

## On the Syntax and Argument Structure of Agent Nouns

11:30 – 12:30: Paul Kiparsky, Stanford University, kiparsky@stanford.edu

The Functional Nominalization Thesis (Kornfilt & Whitman 2011) holds that nominalizers head a nominal projection at some level of the V projection; the structure above and below them respectively determines their nominal and verbal syntactic properties. Baker & Vinokurova 2009 use the FNT to explain the lack of verbal agent nominalizations such as *\*the quickly writer the letter*: to have verbal properties they should be introduced above v, but then they should not be just agentive, but should attach freely to every kind of verb including unaccusatives.

I argue that B&V's version of the FNT is incorrect, and (1) that agent and action nominals have verbal syntax just in case they bear Tense/Aspect features, and (2) that the syntax of nominalizers does not correlate with independent diagnostics of their height in the V projection.

Vedic *'-tar-* (preaccenting) should be “high” by B&V's criteria: it forms agent nouns that assign structural case, take adverbs, and have strictly agentive argument structure:

- (1) *īṣkartā víhṛutam púnaḥ* (*RV* 8.1.12)  
fixer-Nom wrong-Acc again  
'the maker right again (of) what has gone wrong'

But it is structurally low: it is always adjacent to the root, and never goes on prefixed bases. It is inherently present/imperfective in that it only denotes agents of ongoing eventualities. The tenseless accented agent nominalizer *-tár-* has B&V's “low” properties: it can be added to non-agentive/unaccusative verbs and forms nominals that take genitive objects and adjective modifiers. But it is structurally high: it is separable from the root by causative and other V→V suffixes, and affixed to the whole verb base, including its preverbs.

Vedic nominalizers with nominal properties can't be spelled out low and raised to their actual position, because the v head may contain causative and other suffixes, and because of accent and tmesis, and nominalizers with verbal properties can't be spelled out high and then lowered to their actual position, for we can't ensure at spellout that this position is empty.

The Finnish agent nominalizer *-ja* has a mix of “high” and “low” properties that is also incompatible with the FNT. It attaches to any kind of verb including unagentives / unaccusatives, yet does not assign structural case and is compatible with Voice morphology. As expected on the present proposal, agent nouns of this type consistently lack Tense/Aspect features.

My conclusion that the best predictor of verbal properties in agent nominalizations is Tense/Aspect is broadly compatible also with recent work on action nominalizations: verbal gerunds have imperfective Aspect (Pustejovsky 1995, Alexiadou 2001, Alexiadou et al. 2010), whereas regular action nominalizations are aspectless nominal heads. It also relieves little v of the functional overload it has acquired in recent syntactic work. In fact, it opens the door to an account of the generalizations behind the FNT in a lexicalist approach to nominalizations.