A puzzle for a Neo-Davidsonian analysis of event nominals
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1. Two approaches to the lexical representation of event nominals. According to a neo-Davidsonian analysis (Dowty 1989, Grimm & McNally 2013), event nominals, such as assassination, have impoverished lexical content: they don’t encode information about their arguments (1). Nominal arguments are associated with their heads by lambda-conjunction (2).

(1) $\lambda e[\text{assassination}(e)]$

(2) $\lambda e[\text{assassination}(e) \& \text{Agent}(x, e) \& \text{Patient}(y, e)]$

The alternative, lexicalist approach (Wechsler 2008), assumes that event nominals lexically encode their arguments. The two approaches make different predictions about how the possessive argument in (3), the killer, which I call target noun, is interpreted, as agent or patient.

(3) The killer’s assassination was recorded on camera.  
[the killer is TARGET NOUN]

2. Predictions. Neo-Davidsonian approach: The prenominal possessive introduces a free variable R: the killer’s: $\lambda e[R(\text{killer}, e)]$. R will be valued either as agent or patient depending on context and on world knowledge. If our subjective priors suggest that killers are more likely to be assassinated than to assassinate someone, we will assign it a patient role, and if we have the opposite priors, we will favor an agentive interpretation. Lexicalist approach: According to Smirnova (2015), the interpretation of the possessive argument depends on the lexical properties of the corresponding verbs and their alternation patterns (Levin 1993). If the verb participates in alternations that favor the Patient argument, the possessive argument of the event nominal is more likely to be interpreted as patient. If the verb participates in alternations that favor the agent argument, the prenominal possessive of the event nominal will more likely to be interpreted as agent. I’ll refer to these classes as PATIENT-DOMINANT and AGENT-DOMINANT, respectively. Thus, the interpretation of the target noun in (3) will depend on the lexical class of the verb.

3. Study. Participants. 30 participants, recruited through AMT. Stimuli. 16 Agent-dominant verbs (Admire, Avoid, and Inherently Directed Motion) and 14 Patient-dominant verbs (Destroy, Murder, and Change of State). For each lexical item three sentences were constructed: two verbal constructions with a target noun used as agent in one sentence (4) and as patient in another (5), and the nominal construction with the target noun in the prenominal possessive (6).

(4) The killer assassinated the victim.  
Target noun used as agent

(5) The gang assassinated the killer.  
Target noun used as patient

(6) The killer’s assassination was recorded on camera.

Procedure. In the naturalness task, I measured if a target noun was more likely to be interpreted as agent or patient in the context of a particular verb. This task allows me to measure world knowledge effects. In continuation task, I measured whether participants interpreted target noun as agent or patient. Pairs of sentences, (4) and (5), were presented as the beginnings of two different stories, Story 1 and Story 2, and were followed by a sentence with the target noun in the possessive form, (6). The participants had to decide if the third sentence continued Story 1 or Story 2. Results. The results from the multiple regression model suggest that the interpretation of the target noun was strongly dependent of the lexical type of the nominal. While naturalness judgments did not predict the semantic role inferences in the continuation task, the lexical type was a highly significant predictor.