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ON THE NATURE OF NOUN INCORPORATION

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It has been suggested by Sadock 1986 that certain constructions in Greenlandic Eskimo and Southern Tiwa provide evidence against proposals of Mithun 1984 concerning the nature of noun incorporation. These objections are discussed, along with issues concerning the discourse salience, reference, and semantic interpretation of incorporated nouns.

Sadock 1986 has devoted considerable effort to demonstrating that denominal verb formation in Greenlandic Eskimo shares none of the semantic or pragmatic functions of noun incorporation as generally understood. This is an important conclusion, although not completely astonishing: denominal verb formation is a different formal process. In N[oun] I[ncorporation], as commonly understood since Sapir 1911, a noun stem is compounded with a verb stem to yield a more specific, derived verb stem. The Greenlandic construction is based on a single noun stem with a derivational suffix. It is not entirely clear why one would refer to this as NI, since it is not obvious what such nouns are incorporated into. In incorporating languages, a verb minus its I[ncorporated] N[oun] is still a well-formed verb; but in Greenlandic, a denominal verb minus its noun stem would be no word at all.¹

¹ A number of authors used the term 'noun incorporation' in the standard sense before Sapir. However, Sapir was quite explicit in delimiting the scope of the term: 'It is this process of compounding a noun stem with a verb that it is here proposed to call noun incorporation' (1911:257). It is not the case that he simply failed to consider Eskimo, since he described the denominal verb construction at length (254):

'Many American languages form denominative verbs from noun stems by means of various derivative affixes of verbal, generally transitive meaning ... It can hardly be maintained, however, that verbs of this type have had much to do with a belief in the existence of noun incorporation, the process that they illustrate being a familiar one in Indo-Germanic. Eskimo, a language particularly rich in suffixes that verbify nouns, has been termed polysynthetic, but has not been employed by serious students as a source of examples of noun incorporation.'

He concluded his article with a caveat (281-2):

'Lest it be thought, however, that noun incorporation is indeed the characteristic of American languages generally, it is well to point out that it is entirely absent in a large, perhaps the larger, number of them. Such are Athabascan, Salish, Chinookan, Yokuts, Siouan, and Eskimo; and yet Athabascan and Eskimo might well be considered types of "polysynthetic" languages.'

More recently, in two insightful articles, Hagège 1978, 1980 has shown (among other things) that incorporation and the Salish derivational process involving 'lexical suffixes' are formally distinct in a number of ways. Particularly pertinent is the coexistence of both incorporated nouns and lexical suffixes in the Sliammon dialect of Mainland Comox. Hagège points out (1978:67) that the lexical suffixes are the relics of an older system:

'It is clear from the foregoing that the lexical suffixes constitute an archaic system which is characterized by its coherence and its autonomy with regard to the nouns whose meanings are related to theirs. This alone would suffice to show the difference between these suffixes and the incorporated nouns in languages such as Nahuatl, Southern Paiute, Yana etc.'

Southern Tiwa, the other language cited by S, is a very different case: unlike Greenlandic, it does show canonical incorporation. S reports that, according to Allen et al. 1984, incorporation in Southern Tiwa is obligatory; so it cannot be a lexical process. In fact, as Allen et al. make clear, incorporation is a function of such features as animacy, humanness, and number. Apparently S has overlooked their concluding statement (310): 'Furthermore, overlay relations such as "new topic" may sometimes block incorporation where it is otherwise necessary.' It is observations of this kind that I addressed in Mithun 1984.

Contrary to S's understanding, the purpose of my 1984 article is in fact not to prove 'the null hypothesis'—'that any individual word-building process does not interact with the syntax', and 'that NI is always devoid of syntactic interest' (19). It is, as the title indicates, a discussion of the function and evolution of NI. A basic point is that incorporation is not an arbitrary formal alternative to a syntactic paraphrase; rather, the different structures serve different functions. S rejects this conclusion (21):

'to cast doubt on M's characterization of NI ... it is sufficient for NI to be the only normal, idiomatic form (in the sense of Searle 1975)—for then it is not the case that "speakers incorporate for a purpose", but rather that they refrain from incorporating for a purpose.'

The point is that there is a difference. Whether an incorporated form or its analytic counterpart is more idiomatic in a language is a function of the world, not an arbitrary switch in the grammar. In many instances, the only idiomatic way to express a certain fact is, indeed, with incorporation. This is not because the language is defective, but because the real world does not offer the alternative situation sufficiently often for the language to encode it idiomatically. Speakers of an incorporating language may never hear or produce sentences about hand-washing where the noun for 'hand' appears outside of the verb 'wash', and may even find such sentences odd, because the situation calling for them would be odd. This does not mean that NI is arbitrary.

