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 Especially in polysynthetic languages, words for new objects are often created from descriptions of their functions or other salient characteristics. In many such languages, these descriptions take the form of predictions. The examples below come from Mohawk, an Iroquoian language.

(1) wathóntia'ks
'it cuts grass' \(\rightarrow\) 'lawn mower'

(2) teiehserhakwenhtenhstáhkhwa
'one uses it to cause dough to become flat' \(\rightarrow\) 'rolling pin'

(3) teióia'ks
'it flickers' \(\rightarrow\) 'movie'

(4) karistóhare'
'it metal hangs (on it)' \(\rightarrow\) 'shovel'

All of these words are verbs. Because all Mohawk verbs obligatorily contain pronominal prefixes referring to their subjects and/or objects, as well as aspect suffixes, they can function as self-contained clauses as well. This can be seen in the literal translations of the verbs above.

In discourse, no surface markers need signal the syntactic function of such verbs, whether they are used as nominals, predicates, or sentences. The result can be, and often is, discourse which consists predominantly of verbs, or, apparently, strings of predications.

(5) Rató:rats raiénthos.
he-hunts he-plants.
The hunter plants. or
The farmer hunts.

it-cuts-grass it scratches (it)
The lawn mower scratches it. or
The rake cuts grass.

The frequency of these strings of verbs in discourse, unmarked for syntactic function, raises an intriguing issue. To what extent is the distinction between identification (ordinary nominal function)
and predication (verbal function) present in the minds of speakers of such languages?

In this paper, the interpretation of verbal nominals in Mohawk is examined. It is shown that different verbs have been psychologically nominalized to varying degrees, discoverable from three tests: their interpretation under questions, that under negation, and their formal behavior under incorporation.

1. Questions

The first test involves the interpretation of yes-no questions. Such questions are formed in Mohawk as follows. Focussed elements, in the case of questions the element in question, appear word initially. The interrogative particle ken is inserted following this first, focussed, constituent. Just as any type of constituent can be put in focus by fronting, any type can be questioned. In the first example below, a nominal is questioned. In the second, it is the predicate.

(7) Onwá:ri ken ne Sak shakon:n:we's? Mary ? Jim he-her-likes
   Is it Mary that Jim likes?

(8) Shakon:n:we's ken Onwá:ri ne Sak? he-her-likes ? Mary Jim
   Does Jim like Mary?

In the first test, speakers are asked to respond negatively to questions, then supply alternative answers. The test is based on the normal expectation that alternatives tend to be syntactically equivalent to rejected answers. If the speaker interprets the questioned word as a nominal, he/she will probably supply an alternative nominal. If it is interpreted as a predicate, the alternative will be a predicate.

(9) Model: Q. Takös ken?
    Cat ?
    Is it a cat?

    A. Iah. È:rhär thi.
    No. dog that
    No. It's a dog.

(10) Q. Satákhe: ken?
    you-run ?
    Are you running?

    A. Iah. Tekennon:ahkhwa'.
    No. I'm dancing.
The results of the question test are interesting. The test effectively separates conventionalized verbal nominals from verbs lacking this conventional function.

The creation of new nominals from verbs is quite productive in Mohawk but it is usually a conscious act. Speakers make up new names for things constantly, but frequently discuss the relative merits of competing neologisms. Different speakers select different characteristics by which to identify an object. Different communities develop different labels. When asked for a word for 'mitre box', one speaker replied,

(11) "tekahson'kária'ks... No, that would be more like a saw. (it cuts boards)

A better name would be

katakwarfsions."

(it untwists → straightens) it)

As would be expected, such unconventionalized descriptions are interpreted as verbs under questioning.

(12) Q. katakwarfsions ken?
It straightens it = mitre box ?

A. Iah. Tekakwá:ris.
No. It twists it.
(Not: No, it is not a mitre box.)

The identifying function of conventionalized descriptive nominals is retained under questioning, however. The alternative answers show that these verbs were interpreted as nominals.

(13) Q. Kanon'tísen ken?
it-milk-spoiled = buttermilk ?

A. Iah. Kwah tekén onón:ta'.
No. Just milk
No, it's just (regular) milk.

(14) Q. Ratétien'ts ken?
he-cures = doctor ?

A. Iah. Karfhton thf.
No. He is a policeman.

The fact that the interpretation of the function of these verbs depends upon convention and not something inherent in the word itself is shown by the following example. Speakers from two different Mohawk communities respond differently to the question:
Numerous jokes arise from the differences in conventionalized interpretations among communities. When a woman from Ahkwesahne was asked what her husband did for a living, she proudly replied:

rarista'kehró:non'
'he-iron-on-resides' → 'He is an ironworker'.

A great peal of laughter greeted her innocent remark in Caughnawaga, where the verb is interpreted:

+ 'he rides the rails' → 'He is a hobo'.

2. Negation

The second tests involve negation. First, verbal nominals are negated in the normal way, by preceding them with the negative particle iah and the negative prefix te-/th-. Bilingual speakers are then asked to translate the phrase.

Surprisingly, under simple negation, most verbal nominals are interpreted as predications, whether they are conventionalized as nominals or not. Note the discrepancies between the translations of the positive and negative verbs below. (They were not elicited together initially, but results remained the same when they were.)

