

A Diachronic Account of English Deverbal Nominals

This talk offers a novel diachronic explanation for a famous observation. English causative alternation verbs such as *grow* and *collapse* allow optional omission of the agent argument (1), while their cognate nominals (*growth*, *collapse*_N) disallow expression of the agent (2). In contrast, the nominal cognates of obligatorily transitive verbs such as *destroy* allow expression of the agent (3). This puzzling observation has played a key role in syntactic theorizing. Following Chomsky (1970), Marantz (1997) argued that the agent role is lacking from lexical entries; in a verbal projection the agent role is assigned in the syntax (the so-called *Little v Hypothesis*; Kratzer (1996)). As for the varying acceptability of the possessive agents in the nominal construction, Marantz (1997) suggests that subtle semantic or pragmatic differences are responsible for these contrasts: the possessive can express a range of roles, including ‘the sort of agent implied by an event with an external rather than an internal cause’ (from Marantz 1997; see also Harley and Noyer 2000).

However, Smith’s (1972) survey of Webster’s 1953 dictionary concluded that ‘There are many counterexamples to [Chomsky’s] claim: *explode*, *divide*, *accelerate*, *expand*, *repeat*, *neutralize*, *conclude*, *unify*, and so on at length.’ (Smith 1972:137; see also Harley and Noyer 2000) Unlike *grow* and *collapse*, these causative alternation verbs have cognate nominals that *do* allow expression of the agent (4). Smith noted that causative alternation verbs obeying and disobeying the *grow/collapse* pattern occur in roughly equal numbers, governed by some morphological tendencies, e.g. the exceptions tend to have Latin nominalizing suffixes (1972:137). However, Smith did not attempt to explain the particular patterns observed.

The following diachronic explanation will be offered: *Nouns such as growth and collapse*_N *entered the language at a time when only the inchoative variant of the verb existed.* The earliest OED citation for intransitive *grow* is c725 (as a strong Germanic root it is, in a sense, older); the noun *growth* entered in 1587; and transitive *grow* is not attested until 1774. A similar order is found with *collapse*: first intransitive (1732); then the noun *collapse* (1833); then transitive (1883). In short, the argument structure inherited by the noun from its source verb has generally been preserved into present-day English. Verbs like *separate*, on the other hand, originated as transitives, thus precluding any possibility for the cognate nominal (*separation*) to inherit only an intransitive argument structure. Table I shows selected results for examples taken from the literature cited, assuming the grammaticality judgments by those authors; the full paper will buttress these judgments with data from a corpus study.

According to this view, the synchronic grammar of contemporary English stipulates argument structures for verbs and (non-productive) nominals (5). We thus predict, correctly, that productive *ing*-nominals (whether in gerundive or *ing-of* ‘mixed nominal’ constructions) will always allow expression of the full argument structure of the cognate verb, since the nominal is derived by a productive rule; see (6) (cp. Zucchi 1989). Under the Little *v* Hypothesis, these *ing-of* nominal constructions must contain the Agent-assigning element (*v*), as indeed proposed by Marantz (1997). There are three problems with that analysis, which assimilates *ing-of* to verbal projections: (i) *ing-of* nominals have all the syntactic properties of nominal projections (no DP complements; adjectives modify; etc.). (ii) Like other event nominals, *ing-of* nominals denote *events*, unlike verbal projections (clauses and gerundives), which denote *propositions*; see (7) (Vendler 1967; Zucchi 1989:25). (iii) Deverbal and *ing-of* nominals can coordinate and share dependents (8), a problem for the Little *v* Hypothesis, since *destruction* and *looting* would appear at different levels in the phrase structure, but simple N⁰ coordination under the proposed account.

1. a. John grows tomatoes here. / Mary collapsed the tent.
b. Tomatoes grow here. / The tent collapsed.
2. a. *John's growth of tomatoes / *Mary's collapse of the tent
b. the tomatoes' growth, the growth of the tomatoes / the tent's collapse, the collapse of the tent
- 3.a. John destroyed the city/ *the city destroyed
b. John's destruction of the city / the city's destruction
4. a. The balloon exploded. / The army exploded the bridge.
b. the army's explosion of the bridge (from Harley and Noyer 2000)

Table I. Earliest OED entries for causative alternation Vs

verb / noun	intrans. V	trans.	iV - tV	poss.
grow / growth	c725	1774	-1049	*
collapse / collapse	1732	1883	-151	*
disengage / disengagement	1646	1611	35	OK
separate / separation	1684	1432-	252	OK
unify / unification	1817	1502	315	OK
explode / explosion	1790	1621	169	OK
accumulate / accumulation	1759	1529	230	OK
continue / continuation	c1400	1340	60	OK

5. grow < (agt,) th > growth < th >
 explode < (agt,) th > explosion < (agt,) th >
 destroy < agt, th > destruction < agt, th >
6. John's growing of tomatoes (*ing-of*)
7. a. John's looting/destruction of the house was slow/ was sudden / took a long time. (*ing-of*)
 b. #John's looting the house was slow/ was sudden / took a long time. (*gerundive*)
 c. #That John looted the house was slow/ was sudden / took a long time.
8. With nothing left after the soldier's destruction and looting of their home, they re-boarded their coach and set out for the port of Calais. (Google)

References

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