ON PREDICATE NOMINALS IN ROMANIAN

Camelia Constantinescu and Mihaela Tănase-Dogaru

Abstract: This paper investigates the interpretative differences between bare singular nominal predicates (BNPs) and singular indefinite nominals in predicate position (SIPs) in Romanian, for those nouns that can appear in both types of structures. We will focus on two dimensions of their semantics: stage vs. individual levelhood, and gradability. Moreover, we will make a distinction within the class of SIPs between 'true' SIPs and 'apparent' SIPs and reveal the existence of a certain strategy for expressing (high) degree in the nominal domain: a property-denoting noun combines with a (possibly implicit) modifier that restricts the interpretation of the noun to a high degree (cf. Espinal 2004) and that triggers the insertion of the indefinite article.

1. Introduction

Romanian, like other Romance languages, disposes of two types of nominal predicate structures: bare singular nominal predicates (henceforth BNPs) and singular indefinite nominal predicates (henceforth SIPs), illustrated in (1a) and (1b) below respectively[1]:

(1) a. Alex este avocat.
Alex is lawyer
'Alex is a lawyer.'

b. Alex este un avocat.
Alex is a lawyer
'Alex is a lawyer.'

Where both BNPs and SIPs are possible, their meanings differ. BNPs have more literal and "stereotypical" meanings in that they denote simple properties, usually capacities such as professions, religions, nationalities or other roles in society; while SIPs identify the subject referent as being a member of a set of individuals having a certain property and may receive figurative or approximate interpretations. (cf. de Swart et al. 2007)

Interestingly, bare predicate nominals can combine with degree words which normally only select for adjectives (e.g. *mai* '-er/more', *prea* 'too', *foarte* 'very', etc.) – as illustrated in (2) below. On the other hand, there are nominal predicates which look like SIPs in that the indefinite article is present; however, its presence seems to be triggered by a modifier which denotes a high degree of the property denoted by the predicative nominal – as in (3) below; from the point of view of their interpretation (i.e. property), then, such nominal predicates resemble BNPs rather SIPs:

(2) Alex este mai avocat decât Iulian.
Alex is more lawyer than Iulian
'Alex is more of a lawyer than Iulian.'

(3) Alex e un mare avocat!
Alex is a big lawyer
'Alex is a great lawyer!'

The same type of interpretation obtains when a modifier is not present but the sentence containing such a nominal predicate (with an indefinite article) has a special exclamative-suspended intonation:

[1] All the examples are from Romanian, unless otherwise indicated.

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

(4) Alex este ***un*** *avocat…*!
Alex is a lawyer!
'Alex is such/quite a lawyer!'

It is on such structures and the interpretations associated with them that we will focus in the rest of the paper. But first, in section 2, we will make some basic distinctions between the typical BNPs and SIPs in terms of their distribution and interpretation.

2. Distinctions between BNPs and SIPs

The two types of nominal predicates can be distinguished in terms of their contexts of distribution and interpretations, as well as in terms of their being stage-level or individual-level predicates.

2.1 Distribution and interpretation

First of all, only SIPs can be used as answers to identifying questions (cf. Matushansky & Spector 2005):

(5) Cine este Maia Morgenstern? – (Este) *(o) actriță.
who is Maia Morgenstern (is) an actress
'Who is Maia Morgenstern?' – '(She is) an actress.'

Secondly, only BNPs can be used in the "supplementive" construction with the prepositional copula *ca* ('as') and with *în calitate de* ('in one's capacity of') (cf. De Swart et al. 2007):

(6) Mi-a vorbit ca / în calitate de avocat.
me-has talked as / in capacity of lawyer
'He talked to me in his capacity of lawyer.'

SIPs are excluded as complements of *în calitate de* – as illustrated in (7) – and when used with *ca* the interpretation is that of a simple simile – as illustrated in (8):

(7) *Mi-a vorbit în calitate de un avocat.
me-has talked in capacity of a lawyer

(8) Mi-a vorbit ca un avocat.
me-has talked as a lawyer
'He talked to me like a lawyer.'

Thirdly, only BNPs can co-occur with 'qualifiers' like *by profession* (cf. De Swart et al. 2007):

(9) Ion e (*un) doctor de meserie.
Ion is a doctor of job
'Ion is a doctor by profession.'

These different contexts of distribution and the types of interpretations associated with them indicate that BNPs denote properties (such as capacities), while SIPs are extensional /

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

classifying (or 'characterizing' and 'defining' predicates respectively, in Roy's (2007) terminology).

