   a. Proper nouns are basically names of specific people (*Shakespeare*), places (*Milwaukee*), months (*September*), days (*Thursday*), festivals (*Christmas*), magazines (*Vogue*), and so forth. […]
   b. Within a given universe of discourse, proper nouns generally have unique denotation, and are usually written with initial capital letters (though not all nouns so written are proper nouns).

This definition reproduces the conception previous to Grevisse (proper nouns represent a person, a place, something). The shortage of theoretical precision facilitates mistakes. Two of the four examples in (6a) are not proper nouns but common nouns. The months and the days of the week are nouns that indicate a period of time (as *day, year* or *century* do) and, consequently, have semantic content (7a) and admit quantifiers (7b):

7. The months and the days of the week: common nouns, such as *day, year, century*
   a. Semantic content
      i. *Monday*: first day of the week
      ii. *January*: the first month of the year
   b. They can have quantifiers
      i. *Each September, she goes on holiday*
   c. Irregularities (like the absence of article): in a part of the temporal nouns
      i. *Next Monday, I won't come to work*
      ii. *The show will be on a Tuesday*
      iii. *He came in 1990*

Certainly, there are some irregularities in the use of weekdays and months, but this does not justify the qualification of *Monday* or *September* as proper nouns. In addition, other temporary nouns have the same (or similar) irregularities (7c). To summarize, we could say that there is very little theory in Quirk et al. (1985). In this framework, empirical data is presented as if it was theory and there are two common nouns qualified as proper nouns.

The last modern grammar that we will comment upon is the handbook by Renzi et al. (1988-1995). It explains the traditional conception of nouns ("they indicate objects"), although it uses many words:

8. Renzi et al. (1988-1995: §5.1: Caratteristiche generali del nome)
   a. Il nome, in quanto elemento costituente del sintagma nominale, svolge una funzione referenziale, cioè costituisce una sottoparte di un insieme più vasto di espressioni, usando le quali possiamo 'riferirci', cioè 'denotare', 'menzionare', 'indicare' oggetti del mondo extralinguistico (reale o mentale).

When the grammar moves on to proper nouns, it says that, "per definizione, hanno valore referenziale" (8a). But, in contrast with that statement, the manual does not offer its readers a definition of proper nouns. In addition, "referential value" and *representation of an entity* are not synonymous expressions. There are adjectives that have "referential value" (such as *blue, yellow, muddy*) and do not represent entities. Similarly, concrete common nouns (*table, cloud, thunder,* etc.) have "referential value" and do not represent an entity, but a species.

The most positive aspect of the proposal in (9a) is that it highlights the proximity between personal proper nouns and third-person personal pronouns ("pronomi personali e dimostrativi"), perhaps following Lyons. However, those words are not consistent with the following ones (9b):

9. Renzi et al. (1988-1995: §5.4: Nomi propi: introduzione)

    a. I nomi propri, per definizione, hanno valore referenziale (allo stesso modo dei pronomi personali e dimostrativi), nel senso che sono usati appositamente ed esclusivamente per 'riferirci a', 'denominare' persone e cose (in condizioni normali di discorso, vedi oltre).

    b. Tuttavia, almeno per quanto riguarda i nomi propri di persona, non si può dire che sono parole impiegate per riferirsi esattamente ad un individuo, visto che più persone possono avere lo stesso nome proprio. L'uso di un nome proprio non è quindi determinato da una regola generale, come avviene nel caso del nomi comuni, bensì da regole particoalri per ogni uso particolari.

    c. I nomi propi di persona (come anche i pronomi e spesso i nomi propri de cose) non esprimono alcun contenuto descrittivo, in base al quale poter identificare l'individuo cui si referiscono. A differenza di quanto accade per il SN, che invece ha un qualche contenuto descrittivo. […]

We know that a defining property of proper nouns and the pronouns *he* and *she* is that the listener must know which entity is being represented by them. Taking this in consideration, it is not relevant to pose as a problem the fact that many persons have the same proper noun (9b). On the contrary, given that the claim that proper nouns do not have semantic content does not appear often, it is correct to state that "i nomi propi di persona e spesso i nomi propri de cose non esprimono alcun contenuto descrittivo".

