Agent Nouns: the Morphosyntax of Mixed Categories

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The Functional Nominalization Thesis (FNT, Kornfilt & Whitman 2011) holds that nominalizers head a nominal projection at some level of the V projection; the structure above and below them respectively determines their nominal and verbal syntactic properties. Baker & Vinokurova 2009 explain the lack of verbal agent nominalizations such as *the quickly writer the letter* by assuming that agent nominalizers are Voice heads (= v) immediately above VP. To have verbal properties such as assigning structural case they should be introduced above v, but then they should not have only agentive argument structure, but should attach freely to every kind of verb including unaccusatives, as in Gikũyũ and Northern Paiute (Toosarvandani 2014).

I argue that derived nominals have verbal syntax just in case they bear Tense/Aspect features, and that, contra the FNT, this property does not correlate with their agentivity, their voice, or the height of their heads in the V projection. Most of my new evidence comes from Vedic Sanskrit and Finnish.

Vedic has a rich inventory of nominalizing suffixes. A famous contrast is between the preaccenting agent nominalizer ′-tar- and the accented agent nominalizer -tár-. The former has B&V's "high" properties: it forms agent nouns that assign structural case, can be modified by certain adverbs, and have strictly agentive argument structure (no unaccusatives/unagentives).

(1) íṣkartā   víhrutam púnaḥ (*RV* 8.1.12)
     fixer-Nom wrong-Acc   again
     'the maker right again (of) what has gone wrong'

But it is structurally low: it is always adjacent to the root, hence incompatible with causative and other V→V suffixes, and it cannot be added to prefixed bases. The reason it assigns structural case and takes adverbs is that it is inherently present/imperfective (Kiparsky 2016), in that it only denotes agents of ongoing eventualities. accented agent nominalizer -tár- has B&V's "low" properties: it can be added to non-agentive/unaccusative verbs and forms nominals that take genitive objects and adjective modifiers. But is structurally high: it is separable from the root by causative and other V→V suffixes, and it is affixed to the whole verb base, including its preverbs. This nominalizer is tense- and aspectless.

In addition to the distributional evidence for the respective constituency of ′-tar- and -tár-, I provide independent diagnostics from accentuation, allomorphy selection, and preverb-verb splitting (tmesis). I show that all Vedic nominalizers consistently fall into one or the other of these classes, and that case assignment correlates with tense/aspect throughout.

The Vedic data cannot be reconciled with the FNT by generating nominalizers with nominal properties low and then raising them to their actual high position, because the v head may be occupied by causative and other verbal suffixes, and because of the evidence from accent, allomorphy, and tmesis. Nor can nominalizers with verbal properties be generated high and then lowered to their actual low position, for then we couldn't ensure that they are attached only to simple verb roots: under reasonable locality conditions we can't check that there are no verbal suffixes or prefixes somewhere downstairs.

The Finnish agent nominalizer -ja represents a different mix of B&V's "high" and "low" properties that is also incompatible with the FNT. It attaches to verbs of any argument structure, including unagentives/unaccusatives ("high"), yet does not assign structural case and is compatible with Voice morphology ("low"). In this case, even morphological raising or lowering would not help. As expected on the present proposal, agent nouns of this type consistently lack Tense/Aspect features.

My conclusion that the best predictor of verbal properties in agent nominalizations is Tense/Aspect is broadly compatible also with recent work on action nominalizations: verbal gerunds have imperfective Aspect (Pustejovsky 1995, Alexiadou 2001, Alexiadou et al. 2010) whereas regular action nominalizations are aspectless nominal heads.

This finding helps relieve little v of some of the functional overload it has acquired in recent syntactic work: (1) introducing Agent arguments, (2) hosting agent nominalizers, (3) hosting causative, desiderative, and other V→V affixes, and (4) assigning accusative case. In fact, it makes available a lexicalist analysis of nominalizations that accounts for the generalizations behind the FNT without recourse to a hierarchy of syntactic functional projections.

References

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