We will thus adopt Beyssade & Dobrovie-Sorin's (2005) proposal concerning the basic semantics of nominal predicates. In their view, both adjectival predicates and BNPs involve property-theoretic ("attributive") predication. They denote properties (seen as primitive entities in their theory): the property P is attributed to the individual denoted by the subject; we check whether the property associated with the adjectival predicate or the BNP is a member of the set of properties denoted by the subject DP. SIPs, on the other hand, are extensional; they involve set-theoretic, "classifying" predication: we check if the individual denoted by the DP subject is an element of the set (of individuals) denoted by the predicate.[2]

Moreover, it should be pointed out that SIPs, unlike BNPs, can have figurative interpretations:

(10) a. Mihai este copil.
Mihai is child
'Mihai is (strictly speaking) a child.'

b. Mihai este <u>un</u> copil.
Mihai is a child
'Mihai is a child.',
'Mihai is childish(acts childishly).'

(11) a. ??Doctorul ăsta e clovn.
doctor.the this is clown
'This doctor is a clown.'

b. Politicianul ăsta e <u>un</u> clovn.
politician.the this is a clown
'This politician is (acts like) a clown!'

The (a) examples above only have a literal meaning: in (10a) Michael is a child biologically / judging by his age, and in (11a) the doctor should be a professional clown, hence the unacceptability of the sentence. The (b) examples have a figurative meaning: in (10b) Michael can just behave like child, while in (11b) the politician behaves like a clown or has some properties stereotypically associated with one, but he is not a clown by profession.

2.2 Stage-level and individual-level nominal predicates

If we apply the classical tests used to distinguish between stage-level and individual-level predicates (cf. Kratzer 1995 a.o.), we find that BNPs behave like stage-level predicates, while SIPs behave like individual-level predicates.

First of all, BNPs are compatible with temporal expressions, unlike SIPs, which display 'stable stativity' and cannot be thus temporally modified/delimited:

(12) Ion a fost (??un) avocat (până) anul trecut, acum este (??un) profesor.
Ion has been a lawyer (until) year last, now is a teacher
'Ion was a lawyer (until) last year, now he is a teacher.'

When SIPs are used with the verb in the past tense, they trigger a lifetime effect, unlike BNPs. Thus, (13a) below says nothing about whether the referent of the subject DP is still alive or not, it just says that being a doctor is one of jobs the person had; the sentences in (13b), on the other hand, do imply that the referent of the subject DP is no longer alive:

[2] But see de Swart et al. (2007) for a different proposal involving capacities (type *e*) for BNPs and kind denotations for SIPs, obtained by means of / subjected to type-shifting operations.

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

(13) a. Ion a fost doctor.
Ion has been doctor
'Ion was a doctor.'

B. (i) Ion a fost un doctor.
Ion has been a doctor
'Ion was a doctor.'
(ii) Ion a fost un geniu.
Ion has been a genius
'Ion was a genius.'

Furthermore, only BNPs can co-occur with locatives and can occur in perception reports – as illustrated in (14) and (15) respectively:

(14) Ion este (??un) profesor în Constanța.
Ion is a teacher in Constanta
'Ion is a teacher in Constantza.'

(15) L-am văzut pe Ion (??un) clovn ieri.
him-have$_{1sg}$ seen ACC Ion a clown yesterday
'I saw Ion as a clown / doing his job of clown yesterday.'

Finally, BNPs, but not SIPs, can co-occur with adverbs of quantification, in the antecedent of conditional clauses and in time clauses; we will illustrate below the latter type of context:

(16) Când Ion este (??un) doctor este foarte priceput, dar când este (??un) profesor – nu.
when Ion is a doctor is very skillful, but when is a professor no
'When Ion is a doctor, he is very skillful, but when he is a professor (when he teaches), he isn't so.'

Therefore, BNPs pass all the tests that identify a predicate as being stage-level, while SIPs have the behaviour of individual-level predicates.[3]

3. Gradability and predicate nominals

This examination of gradability in the domain of predicate nominals starts from the observation we already made in the introduction that bare predicate nominals can combine with degree words which normally only select for adjectives (e.g. *mai* '-er/more', *prea* 'too', *foarte* 'very', etc.):

(17) a. Este (*o) prea (*o) doamnă ca să facă aşa ceva!
is a too a lady that SUBJ do$_{3sg}$ such something
'She is too much of a lady to do something like this!'
b. Alex este (*un) mai (*un) avocat decât Iulian.
Alex is a more a lawyer than Iulian
'Alex is more of a lawyer than Iulian.'

