

Some bare nouns are more equal than others

The distribution and interpretation of bare nominals is a long-standing topic in linguistic theory. In languages with a productive complex predication process, the debate has often focused on the nature of bare singular nouns and their relation to the verb in the two types of N+V constructions exemplified in (1) and (2) for Persian.

- (1) a. mærdom **færib** xord-æn
 people deceit ate/collided-3PL
 ‘(The) people were deceived.’
- b. nærges mu-ha-_-o **_une** zæd
 Narges hair-PL-POSS.3SG-OM comb hit-3SG
 ‘Narges combed her hair.’
- (2) a. mæn **hævij** xord-æm
 I carrot ate-1SG
 ‘I ate a carrot/carrots.’
- b. bæ_e-ha **ketab** mi-xun-æn
 child-PL book DUR-read-3PL
 ‘The children are reading a book/books.’

These bare nouns appear in the preverbal position, seem to be in a close relation with the verb, and share certain properties such as stress and VP aspect. Based on these similarities, the two types of nominals have been treated uniformly in past analyses as undergoing an instance of noun incorporation (Ghomeshi and Massam 1994, Dabir-Moghaddam 1997). I will argue, however, that these two categories of preverbal nouns cannot receive the same analysis since they display distinct syntactic and semantic behavior: the complex predicate nominals in (1), unlike the bare object nouns in (2), cannot be questioned, are modified differently, have different interpretations, give rise to distinct case-assignment contexts, and can co-occur with a nonspecific object.

I will then show that a Noun Incorporation analysis cannot be maintained for the bare object nouns. The mixed characteristics of these nominals are reminiscent of what has been described as Pseudo Noun Incorporation or PNI (cf. Massam 2001, Dayal 2003). I argue, however, that there is no theoretical need for positing PNI and that the distinct properties of the two nominal categories are captured by the distinct structural positions of these nouns. Following ideas developed in Vergnaud (2000), I suggest a framework in which the verbal predicate and nominal phrase each project their own domain in syntax. The nonspecific bare nouns in (2) appear in the nominal domain as internal arguments of the thematic verb, while the nominal element of the complex predicate construction is part of the verbal domain with which it combines to form a single predicate. By contrasting the behavior of the bare objects with specific and definite nominals, I argue that the distinct properties observed are straightforwardly captured by (i) the structural complexity of the noun, and (ii) the structural position occupied by the nominal with respect to the verbal domain.