

Introduction

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This volume presents six chapters which all address – from different angles and in different ways – one single topic: Nouns. It offers new ideas and perspectives on nouns and on particular aspects of this topic. While focusing on old and new problems related to nouns, it above all takes into account a range of genetically unrelated languages and further discusses more general morphological processes involving nouns (derivation, nominalization, lexicalization, verbalization and deverbalization).

It is not possible in the space available to summarize the huge amount of literature on this topic, so we prefer to offer an overview of a selected number of issues which are related to the main theme and which are placed in focus in the volume: parts of speech, with special consideration of verbs and nouns, nominalizations, and complexity in nouns and noun phrases.

Although the topic is huge and a classical theme for both morphologists, syntacticists, and semanticists, it remains one of the most intriguing, but also problematic.¹

Nouns and verbs have traditionally been opposed to one another from Aristotle onwards, and this opposition has been debated in the philosophical, logical, and linguistic literature. The linguistic literature has especially focused on their classification as parts of speech. Recent trends in the literature on parts of speech discuss the non-discreteness of the opposition between nouns and verbs (see the non-discreteness hypothesis, Sasse 2001, who also summarizes other work on this subject). Prototypicality theory, which developed in the late 1960s, is the starting point for the revision of parts of speech in this direction. The non-discreteness hypothesis is particularly evident when dealing with nominalizations, which mix verbal and nominal properties and which constitute a good example of ‘category squishes’ in Sasse’s words, namely the nouniness squish (2001: 496). A special contribution to this general theoretical view also comes from the scalar approach to lexical classes of Hopper & Thompson (1984; 1985). In their scalar approach to the verb-noun opposition, Hopper & Thompson assess that the more prototypical a form is with respect to a lexical class, the more it receives overt and strong morphosyntactic indicators.

Nouns and verbs encode prototypical discourse functions: naming participants (nouns) vs. reporting events (verbs). The differentiation of major lexical categories is a matter of an individual language's refinement of this distinction. The scalar or gradient character of lexical classes is an effect of mapping semantic relationships onto grammar.

The set of articles in the volume provides in particular a thought-provoking picture of some of the most recent research streams on nouns, encompassing different theoretical issues. Each paper in the volume offers a different perspective on research on nouns. Nouns are considered not only on different levels (morphological and syntactic above all) but also according to different scientific approaches (structural complexity, psycholinguistics, typology, sociolinguistics), and each paper contains an extensive and up-to-date bibliographical list.

The volume is divided into two parts, one is devoted primarily to nominalizations as non-prototypical nouns (Comrie, Munro, & Fiorentino), while the other is concerned with nouns and noun phrases and their structural complexity (Hawkins, Mattissen, and Berman & Seroussi).

The first paper throws new light on action nominals. Action nominals have traditionally been considered as a non-prototypical category between nouns and verbs. While there are languages in which action nominals mix noun-phrase-like properties with clause-like properties, in this paper Comrie asks if there are action nominals whose internal structural properties are neither noun-phrase-like nor clause-like. And he does find that there are some cases where an action nominal construction cannot be predicted from the interaction of clausal or nominal morphosyntax, and even occasional cases where the construction has completely idiosyncratic properties.

The second paper introduces us to nominalizations as used in two indigenous languages of the Americas. It analyses how the two languages avoid forming single (abstract) words for abstract ideas / concepts and which alternative strategies they adopt for expressing them (for example Tlacolula Valley Zapotec uses headless relative clauses for expressing deverbal nominalizations). The paper also addresses more generally, even if as a secondary theme, the topic of abstract expression in human languages, a major but complex topic that raises the question of how human minds and languages deal with the expression of abstract notions. Some languages choose verbs / clauses and others prefer nouns / nominalizations. The two languages under investigation clearly prefer to recur to periphrasis instead of realizing single words in the lexicon, although Tlacolula Valley

Zapotec also uses well integrated loans from Spanish. This topic could be even more deeply developed in a typology of abstract expression in the world's languages, and the puzzle does not seem to have a simple solution, as the choice between verb or a clause-like strategy versus a noun or nominalization is not limited to languages with a short written tradition or to a single area (for example indigenous languages of the Americas), as a superficial look might suggest.