These degree words appear to be in complementary distribution with the indefinite article (SIPs).

[3] But see Roy (2007) for a three-way distinction between defining predicates (SIPs), characterizing predicates (BNPs) and situation-descriptive predicates (adjectival predicates).

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

With a special exclamative-suspended intonation, the latter structures have a high degree interpretation:

(18) Alex este ***un*** *avocat…*!
Alex is a lawyer!
'Alex is such/quite a lawyer!'

In Romanian, then, the indefinite article and degree words such as *mai* ('-er/more'), *prea* ('too'), *foarte* ('very'), *ce* ('what/how') etc. seem to accomplish the same kind of (degree-related) job and, apparently, the difference between BNPs and SIPs is an expression of degree, which is signalled by the indefinite article.

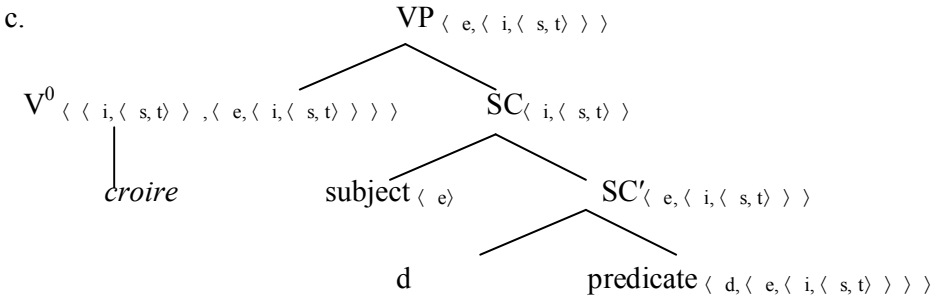
Recall also that SIPs can have 'figurative' uses – as illustrated in (10.b) and (11.b) above – which have often been correlated with scalar interpretations.

At first sight, this type of data appears to support Matushansky & Spector's (2005) account of the occurrence of the indefinite article on predicate nominals as marking the saturation of an argument slot: certain nouns can only be used as SIPs because they are scalar nouns which have a degree argument that is bound by the indefinite article:

(19) a. (i) Il est *(un) génie. (ii) Je le crois un génie. [French]
he is a genius I him consider a genius
'He is a genius.' 'I consider him a genius.'

b. [[genius]] = λd ∈ Dd . λx ∈ De . λt ∈ Di . λw ∈ Ds . *x* is a genius to the degree *d* in the world *w* at the time *t*

c.



(Matushansky & Spector 2005)

However, it should be pointed out that the figurative use of SIPs is not the same as scalarity/gradability; moreover, at a closer look, it turns out that the difference between BNPs and SIPs cannot be reduced to an expression of scalarity, and it is not just the indefinite article that is in complementary distribution with degree words and that contributes an expression of degree. This is what we will show in the next section, where we argue that it is not always the case that the presence of the indefinite article is an indication that we are dealing with a true SIP.

4. Not all that looks like a SIP is a true SIP

4.1 SIPs have quite a restricted distribution

Recall that SIPs are felicitous in identifying contexts – as illustrated in (5) above – and in the presence of a modifier:

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

(20) a. Alex e ??/*(un) avocat inteligent.
Alex is an lawyer intelligent
'Alex is an intelligent lawyer.'

b. Alex e *(un) avocat aşa de inteligent!
Alex is an lawyer so of intelligent
'Alex is such an intelligent lawyer!'

(21) a. ?Alex e un avocat.[4]
Alex is a lawyer.
'Alex is a lawyer.'

b. Alex e un avocat bun.
Alex is a lawyer good.
'Alex is a good lawyer.'

At this point we must distinguish between several types of modifiers based on their semantic role and on their impact on the insertion of the indefinite article.

First of all, BNPs accept the types of adjectives / modifiers that appear low in the structure – relational adjectives can combine with bare nouns giving rise to a complex property (cf. Beyssade & Dobrovie-Sorin 2005) or subtypes of a property (we will label these "type A" modifiers):

(22) a. George e inginer mecanic.
George is engineer mechanical
'George is a mechanical engineer.'

b. Tudor e actor de comedie.
Tudor is actor of comedy
'Tudor is a comic actor.'