The fact that IN's generally have less individual salience than separate nominals is probably familiar to anyone experienced in working with spontaneous oral discourse.² In fact, texts recorded by Harrington 1947 from Tewa—a sister language of Southern Tiwa within the Tanoan family—provide extensive exemplification of the fact that, when a noun is specifically employed to introduce a significant new topic, it typically appears outside of the verb (the discourse function of incorporation in Tanoan is discussed in Mithun 1983):

- (1) a. *hèri 'i-'q̄n'úkè: wém fó'è: 'q̄n-tc̄æn̄u ...*
 and the-girl a HAIR she.her-threw
 'So the girl threw her a hair ...'

² Incorporation as a stylistic device is notoriously fragile—in unpredictable ways—under elicitation, very slow dictation, and writing. Some speakers, intent on translating English prompts as faithfully as possible, incorporate rarely or never. Others, alert to the linguist's unbounded delight at the verbal virtuosity displayed in incorporation, incorporate every time it is morphologically possible, regardless of discourse context (Mithun 1985). Because of this phenomenon, several colleagues have reported erroneously concluding, early in their fieldwork, that incorporation in particular languages was obligatory.

- b. *hèrihò' 'i-tcùye'iri 'i-'àn'úké: 'ó:-fóh-wíyíⁿdè'è*
 and.so the-witch the-girl she.her-HAIR-throwing
'ihè:ri, ...

when

'And so as the girl was throwing it (the hair) to the witch, ...'
 (Harrington, 115–16).

New topics may be introduced in other ways, however. IN's do, on occasion, serve to introduce new topics—simply because they are parts of complex verbs denoting conceptually unitary activities, like fish-catching or berry-picking. Further discussion of fish or berries is not unexpected in such situations.

Actually, topics need not be explicitly introduced by nouns at all. The following exchange illustrates this well. Two Mohawk speakers met in an office early one afternoon. The man asked the woman what she had for lunch. She answered with 2A, and her friend replied wistfully with 2B:

- (2) A. *S-a-k-atshó:ri nì:'i.*
 again-PAST-1sg.-slurp myself
 'I had soup, myself.'

- B. *Á:ke kî' nà:'a tsi ni-ka-nutar-áku.*
 gee just guess that SO-NEUT.SG-soup-delicious
 'Gee, I bet it (soup) must have been delicious.'

Further discussion of the soup ensued. Note that the topic of soup was first introduced here by a verb. B knew that A had eaten soup because of her choice of the verb for eating, one used only with soup. When he used the noun for 'soup', he incorporated it as established information.

Topics may even be introduced with no words at all. Most of us have experienced a situation like the following: Two people sitting on a bench silently watch a red Porsche roar by. One then turns to the other and comments, *Nice*.

The referentiality of IN's is a subtle issue. Obviously it is not the case that they are never related to a referent. If I say that John 'hand-washed', there is little doubt that I have his own hands in mind. If I say I have a headache, it is generally understood that my own head is involved. IN's are not marked for referentiality, and this is why external determiners appear so often with such constructions: they are used to supply overt referential specification.

S objects to the observation that IN's narrow the scope of their host verbs, rather than functioning as arguments themselves. It has generally been assumed that, in a verb like Mohawk *-hnek-ihra-* 'drink', *-hnek-* 'liquid' narrows the scope of the verb *-ihra-* 'consume' to the consumption of liquids. Such verbs can occur with external nominal constituents:

- (3) *Onù:ta' wa'-k-hnek-ì:ra.*
 milk PAST-1sg.-liquid-consume
 'I drank milk.'

S's objection reads as follows (28):

'The idea is that the IN can be taken as a qualifier of the activity expressed by the verb, and the external argument as the real argument; the effect of modification of the incorporated nominal is then a product of the semantics, rather than the syntax. If we have a clause of the

form NP₁ N₂+V, we take N₂+V to signify the class of actions of V-ing restricted to things of type N₂, and the patient of this action to be NP₁. Thus the patient must both be in the set denoted by N₂ and in the range of potential denotata of NP₁.

'Such a semantic theory might be plausible in the case where the incorporated nominal is quite general, and the external argument is necessarily a more specific entity of the same kind—as in Eng. *compose a cantata* ... But it is much less plausible where the two sets have no necessary relationship to one another. This is the case in M's Mohawk example 106 ... and in general where the external nominal is a quantifier, as in M's Caddo example 81.'

