

'Pseudo-nominalization' in Distributed Morphology and Nanosyntax

In Distributed Morphology (DM) and similar frameworks, category-changing operations take place in narrow syntax: deverbal nominalization, for instance, involves merging a root or a larger structure with a nominal categorizing head (e.g. Marantz 1997, Harley 2009). In DM, nominalizing affixes are taken to be the morphological realization of this nominalizing head (n^0 or 'little n '); as such, the presence of a nominalizing affix implies the presence of nominal structure.

However, this view on the morphology of nominalizations is challenged by the fact that in some languages, a verb may be morphologically nominalized while not having the internal and external syntactic properties of a nominal. This is the case in Scottish Gaelic, where 'verbal nouns' can be used with aspectual or modal auxiliaries in a way similar to infinitives in e.g. Germanic or Romance languages, and in this case they are not able to take nominal modifiers (Adger 2022). This is illustrated in (1): the nominalized verb *sgrìosadh*, from *sgrìos* 'destroy', is used as the complement of an aspectual auxiliary, and cannot be modified by an adjective.

- (1) Bha na saighdearan a' sgrìosadh (*iomlan) a' bhaile
be.PST the soldiers PROG destroy.NMLZ complete the town
'The soldiers were (*completely) destroying the town.' (Adger 2022: 5-6)

In Iraqw, a Cushitic language spoken in Tanzania, event nominals similarly can occur before certain auxiliary or modal verbs (like 'go' or 'want'), in which case the theme of the event nominal occurs as the object of the matrix clause, essentially like restructuring in infinitival constructions. Event nominals in this configuration cannot be modified by adjectives. This is illustrated in (2); the second instance of *daa'angw* 'singing' is morphologically nominal, but does not appear to be licensed and cannot take an adjectival modifier.

- (2) a. *daa*'sing' > *daa'aangw* 'singing'
b. *daa'aangw* u *daa'angw* (*hhoó') eér
song:M O.M sing:NMLZ:M good:M go:3F
'She is going to sing a song (*beautifully)'

These 'pseudo-nominals', which show a mismatch between morphological and syntactic properties, pose a problem for DM. One way to approach it would be to propose that the nominalizer in these cases is a dissociated morpheme which is added post-syntactically; the analysis proposed by Adger (2022) is in this vein. However, this has several shortcomings; mainly, the model of DM does not provide a compelling reason why this morpheme would need to be added.

Instead, I argue that the model of Nanosyntax (Caha 2009, Starke 2009), specifically its approach to spell-out and the syntax-morphology interface, provides a natural explanation for this phenomenon. The crucial differences between Nanosyntax and DM that allow for this are the following (paraphrased):

1. **Phrasal spellout.** While in DM, lexical ('Vocabulary') items are inserted into terminals, in nanosyntax they spell out phrases, which may contain multiple heads. This phrase structure is specified in each lexical entry.

2. **The Superset Principle.** A lexical item can realize any structure that is contained within the phrase structure specified in its lexical entry.

The proposal is as follows. Event nominals in both Gaelic and Iraqw contain a certain amount of verbal structure, enough to host aspectual and manner adverbs; the topmost projection I will label as AspP (see Adger 2022). This AspP is nominalized by merging it with n⁰. This whole structure is specified in the lexical entries of the nominalized forms, as shown in (3). This is independently motivated in both languages: in Iraqw, certain nominalizing affixes are fused with the verb stem, or with voice and aspect suffixes (Mous 1993: 79-80), while in Gaelic, many event nominals are formed via stem alternations or in some cases stem suppletion (Adger 2022).

- (3) Scottish Gaelic (Adger 2022)
- | | | |
|----------------------------|------|---------------------------|
| <i>squabadh</i> 'sweeping' | <--> | [nP [AspP [vP [√SWEEP]]]] |
| <i>ràdh</i> 'saying' | <--> | [nP [AspP [vP [√SAY]]]] |

These event nominals may be used as arguments of verbs like 'go' or 'want', which undergo grammaticalization and become auxiliaries or modals. Following this, the nominalized verbs lose their argument status and their nominal properties and become simply non-finite verbs (in this case bare AspPs), essentially 'shedding' the nP layer and all the nominal structure above it. However, according to the superset principle, the 'nominalized' forms are still able to lexicalize these non-finite verbs, since their structure is contained within the structure specified in their lexical entry. This is illustrated in (4).

- (4) *ràdh* <--> [nP [AspP [vP [√SAY]]]]

If on the right track, this approach provides a natural explanation of a phenomenon that is difficult to account for using DM. Similar approaches could also be used to account for potential other morphology-syntax mismatches, where the morphology suggests more structure than is actually present.

References

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