Secondly, ordinary 'evaluative' (intersective) adjectives trigger the obligatory insertion of the indefinite article – presumably needed in order to individualize an entity to which the property denoted by the adjective can be attributed (we will call these "type B modifiers"):

(23) a. ??/*George e inginer inteligent.
George is engineer intelligent

b. George e un inginer inteligent.
George is an engineer intelligent
'George is an intelligent engineer.'

We follow here Dobrovie-Sorin & Laca's (2003) proposal that predicative bare nominals are deviant when the noun is accompanied by evaluative modifiers because they indicate the attitude of the speaker towards specific referents; they illustrate this point with predicative bare plurals:

(24) a. Son rosas blancas / ??(unas) rosas magnificas. [Spanish]
b. Sono rose bianche / ??(delle) rose magnifiche. [Italian]
c. Sunt trandafiri albi / ??(nişte) trandafiri magnifici.
are roses white some roses magnificent
'They are white roses.' / 'They are magnificent roses.'

Finally, there are adjectives which act as (high) degree modifiers applied to the property denoted by the bare noun; they also trigger the insertion of the indefinite article (we will call these "type C" modifiers):

(25) a. George e un inginer extraordinar!
George is an engineer extraordinary
'George is an extraordinary engineer.'

[4] This example sounds odd if uttered just out of the blue, but it becomes perfect when used in an identifying context or with a modifier.

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

b. (i) Alex e un mare avocat!
Alex is a big lawyer
'Alex is a great lawyer!'

(ii) Gigi e un mare idiot!
Gigi is a big idiot
'Gigi is a big idiot!'

c. George e un inginer aşa de bun!
George is an engineer so of good
'George is such a good engineer!'

These include (1) adjectives which lexically encode a high degree interpretation in their meaning: adjectives semantically marked for degree 'qualitatively' (*extraordinar* 'extraordinary', *fantastic* 'fantastic', *formidabil* 'formidable', *excepţional* 'exceptional', *excelent* 'excellent' etc.), adjectives denoting 'completion' (*desăvârşit, complet* 'complete'), as well as size adjectives (*mare* 'big') or other adjectives semantically marked for degree quantitatively (*colosal* 'colossal', *enorm* 'enormous', *imens* 'immense'); and (2) 'vague' evaluative adjectives used inside a DegP containing a high degree operator (e.g. *so*, as in *aşa de bun* lit. so of good 'so good').

Note that the presence of the indefinite article in these cases cannot be accounted for using Dobrovie-Sorin & Laca's (2003) proposal, since here we do not need to individualize a referent to whom we attribute a property or towards whom we express an attitude; instead the predicate nominal as a whole still denotes a property holding of the subject referent to a high degree.

4.2 Proposal

It is relevant to note in this context that "type C" modifiers can be left out and the indefinite article retained if the sentence has an exclamative-suspended intonation; we will refer to these as 'apparent' or exclamative SIPs (see also (18) above):

(26) Alex e ***un*** *avocat*__! = Alex e un avocat extraordinar / aşa de bun!
Alex is a lawyer Alex is a lawyer extraordinary / so of good
'Alex is such a lawyer!' = 'Alex is an extraordinary / such a good lawyer!'

This is not possible with the "type B" modifiers:

(27) Alex e ***un*** *avocat*__! =/= Alex e un avocat aşa de inteligent / înalt!
Alex is a lawyer Alex is a lawyer so of intelligent / tall
'Alex is such a lawyer!' =/= 'Alex is such an intelligent / tall lawyer!'

Moreover, some adjectives (especially the adjective *good*) are ambiguous[5]:

(28) a. Alex e un avocat bun.
Alex is a lawyer good
'Alex is a good lawyer'

a'. Alex e un bun avocat.
Alex is a good lawyer
'Alex is a good lawyer.'

b. Alex e avocat bun.
Alex is lawyer good
'Alex is a good lawyer.'

b'. ??/*Alex e bun avocat.
Alex is good lawyer

[5] An ambiguity reminiscent of the ambiguity of "a beautiful dancer", and often discussed in the literature on intersective vs. subsective adjectives.

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

c. Alex e un avocat aşa de bun!
Alex is a lawyer so of good
'Alex is such a good lawyer!'

c'. Alex e ***un*** *avocat__*!
Alex is a lawyer
'Alex is such a (good) lawyer!'