My ex. 106 is repeated below:³

(4) *Kanekwarúnyu wa'-k-akya'tawi'tsher-ú:ni.*

it.dotted.DISTR PAST-1sg.-dress-make

'I made a polka-dotted dress.' ('I dress-made a polka-dotted one.')

S feels that 'existing semantic theories' could not account for the meaning of such sentences unless incorporated nouns are recognized as true arguments. However, as pointed out in my 1984 paper, the same types of external constituents appear with verbs containing no incorporated nouns at all. The nature of their patients is interpretable from the inherently narrow scope of the verb, from the discourse context, or from a combination of both. The sentence below (quoted from p. 870) is appropriate any time the type of patient involved (here a dress) is interpretable from context:

(5) *Kanekwarúnyu wa'-k-atkáhtho.*

it.dotted.DISTR PAST-1sg.-see

'I saw a polka-dotted one.'

A semantic theory that could not handle such constructions would be stymied even by languages without incorporation. Situations in which the range of possible patients of a verb and of possible referents of an external noun 'have no necessary relationship to one another' arise all the time in ordinary English. If someone asked me, *So how was the fishing trip?*, I might reply:

(6) *Oh, I caught a beaut.*

My friend would probably be secure in the knowledge that I had caught a beautiful fish. Note that the range of possible patients of the verb is important here. If, instead, I had said 7, my friend would probably be puzzled:

(7) *Oh, I met a beaut.*

Catching is something one does to fish, among other things, especially on a fishing trip. Meeting is something one generally does to humans, but rarely fish. But at the same time, catching is not a verb that necessarily implies a particular patient, as singing (songs) does. If I telephoned a friend and reported, with no preliminaries, *I caught a beaut*, my friend would be confused; she might try to remember whether I played softball, or wonder whether I was sick.

As S points out, verbs with IN's often appear with external quantifiers, as

³ S's suggestion that this sentence would start a discourse is unlikely; it would be more likely to appear during a discussion of dressmaking. Discourse-initially, a speaker would normally establish that she had made a dress, and then go on to describe the dress with separate predications such as this one.

in the Caddo sentence below (original ex. 81):

- (8) *Wayah hák-k'uh-t-'i'-sa'*.
 a.lot PROG-grass-be/grow-PROG
 'There is a lot of grass.'

Interpretation of the quantifier in such a sentence cannot depend upon the status of the IN as a syntactic argument, since the same quantifiers also appear with verbs containing no IN at all, as below (original ex. 82):

- (9) *Wayah háh-'i'-sa'*.
 a.lot PROG-be/grow-PROG
 'There is a lot.'

Again, any theory of semantics that cannot handle the interpretation of such sentences will encounter similar problems with English. Quantifiers need not have an overt lexical antecedent in English any more than in an incorporating language. In answer to the question *How was the party?*, I might reply:

- (10) *O.K., but I drank too much.*

On the transitive reading of *drank*, you would have little trouble understanding that what I drank too much of was alcohol. The English verb is sufficiently narrow in scope to make it clear that I consumed liquid, probably alcohol; and the party context confirms the alcohol. When a verb's scope is transparently narrowed morphologically by an IN, it functions in just the same way.

It is unfortunate that S seems to have misinterpreted a number of basic points of my 1984 discussion. Thus he remarks (fn. 2):

'M does cite Wakashan as illustrating her principles. As Tony Woodbury (p.c.) has pointed out to me, it would be very difficult to argue that these languages involve synchronic compounding in incorporation.'

He has omitted the discussion surrounding the Wakashan examples. There I observe that NI may cease to be a productive process at any point in its development in a language, although lexical items produced by the process may remain for a while. Over time, they gradually lose their original identity as compounds through phonological and semantic change and lexical replacement. Wakashan and Chemakuan languages contain extensive sets of lexical suffixes that share the semantic and pragmatic functions of incorporating verbs in other languages. Swadesh 1948 demonstrated, by compiling sets of cognate suffixes and stems—both between related languages and within individual languages—that the suffixes originated as verb stems. Given the context of the reference to Wakashan, Sadock's remark is at best inappropriate. Because of a number of problems of this nature, readers interested in specific issues should consult my 1984 article.

In the end, it seems counter-productive to alter the defining features of a structurally and functionally coherent class so that a completely different process can be admitted to that class, and then to abandon the characteristics originally associated with the class because they are no longer exceptionless. Perhaps we can learn more by investigating just why the Greenlandic structure might be, as S has suggested, so unlike noun incorporation.

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