(16) kà:sere'
car
iah tekà:sereh
it doesn't drag

(17) ratétien'ts
(he is) a doctor
iah tehatétien'ts
he is a bad doctor (< he doesn't cure)

Next, speakers were asked to complete negative statements. The information they chose to add, underlined below, is also revealing. The negative verbs are clearly interpreted as predicates; they do not identify.
The fact that verbs generally revert to their predicative function under negation produces a result which amuses Mohawk speakers: Translations of straightforward English sentences can appear superficially contradictory in Mohawk, but they are perfectly meaningful.

This mitre box doesn't straighten (corners).

That doctor doesn't cure.

A probable factor in the pressure to interpret all deverbal nominals as predications under negation is the fact that this form of negation is morphologically incompatible with formal nouns, even though they contain pronouns just like verbs.

An alternative mechanism exists for negating nouns, something of the sort 'it is not the case that that is an X.' The negative prefix te' is affixed to a dummy verb following the noun.
When this type of negation is used with deverbal nominals, an identifying interpretation is possible.

not it-drags (not) is it-boat it-is It is not a car but a boat.

(26) Iah teiónthnekáhhwa ³ tê:ken, ô:wise' thi:
not does one use it to pour liquid (not-is-it, it-glass this) That is not a cup but a glass.

If the verbs in (25) and (26) were interpreted as predicates, the sentences would not make sense.

3. Incorporation

The third test involves noun incorporation, frequently found in polysynthetic languages. In Mohawk, a noun stem referring to the semantic patient of a predication can be incorporated into the verb itself, between the pronominal prefix and the verb root.

Intransitive

(27) Kowá:nen ne otsi:tsa' → katsi' tsowá:nen
it-big-is the it-flower + it-flower-big is

Transitive

(28) Wa'khñí:non' ne otsi:tsa' + wa'ktsi' tsahní:non' past-I/it buy the it-flower + past-I/it-flower-buy

In the intransitive sentence, the incorporated semantic patient is the surface syntactic subject. In the transitive sentence, the incorporated semantic patient is the surface syntactic object.

Verbal nominals do not behave exactly like formal nouns under incorporation. Note that the simple noun root -tsi' 'ts-'flower' is incorporated as is, above. Verbal nominals are not. Although the verbal origin of a nominal may have long ago left the consciousness of speakers, it resurges formally when the nominal itself is incorporated into another verb. An overt nominalizer, like the -'tsher- below, is required.

(29) Kowá:nen ne atekhwá:ra + watekhwahra' tsherowá:nen
it-big-is the table (it-it-food-set-is) + it-table-big-is

(30) Wa'khní:non ne atekhwá:ra + wa'katekhwahra' tsherahní:non' past-I/it-buy the table + past-I/it-table-buy
Noun incorporation thus serves to separate nominals of verbal origin, whether speakers are aware of it or not, from simple, formal nouns. Derived nominals require nominalizers. Original nouns do not.

4. Conclusion

It has been shown that the distinction between identifying and predicative function is, indeed, present in the minds of Mohawk speakers, even in those cases where the same form can be used for both functions. The difference between interpretations of descriptions as identifying, so pre-supposed, versus predicating or asserted, can be seen in the alternative answers supplied to yes-no questions.

The degree to which specific verbs have been psychologically nominalized appears to be largely a function of usage and convention. This degree can be identified by the interpretation of the word under questioning and negation, and by its behavior in noun incorporation. The tests reveal four degrees of nominalization or "nouniness", here arranged from least to most.

A. Spontaneous, unconventionalized descriptions

1. Used as nominals on occasion but interpreted as verbs under interrogation without context (V)

2. Interpreted as verbs under negation (V)

3. Require nominalizers under incorporation (V)

B. Conventionalized verbal nominals of whose verbal origin speakers are conscious

1. Interpreted as nominals under interrogation (N)

2. Interpreted as verbs under simple negation (V)

3. Require nominalizers under incorporation (V)

C. Conventionalized verbal nominals whose verbal origin is not remembered

1. Identified as nominals under incorporation (N)

2. Meaningless under simple negation (N)

3. Require nominalizers under incorporation (V)
D. Formal nouns

1. Identified as nouns under interrogation (N)
2. Meaningless under simple negation (N)
3. Incorporated without nominalizers (N)

NOTES

1. I am especially grateful to Miss Mary MacDonald, of Ahkwesahsne, New York, and Mrs. Annette Jacobs and Sister Dorothy Lazore, of Caughnawaga, Quebec, for their generous help with the Mohawk examples.

2. This is a sausage covered with a deep fried crust.

3. The prefix te- on this word is the daulic, indicating a change of position, not to be confused with the negative prefix.

4. The neuter pronoun ka- takes the form w- before a- initial stems.

5. An unexplained exception is the word for pencil. Compare the two words below:

kahiatonhkwi:io
it-'write'-instrumental-'nice'+perfective aspect
nice pencil

kahiatonhkwahtsherf:io
it-'write'-instrumental-nominalizer-'nice'+perfective aspect
nice writing instrument