(28a) has a "speaker-oriented" interpretation, which can be paraphrased as 'My opinion is that Alex is a good lawyer / I judge Alex's professional achievements as being good' (cf. Dogaru 2004); in other words: 'Alex is a lawyer and he is good.' *Good* behaves like a type B modifier here. Note that when used as an 'evaluative' adjective, it can also be used prenominally (emphatically), as in (28a'). (28b) has a "subject-oriented" interpretation, paraphrasable as 'It is Alex's capacity to function as a good lawyer' (cf. Dogaru 2004), which makes it a type A modifier. Note that when used in this way, it cannot appear prenominally, as shown by (28b') – cf. the same sort of behaviour for typical A modifiers:

(29) *George e mecanic inginer.
George is mechanical engineer

(28c) illustrates the degree modifier use: a 'vague' evaluative adjective used inside a DegP containing a high degree operator, i.e. a type C modifier; it can be left out and we get an 'exclamative' (apparent) SIP, as in (28c').

Thus, when an indefinite singular nominal in predicate position has an exclamative-suspended intonation – as illustrated in (18), (26) and (28c') above – a high degree modifier is always understood / recoverable from the context; this is an 'apparent'/ exclamative SIP.

There are also (other) differences in interpretation and truth conditions between 'true' SIPs and exclamative SIPs. Thus, **'**true' SIPs are classifying /extensional and typically have identificational uses – as illustrated in (5) above – or they can have can have figurative uses, i.e. the subject does not have to have the basic/prototypical property denoted by the corresponding BNP but only some properties that are stereotypically associated with *being x* – as illustrated in (10b) and (11b) above. The denotation of a SIP is thus somehow "richer" than that of the corresponding BNP which only has the prototypical property meaning (e.g. capacity). On the other hand, in exclamative ('apparent') SIPs the subject has to have the capacity /prototypical property denoted by the corresponding BNP in the first place:

(30) a. Alex e ***un*** *avocat__*!
Alex is a lawyer
'Alex is such a lawyer!'

b. Gicu e ***un*** *clovn__!*
Gicu is a clown
'Gicu is such a clown!'

In (30) Alex/Gicu must be a lawyer/a clown by profession (and this property holds to a high degree). Therefore, these apparent/exclamative SIPs are actually closer to BNPs than to true SIPs.

Based on these facts, we would like to propose that in these exclamative SIPs there is actually an (implicit) modifier, which can be recovered from the context. This modifier includes a notion of high degree and triggers the insertion of the indefinite article**.** As already noted, this high degree interpretation is either lexically encoded in the meaning of adjectives denoting high degree, such as *exceptional, incredible* etc., or is due to a high degree operator (e.g. *so*) combining with an evaluative adjective inside the modifying DegP (cf. our type C modifiers) – as illustrated in (25) and (26) above. When the modifier is left out, the indefinite article is retained and the sentence has an obligatory exclamative-suspended intonation – as illustrated in (26) and (30). It is under such circumstances that these structures have a high degree interpretation.

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

It is therefore this complex [indefinite article + (implicit) modifier] that is responsible for the expression of degree and that is in complementary distribution with other degree words. (cf. also Castroviejo Miró (2006) who argues that Catalan *wh* exclamatives always contain a gradable predicate (headed by a degree operator), though it may be left implicit).

5. Extension of the empirical domain

There are also other contexts in which we find that a nominal with the indefinite article can still have a property denotation. In other words, we find the same type of exclamative indefinites with other types of expressions, where though the indefinite article is present the denotation is still that of a (high degree of a) property (no individuation is performed by the article as in the type B modifier sort of contexts mentioned above).

The most obvious such case is represented by (quasi)idiomatic structures such as: *e soare/ vânt/ frig/ răcoare/ ger/ zăpuşeală* (is sun/ wind/ cold/ chill/ frost/ burning.heat 'it is sunny/ windy/ cold/ chilly/ freezing cold/ scorching hot') etc., *mi-e foame/ sete/ frig/ somn/ dor/ frică/ ruşine* (me-is hunger/ thirst/ cold/ hot/ sleep/ longing/ fear/ shame 'I'm hungry/ thirsty/ cold/ sleepy/ homesick/ afraid/ ashamed') etc. in Romanian; *avoir faim / peur* etc. in French; *fer sol/ aire/ fred* etc. (make sun/ air/ cold 'be sunny/ windy/ cold') etc., *tenir son / gana/ morro* (have sleep/ hunger/ snout 'be sleepy/ hungry/ cheeky') etc. in Catalan. These include (a light verb expressing an internal cause and) a bare noun that denotes a property (cf. Espinal 2004):

(31) Fa (*un) sol [Catalan; Espinal 2004]
makes a sun
'It's sunny.'