Perhaps as a consequence of the lack of theory, the grammar presents as "obvious" the difference between common and proper nouns (10). The same factor might explain that, instead of exposing the general syntactic difference between common and proper nouns (proper nouns: incompatibility with restrictive modifiers), the manual focuses on a specific difference, the article:

10. Renzi et al. (1988-1995: §5.4.1: Comportamento dei nomi propi)

    a. I nomi propri, in virtù del loro valore intrinsecamente referenziale e quindi del loro carattere intrinsecamente determinato, sono ovviamente diversi dai nomi comuni (massa e/o numerabili) e hanno comportamenti diversi. Tale diversità è marcata innanzitutto dal fatto che le regole per l'uso dell'articolo determinativo, valide per i nomi comuni, non sono altrettanto valide per i nomi propi.

The beginning of the citation establishes a cause-effect relationship between "valore intrinsecamente referenziale" and "carattere intrinsecamente determinato". As we have already mentioned, there are many words that have "referential value" (among nouns and beyond nouns), but the vast majority of them do not have "carattere determinato".

5. Conclusions, with a proposal of definition

The concept of *proper noun* is difficult because, although it is much simpler or much more elemental than the one of common noun, it is, paradoxically, not the more basic of the two. We know that the reason for this paradox is that proper nouns violate one of the pillars of human languages: the intellectual operation of making nouns represent species. This same explanation justifies the second difficulty that we encounter when we want to clarify the nature of proper nouns: they are not a positive and different concept from common nouns. These features determine the theoretical nature of proper nouns: they are a special class of nouns (irregular ones, because they do not represent a species, but an entity).

In spite of those two problems, two traditional grammars have shown us the way to clarify three basic theoretical questions: firstly, what common nouns are; secondly, which is the (theoretical) property that divides common nouns from proper nouns; thirdly, which is the part of the grammar where we should deal with the creation of nouns and the nature of proper nouns (§3). In view of such a positive situation, one gets the impression that the linguists

which we tend to classify as modern or more theoretical have actually not improved the treatments by those traditional authors studied here (in fact, I would say the opposite is the case).

We will now complete Grevisse's and Fabra's definitions and contributions with two definitions of the discussed concepts. I would like to remind the reader that definitions of common nouns and proper nouns are necessary. A scientist who does not provide definitions (as in the monograph by Moran 2009) will hardly be able to progress. I published proposals 1 and 2 in a previous work on the concept of *proper noun* (Saragossà 2008):

1. A **proper noun** is a noun that represents an entity, without regarding if it is a member of a species. As a result of this property, these nouns do not have semantic meaning. The values of a proper noun are subjective (connotations). When the speaker uses a proper noun, the listener has to know which is the entity represented by it. That requirement means that proper nouns are equivalent to common nouns with restrictive modifiers. The most important proper nouns represent persons (anthroponyms) or places (toponyms).

If the definition must appear in a dictionary, we need to define *noun* and *proper noun* in the same entry. Furthermore, the definition has to be understood by people of average education. These requirements force us to seek a definition that, although it is not explicit and rigorous, guides readers to the defining features. Here is an attempt:

2. **noun** *n* 1 A word that represents a species or class of entities. *The lion is one of the species among mammals*. **a** Concept. *The name of what I'm doing is* decorating. 2 *gram.* One of the syntactes categorés; in sentences, it forms the subject, which expresses the part of the world about which the speaker wants to talk to the listener. 3 **proper noun** A noun that represents an entity (an object, a being), which has to be recognised by the listener(s) (*Rose, Joseph*; *Sheffield, Valencia*). When we need to oppose the basic value (1, *noun*) to the specific one (3, *proper noun*), we use the expression *common noun* (noun which is common to all the entities that form a species).

The meaning of (2.1.*a*) aims at collecting the observation of Grevisse (§3, 2a.i: all concepts have a nominal nature, like the definition of the semantic content of *to go*: "verb that expresses ...").

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