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The structure and interpretation of Nouns and Noun Phrases (Part I)

Introduction

Lisa Cheng, Denis Delfitto & Lutz Marten

The papers in this special issue of the Italian Journal of Linguistics are the results of a collaborative research project between universities in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, concerned with the structure and interpretation of nouns and noun phrases from a cross-linguistic comparative perspective. The main languages providing the empirical basis for the majority of the papers are Bemba and Swahili (Bantu), Mandarin and Cantonese (Chinese) and Italian (Romance), reflecting the scope of the project. To these Bangla and Hebrew are added, resulting in a typologically rich and diverse set of papers.

The structure and interpretation of nouns and noun phrases have been extensively studied for the last 20 years. Plural marking, the distinction between count and mass nouns, cross-linguistic similarities between bare nouns and determined nouns, nominal grammatical features (person, number, gender), and nominal classification are a small subset of areas of contemporary research concerned with nouns and noun phrases (see Carlson 1980, Cheng & Sybesma 1999, Chierchia 1998, Dayal 2004, Delfitto 2005, Marten 2005 among many others). Many aspects of nominal syntax and semantics have been studied intensively with respect to European languages, but also increasingly with respect to a wider set of languages, and it is to this kind of development in a macro-comparative perspective that the present papers contribute.

Thematically, the papers that appear in the present issue and in one of the next issues of the Italian Journal of Linguistics address topics concerning nominal classification, classifiers and classifier phrases, forms of nominal compounding and issues in the comparative syntax of noun phrases. The relation between the different nominal classification systems of Bantu, Chinese and Romance – and indeed Bangla – has been noticed in the typological literature for some time, and these systems are often seen as being part of a continuum (see e.g. Grinevald 2002), or indeed as being essentially the same – as for

example proposed by Corbett (1991) and Corbett and Fraser (2000) for the Bantu noun class systems and Romance genders. Another parallel between Bantu and Romance is the structure of the noun phrase (see e.g. the papers in de Cat and Demuth 2008). In addition, Bantu and Chinese share, next to their classification systems, the fact that bare nouns and nouns with classifiers/noun-class markers can be interpreted both as definite and indefinite, a characteristic also shared with Bangla. The collection of papers in these issues explores the similarities and differences between the different language groups, develops analyses for several challenges raised by the data, and investigates noun and noun phrase structure from a macro-comparative perspective.

The whole set of contributions is divided between papers dealing with the morphosyntax of (complex) nouns, and those discussing the morphosyntax of noun phrases. More precisely, the three papers in the current issue are concerned with (complex) nouns, while another set of five papers on the morphosyntax of noun phrases will be published in issue 24:2 (2012) of the *Italian Journal of Linguistics*.

The papers collected in the present volume start out with some fundamental issues around the structure of nouns, discussed in the paper by Crisma, Marten and Sybesma. More particularly, the paper addresses the central comparative question concerning the function of classification: why are the determinations expressed by classifiers, by gender or by noun class marking encoded in morphosyntax if the corresponding information may somehow be assumed to be already present in the semantics associated to the noun in question? The 'interface hypothesis' put forth in this paper links the answer to the interaction of number and 'noun class / classifier' determinations: noun classification / gender emerges as a by-product of the need to mark 'individual reference', and the interplay with number determinations, which takes different forms in the three language systems in question, is what Chinese, Romance and Bantu appear to share for the satisfaction of this need. In fact, one of the main insights of this contribution is that the processes of 'association with number' can be used as a sort of original heuristic in order to determine commonalities and points of divergence in the syntax of nouns proper to language systems that use, superficially, radically different forms of formal marking in the nominal system: classifiers in Chinese, noun classification in Bantu and gender in Romance.

Basciano, Kula and Melloni's article presents a cross-linguistic survey of two compounding phenomena, i.e. root NN compounds and exocentric VN compounds, in Bantu, Romance and Mandarin Chinese. By applying a macro-comparative perspective to the morphosyntactic, semantic and productivity patterns proper to these compounding phenomena, the authors show that the Bantu-Romance connection significantly extends to the word formation domain, while Mandarin strongly diverges from Romance and Bantu and manifests instead strong convergences with Germanic languages, especially in the formation of NN compounds.

Based on a comprehensive set of data, Basciano et al.'s article also challenges the theoretical perspective on compounding recently defended by Jackendoff (2009) and Progovac (2009), i.e. a 'protolinguistic account' of compounding phenomena. Their cross-linguistic study presents a significant set of data strongly suggesting the presence of an underlying "syntax" of compounding both in the domain of NN and VN compounds.

The paper by Delfitto, Fiorin, and Kula on different varieties of nominal compounds is primarily based on a detailed analysis of so-called 'associative compounds' in Bemba. These structures are open to a large variety of interpretations (roughly corresponding to those detected in genitival structure in Indo-European) and significantly, also open to recursion. Associative compounds in Bantu are carefully compared with two different varieties of 'alleged' Romance compounds: so called 'prepositional compounds' and a restricted class of 'aprepositional genitives' attested in Italian, showing commonalities with both Construct State in Semitic and so-called 'Juxtaposition Genitive' in Old French. What these three constructions have in common is the fact that they clearly challenge the traditional boundaries between syntax and morphology: on one side, they are all syntactically 'too transparent' to respond positively to the diagnostics associated to the Lexical Integrity Hypothesis, on the other side they seem to resist full assimilation to the familiar syntactic modes of construction. We have thus a sort of 'gradience' that calls for a new style of analysis as well as theoretical tools.

We are quite confident that, taken together, the three contributions published in the present volume may provide a stimulating elucidation of the advantages of macro-comparison as applied to a constrained domain of nominal syntax, essentially involving the basic determinations of (complex) nouns and the complex interplay to which they give rise.

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