(32) a. E (*un) soare.
is a sun
'It is sunny.'

b. Mi-e (*o) foame.
me-is a hunger
'I'm hungry.'

They too can combine either with a degree head (e.g. *mai* 'more', *foarte* 'very' etc.):

(33) fa més / força sol. [Catalan; Espinal 2004]
makes more / quite sun
'It's sunnier / quite sunny.'

(34) a. (i) E foarte soare.
is very sun
'It's very sunny.'

(ii) E mai soare decât ieri.
is more sun than yesterday
'It's more sunny than yesterday.'

b. (i) Mi-e foarte foame.
me-is very hunger
'I'm very hungry.'

(ii) Mi-e mai foame decât acum o oră.
me-is more hunger than now an hour
'I'm more hungry than one hour ago.'

or with an (idiomatic) modifier that denotes a high degree of the respective property and triggers the insertion of the indefinite article:

(35) fa *(un) sol de justícia [Catalan; Espinal 2004]
makes a sun of justice
'It's scorching hot.'

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

(36) a. E *(un) soare ucigător.
is a sun terrible
'It's scorching hot.'

b. Mi-e *(o) foame de lup.
me-is a hunger of wolf
'I'm awfully hungry.'

Espinal (2004), who analyses such (quasi)idiomatic structures in Catalan, notes that this type of modifier "restricts the interpretation of the noun to a high degree"; the indefinite article and the modifier "contribute to a measure-like function over gradable properties" (they form "a sort of discontinuous measure constituent") in the same way degree heads/modifiers do. As for the indefinite article, she claims it introduces existential quantification over degrees.

We should also note that degree words cannot co-occur with the (idiomatic) modifier (and/or the indefinite article) in these expressions:

(37) *Fa massa / molt / més / força sol de justícia. [Catalan; Espinal 2004]
makes too.much / much / more / quite sun of justice

(38) a. *E mai / foarte soare ucigător.
is more / very sun terrible

b. *Mi-e mai / foarte foame de lup.
me-is more / very hunger of wolf

(39) a. E (*un) mai (*un) soare.
is a more a sun
'It's more sunny.'

b. Mi-e (*o) mai (*o) foame.
me-is a more a hunger
'I'm more hungry.'

We would like to point out that the modifier can be left out and the high degree reading maintained under the same circumstances as with predicate nominals: the indefinite article is retained and the sentence has an obligatory exclamative-suspended intonation:

(40) Fa ***un*** *sol*__! [Catalan]
makes a sun
'It's so sunny!'

(41) a. E ***un*** *soare* __ !
is a sun
'It's so sunny/hot!'

b. Mi-e ***o*** *foame* __ !
me-is a hunger
'I'm so hungry!'

Though Espinal (2004) does not examine such exclamative indefinites and does not directly relate their interpretation to the presence of an implicit modifier, she does note that omission of the modifier in examples such as (35a) is acceptable "if, and only if, specific morphosyntactic instructions remain at the phonetic-articulatory interface which specify that *un* 'a' is not a cardinal quantifier over individuals, but rather an existential quantifier over degrees". While she attributes the degree interpretation to a special use of the indefinite article reinforced by intonation, we claim that the high degree reading is due to the implicit modifier – the presence of the indefinite article is triggered by this modifier and the intonation is also a reflex of it.

This type of strategy for expressing high degree is generally available with predicate nominals, (quasi)idiomatic expressions or structures involving 'light' verbs, and even with arguments, where we can get high degree / evaluative interpretations of indefinites with the appropriate exclamative-suspended intonation when the (high degree) modifier is left out (the (b) examples):

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

(42) a. Are (*un) tupeu.
has a cheek
'S/he is cheeky.'

b. Are ***un*** *tupeu*__!
has a cheek
'S/he is so cheeky!'

(43) a. Are (*o) răbdare.
has a patience
'He has patience.'

b. Are ***o*** *răbdare*__!
has a patience
'S/he has such patience!'

(44) a. Am mâncat (o) supă.
have$_{1sg}$ eaten a soup
'I have eaten (some/a) soup.'

a'. Are (o) casă / maşină.
has a house / car
'S/he has a/one house / car.'

b. Am mâncat ***o*** *supă* __!
have$_{1sg}$ eaten a soup
'I have eaten such good soup!'

b'. Are ***o*** *casă* __!
has a house
'S/he has such a (great) house!'

