

Workshop on Modification (with and without modifiers)
Fake arguments: Nouns and clitics as event modifiers

In this talk we will focus on the question of which syntactic categories can be modifiers. We will show that nominal categories sometimes correspond to ‘fake’ arguments, that is, to constituents which –in spite of being nominal– are arguments only from a syntactic perspective (or not even syntactic arguments), but behave as modifiers of the event from a semantic perspective.

It is commonly assumed that in Romance languages nominal expressions have a referential interpretation when occurring in an argument position. Thus, following Longobardi (1994, 2001, 2005), and Chierchia (1998), among others, it is predicted that common nouns can easily occur bare in predicate position but need a D in argument position. Similarly, third person pronouns have been attributed a referential reading either because they are generated in a D or a ϕ head (i.e., a position for ϕ features) (Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002).

This picture is, however, incomplete. On the one hand, as it was extensively argued in the nineties in the literature on Spanish, Albanian, and Romanian, bare plurals are indefinite expressions that may occur in object argument position and denote either properties or bound variables that convey an existential reading at the time the meaning of the VP is semantically composed (McNally 1992; Dobrovie-Sorin 1997a,b; Dobrovie-Sorin and Laca 1996, 2003; Kallulli 1999). On the other hand, it is well-known that event adjectives (e.g., *occasional*) present a problem to a strict bottom-up compositionality because, even though they syntactically occur within the nominal domain, they must be interpreted as modifiers within the verbal domain (Partee 1984). So, previous studies have already shown the existence of mismatches at the syntax-semantics interface between the nominal and verbal domains, regarding the topic of what is an argument and what is a modifier.

Furthermore, recent research on the semantics of bare nominal expressions in languages that only allow bare nominals in a subset of argument positions (e.g., Catalan and Spanish vs. Brazilian Portuguese) has proved that nouns and clitics can also be interpreted as modifiers within the verbal domain (Espinal 2010; Espinal and McNally 2007, 2011; Navarro and Espinal 2011). (On the widespread distribution of BNs in Brazilian Portuguese, see Munn and Schmitt 2005, Müller 2002, Dobrovie-Sorin and Pires de Oliveira 2009, Pires de Oliveira and Rothstein 2011, among others).

In this presentation, we will focus on the hypothesis that the morphosyntactic defectiveness of nouns and clitics is a necessary condition for their being able to be interpreted as semantic event modifiers. We will argue that defective nouns and clitics, which syntactically are not adjuncts, and show the semantic properties of being scopally inert and discourse opaque, intervene in the compositional meaning of the clause not through the canonical function-application operation, but via a process of semantic incorporation.

First, we will rely on recent research that has proved that bare nominals are productively allowed in object position, even though they are unmarked for number, definiteness and specificity (see (1a)). It will be shown that in correlation with their formal defectiveness these nominals are not referential expressions and do not denote individual entities, but are licensed as property denoting expressions, which are combined with the verbs they are object of by a process of composition that intersects the property denoted by the N with the one expressed by the verbal predicate. The hypothesis being held is that fully defective bare nominals that occur syntactically in object argument position are semantic modifiers of an internal thematic participant of the verb, which in its turn (following the tradition developed in event semantics, Parsons 1995) is interpreted as a predicate of events. The output of this semantic composition operation is that the property denoted by the noun in object position is finally interpreted as an event modifier (see (2)).

Second, we will focus on a piece of research on the semantic composition of a productive class of predicates in Mexican Spanish (Navarro 2009) formed by lexical verbs that combine with a morphosyntactic clitic that is defective for person, case, number and gender (see (3b)). This clitic *le* is not an argument of the predicate, and

therefore can be associated neither with a referential nor with a coreferential interpretation, but is not expletive either. We will show that *le* corresponds to a lexical affix that is syntactically analysed as a defective high Appl head that semantically modifies the event of the verb it combines with by classifying it as an Action. In the proposed analysis, we will accommodate Doron's (2003, 2005) compositional analysis of the intensive verbal template in Hebrew to an analysis of the function introduced by *le* (see (4)).

Third, we will further extend this analysis to transitive verbs with implicit indefinite object affixes $\{-tē-, -tla-\}$ in Nahuatl (a polysynthetic Uto-Aztecan language). Crucially, these affixes do not contribute a referent in discourse (see the contrast in (5); Merlan 1976, de la Fuente 2007).

Finally, we will present the similarities and differences between the phenomena in (1), (3) and (5), and various types of noun incorporation postulated for natural languages (Mithun, 1984).

(1) **Peninsular Spanish**

(Situation: Describing a candidate for a tenure track position, one of the members of the evaluation committee says:)

- a. Este candidato *tiene libro*.
this candidate has book
'This candidate has published (one or more books).'
- b. Este candidato *tiene libros*.
this candidate has books
'This candidate possesses various books.'

$$(2) \quad \llbracket [_V V N] \rrbracket = \lambda e[V(e) \wedge N(\theta(e))] \quad \text{Espinal and McNally (2011: rule(44))}$$

(3) **Mexican Spanish**

(Situation: The speaker is supposed to have cleaned the shoes, and says:)

- a. Limpié los zapatos y quedaron bien limpios.
cleaned the shoes and remained well clean
'I cleaned the shoes and left them completely clean.'
- b. *Le limpié* a los zapatos.
le cleaned to the shoes
'I performed cleaning with regard to the shoes.'
- c. #*Le limpié* a los zapatos y quedaron bien limpios.
le cleaned to the shoes and remained well clean

$$(4) \quad \llbracket [_{leP} le V] \rrbracket = \lambda e[V(e) \& \theta(e) \& \mathbf{Action}(e)]$$

(5) **Nahuatl**

- a. Ni-[*la*]-kwa
1.SG.NOM-various things-eat
'I'm eating.'
- b. San [*i**la*] ni-*k*-kwa
alone-various things-1.SG.NOM-3SG.AC-eat
'I'm eating some things.'

Selected references

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