The third paper investigates the noun-verb opposition and the distribution of action nouns between speech and writing. On the basis of an examination of corpora, it furnishes some further empirical support, especially in reference to the Italian language, to the established point of view on the use of action nouns in written and spoken language. Many of the results are perhaps not particularly surprising, such as the greater frequency of action nouns in written than in spoken language, but it is important to have this impression verified. And there are some less expected, but nonetheless empirically verified, results, such as the fact that even in the written corpus (in contrast to, for instance, legal texts) the complexity of action noun phrases is relatively low. The results also show that action nouns cover different functions in speech and writing. In spoken texts action nouns seem pragmatically motivated, in order to introduce (new) events as focal points in the discourse. In written texts action nouns are a syntactic strategy to construct more intricate and synthetic texts.

Possible cognitive motivations for the difference in use of action nouns between speech and writing might be better investigated in a psycholinguistic approach. And this psycholinguistic dimension strongly shapes the fourth paper of the volume, Hawkins' article on noun phrase typology. The article, while examining cross-linguistic variation in the syntax and morphosyntax of noun phrase, proposes some powerful generalizations about possible dimensions of variation in noun phrase structure. The general hypothesis that underlies the article is Hawkins' Performance-Grammar Correspondence Hypothesis (Hawkins 2004), which accounts for many universal regularities found in the grammars of languages and which makes it possible to predict others. According to this hypothesis, grammars conventionalize syntactic structures in proportion to those structures' degree of preference in performance (Hawkins 2004). The model proposed by Hawkins is a coherent model of grammars, one which also fits well with other linguistic principles, for example with complexity principles, which separately propose that in the case of more or less explicit grammar options the first are preferred in cognitively complex environments. Regarding nouns, the model proposes two main

regularities: the first concerns the possibility of recognizing and correctly constructing a noun phrase while the second concerns the possibility of correctly attaching categories to noun phrases. Most of the structural properties found in noun phrases seem to be connected to cognitive tasks and to satisfy the predictions of the model.

Complexity is also the topic of Mattissen's article, which focuses on complex nouns, i.e. nouns that are structurally complex and which result from special derivational processes such as compounding. While widespread derivation of this type throughout the grammar is a characteristic of polysynthetic languages, they can also be even found in non-polysynthetic languages. The paper offers a rich and strongly argued presentation of a topic that has not been well investigated in earlier literature. It provides a classification of complex nouns together with a systematic comparison between complex nouns in the two major relevant language types, polysynthetic and non-polysynthetic.

The last paper combines a structural analysis of noun formation in Modern Hebrew with an empirical psycholinguistic test on the processing of derived nouns among Hebrew speakers, with an emphasis on processing. After providing a solid analysis of alternative strategies in noun formation in Hebrew, namely interdigitation of consonantal roots versus linear affixation, the empirical testing analyses language users both in perceiving and in producing the two alternative morphological strategies. Empirical research reveals that there is a coherent and constant evolution in the use, formation, and recognition of derived nouns among language users and that there are complex factors involved in this process.

Acknowledgments

The present volume includes a selection of updated versions of presentations from the Symposium "Nouns Cross-Linguistically", held at the University of Molise in June of 2007. The editors are grateful to the University of Molise and the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology for their material support of this symposium.

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Notes

¹ Just to mention one of the main aspects subsumed into the topic Nouns, namely their place among word classes and the classical opposition verb-noun, see Sasse: “Whether or not “nouniness” and “verbiness” ... are really universal cognitive entities has yet to be shown. ... this remains one of the most fundamental open questions in word class research” (Sasse 2001: 507). On word classes in typology see the recommended reading by Plank (1997).

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