(45) a. A fost (*o) secetă anul ăsta.
has been a drought year.the this
'There has been a drought this year.'

b. A fost ***o*** *secetă*__ anul ăsta!
has been a drought year.the this
'There has been such a drought this year!'

Such indefinites denote (a high degree of) a property (in spite of the presence of the article). Evidence supporting this claim comes from the lack of scope ambiguities with explicit indefinite expressions. Thus, Espinal (2004) shows that in the examples below *(un) sol (de justícia)* can only be interpreted as being in the scope of the existential quantifier *unes aules*: there are some x, x being classrooms, where it was sunny / scorching hot:

(46) a. Feia sol en unes aules, però no en unes altres. [Catalan; Espinal 2004]
made sun in some rooms but not in some others
'It was sunny in some rooms, but not in others.'

b. Feia un sol de justícia en unes aules, però no en unes altres.
made a sun of justice in some rooms but not in some others
'It was scorching hot in some rooms, but not in others.'

Moreover, we should note that there are contrasts between the (im)possibility of using these exclamative indefinites VP-internally (post-verbally) vs. VP-externally (pre-verbally, fronted etc.). This is clear if we examine the behaviour of argumental exclamative indefinites. They exhibit a preference for post-verbal rather than pre-verbal positions:

(47) a. A venit ***un*** *avocat*__!
has come a lawyer
'Such a (good) lawyer came!

b. ??***Un*** *avocat* a venit!
a lawyer has come

(48) a. A vorbit ***un*** *avocat*__!
has talked a lawyer
'Such a (good) lawyer talked!'

b. ??***Un*** *avocat* a vorbit!
a lawyer has talked

Note that the (b) sentences in the examples above are only unacceptable with the intended high degree interpretation and exclamative-suspended intonation.

It is also impossible to retain the exclamative-suspended intonation and the associated high degree reading when such phrases are fronted (out of the vP):

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

(49) a. Am mâncat ***o*** *supă*__!
have$_{1sg}$ eaten a soup
'I've eaten such a good soup!'

b. ??/*__*O*__ *supă* am mâncat!
a soup have$_{1sg}$ eaten

(Quasi)idiomatic expressions show similar behaviour, in the sense that the nominals can normally be fronted – as in (50) below – but not when they appear as exclamative indefinites – as in (51b):

(50) a. Foame, îmi este, dar sete – nu.
hunger me is but thirst not
'I'm hungry, but not thirsty.'

b. Foame îmi este, dar mai pot aştepta.
hunger me is but still can$_{1sg}$ wait
'I am hungry, but I can still wait.'

(51) a. Îmi este ***o*** *foame*__!
me is a hunger
'I'm so hungry!'

b. ??/*__*O*__ *foame* îmi este!
a hunger me is

c. *Cât de / Ce / Mai* foame îmi era ieri la ora asta!
how of / what/ more hunger me was yesterday at hour this
'How hungry I was / I was more hungry this time yesterday!'

Thus, it appears that these 'high-degree-of-a-property' readings of indefinites with exclamative-suspended intonation arise when the noun is inside the predicate (VP/vP). This may be correlated with the availability of existential closure within the vP. If the indefinite article quantifies over degrees (cf. Espinal 2004) in these expressions, then existential closure of the argument nominal can come from the vP/VP. But when the noun is fronted/raised out of the VP only the indefinite article can existentially close the nominal phrase; in that case it cannot also quantify over degrees, hence the unavailability of such exclamative indefinites in those positions. An overt degree word is needed for such an interpretation to obtain in these positions – as in (51c) above.

6. Concluding remarks

The distinctions to be made within the class of nominal predicates go along several lines. First of all, we have shown that BNPs are stage-level predicates, while SIPs are individual-level.

Secondly, BNPs denote prototypical / one-dimensional properties, which is why capacity nouns are the most common in this type of predication – they have precisely this type of denotation. As they denote properties (just like adjectives), we can also understand why they accept degree words, which coerce the (ungradable) property into a gradable one. 'True' SIPs, on the other hand, are classifying / extensional: the subject is a member of the set of individuals that have the property denoted by the bare noun or some property stereotypically related to that. This accounts both for their typical 'identificational' uses, as well as for the figurative ones.

We have also argued that there is a class of 'apparent' SIPs – the exclamative ones – which are actually BNPs combining with an (implicit) modifier that encodes high degree and triggers the insertion of the indefinite article. The [indefinite article + modifier] have the same semantic role as degree words (applied to the bare noun) with which they are in complementary distribution. The modifier can be left out; the indefinite article is then preserved and the sentence has an exclamative-suspended intonation. It is important to note that it is only high degree modifiers that can underlie such structures, presumably because they can be recovered through the use of the special exclamative-suspended intonation, which is obligatory in these cases.

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

The paper thus shows that, under specific syntactic circumstances, not only mass / continuous nouns, but also bare count / discrete singulars are logically interpreted as property-denoting objects. This is why BNPs and bare nouns inside (quasi)idiomatic expressions can combine with degree words. We have also revealed a more generalized mechanism which allows the expression of high degree in several contexts in Romanian, and possibly other Romance languages, involving property-denoting nouns (mainly predicate nominals and (quasi)idiomatic expressions, but also, to a certain extent, arguments), based on a special role of the indefinite article (still to be made more precise, semantically and syntactically, by further research) and the existence of a particular type of modifiers (i.e. adjectives which lexically encode a high degree interpretation, DegPs containing a high degree operator, and idiomatic modifiers), the two elements contributing to a measure-like function over gradable properties.

Camelia Constantinescu
LUCL/Leiden University
c.constantinescu@let.leidenuniv.nl

Mihaela Tănase-Dogaru
University of Bucharest
mihaela.dogaru@gmail.com

References

Beyssade, C. and Dobrovie-Sorin, C. (2005). A syntax-based analysis of predication. *Proceedings of SALT* 15. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications.

Castroviejo, M. (2006). Wh-exclamatives in Catalan. PhD dissertation, Universitat de Barcelona.

Chierchia, G. (1998). Reference to kinds across languages. *Natural Language Semantics* 6 (4): 339–405.

Dayal, V. (2004). Number marking and indefinites in kind terms. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 27(4): 393–450.

Déprez, V. (2005). Morphological number, semantic number and bare nouns. *Lingua* 115 (6): 857–883.

Dobrovie-Sorin, C. and Laca, B. (2003). Les noms sans déterminant dans les langues romanes. In D. Godard (ed.), *Les langues romanes*, 235-279. Paris: CNRS.

Doetjes, J. (1997). *Quantifiers and Selection:On the Distribution of Quantifying Expressions in French, Dutch, English*. The Hague: Holland Academic Graphics.

Dogaru, M. (2004). On the interpretation of Romanian predicative bare singulars. *Bucharest Working Papers in Linguistics* VI (1):85-94.

Dogaru, M. (2004). Romanian bare singulars and free DP agreement. In *The National Conference on British and American Studies: Conference Papers*. Braşov: Tipografia Universităţii Transilvania.

Espinal, T.M. (2004). Lexicalization of light verb structures and the semantics of nouns. *Catalan Journal of Linguistics* 3(1): 15-43.

Kratzer, A. (1995). Stage-level and individual-level predicates. In G. N. Carlson and F. J. Pelletier (eds.), *The Generic Book*, 125-175. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

Matushansky, O. and Spector, B. (2005). Tinker, tailor, soldier, spy. In E. Maier, C. Bary & J. Huitink (eds.), *Proceedings of Sinn & Bedeutung* 9, 241–255. Nijmegen: NCS.

McNally, L. and Boleda Torrent, G. (2004). Relational adjectives as properties of kinds. In P. Cabredo-Hofherr and O. Bonami (eds.), *Empirical Issues in Formal Syntax and Semantics* 5: 179–196. Paris: CNRS.

Munn, A. and Schmitt, C. (2005). Number and indefinites. *Lingua* 115(6): 821–855.

Musan, R. (1997). Tense, predicates, and lifetime effects. *Natural Language Semantics* 5(3): 271–301.

Roy, I. (2007). Nouns, adjectives and predicates. Handout, Paris, June 2007.

de Swart, H.,Winter, Y. and Zwarts, J. (2005). Bare predicate nominals in Dutch. In E. Maier, C. Bary, and J. Huitink (eds.), *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung* 9, 446–460. Nijmegen: NCS.

de Swart, H. and Zwarts, J. (2006). Less form, more meaning: why bare nominals are special. Ms., Nias/Utrecht/Nijmegen.

de Swart, H., Winter, Y. and Zwarts, J. (2007). Bare nominals and reference to capacities. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 25 (1): 195-122.

Tănase-Dogaru, M. (2007). The Category of Number. Its Relevance for the Syntax and the Semantic Typology of the Nominal Group. PhD dissertation, University of Bucharest.

Wierzbicka, A. (1988). What's in a noun? In *The Semantics of Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

BDD-A9759 © 2007 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)