Root vs. n: A Study of Japanese Light Verb Construction and Its Implications for Nominal Architecture

Goal. It has been assumed that in Japanese, the nominal structures for NI (1a) and for non-NI (1b) are underlyingly the same: (Kageyama 1982, Terada 1990):

(1) a.  Nino-ga [VP [NP t1] syokuji1-sita]
      Nino\textsubscript{ NOM} dining-did
      ‘Nino had a meal.’

b.  Nino-ga [VP [NP syokuji-o] sita.]
      Nino\textsubscript{ NOM} dining-\textsubscript{ACC} did
      ‘Nino had a meal.’

The general assumption is that in (1a), an N head \textit{syokuji} incorporates into a verb \textit{su} (the verbal root of \textit{sita} ‘did’), creating an N + V complex, whereas in (1b), the noun stays in-situ, obtaining Case from \textit{su}. Thus, an NI form and a non-NI form start off with the same underlying NP structure. I argue that this is incorrect, and provide different underlying structures for NI and non-NI sentences.

Counterevidence. The fact that only a non-NI form can co-occur with noun-modifying elements like (complex) numeral classifiers (2), or adjectives (3) suggest that an NI form is not derived from an NP:

(2) Nino-ga hutu-ka-bun-no *syokuji-sita/ syokuji-o sita.
    Nino\textsubscript{ NOM} two-days-amount \textsubscript{GEN} dining-did/ dining-\textsubscript{ACC} did
    ‘Nino had two days worth of meals.’

(3) Nino-ga kantanna * syokuji,-sita/ syokuji-o sita.
    Nino\textsubscript{ NOM} simple dining-did/ dining-\textsubscript{ACC} did
    ‘Nino had a simple meal’

If an NI form contains an N on a par with a non-NI form, it should be able to host these noun-modifying elements, contrary to fact. In fact, in other NI languages like Mohawk, where both NI-forms and non-NI forms share the same underlying structure (i.e. NP), the NI form can host these elements (Baker 1996).

In fact, Sugimura (2008) argues that NI-forms and non-NI forms are not both NPs, and she posits a DP structure for a non-NI form. If this is the case, then at least the grammaticality fact in (2) follows: that is, genitive Case is only compatible with a non-NI form under the assumption that a D head licenses Genitive Case. However, there is no concrete evidence that a D assigns genitive Case in Japanese. Moreover, the genitive marker \textit{no} could be a dissociated morpheme that is inserted post-syntactically. But most importantly, the DP/NP distinction cannot explain why an NP cannot host an adjective in (3). If an NI form is derived from an NP, it should be able to host these noun-modifying elements like other Mohawk-type NI languages.

Proposal. I propose that the NI form does not consist of N + V, but it instead consists of a category called root (Pesetsky 1995) and a light verb (Grimshaw & Mester 1988) \textit{su} ‘do’, which is semantically vacuous (i.e. does not bear theta-roles). On the contrary, I assume that a non-NI form consists of a root and at least a category-defining head \textit{n} (Halle & Marantz 1993) that discharges an external argument of the root, which eventually moves to a subject position:
Thus, in (4a), \(\sqrt{syokuji}\) ‘dining’ is never a noun at any derivational stage. The root combines with \(su\) ‘do’, and thereby \(syokuji\)-sita becomes a verb as a whole. In contrast, in (4b), \(\sqrt{syokuji}\) is assigned a category of noun, before it merges with \(su\). The grammaticality of (2) and (3) then follows since noun-modifying elements are incompatible with a verb \(syokuji\)-sita, while they can attach to a nominal \(syokuji\) for \(syokuji\)-o sita.

**Supporting Evidence.** (4a, b) imply that the subject in an NI sentence is base-generated, while that in a non-NI sentence the subject is derived. This is supported by Kuno’s (1973) observation that base-generated subjects force an exhaustive interpretation, while derived ones do not. Thus, the interpretation of (1a) and (1b) are not exactly the same: (1a) is interpreted as ‘It is Nino who had a meal’, while (1b) obtains a non-exhaustive interpretation, ‘Nino had a meal.’ (4a, b) also imply that unaccusative nouns can only have a bare-root option (4a) since they do not have an external argument that \(n\) can discharge. Thus, unaccusative nouns can only have an NI form:

(5) Tokyuu-ga  Ueno  ni  5-dai tootyaku-sita/ *tootyaku-o sita(n)

limited express-NOM Ueno station to 5-CL arrival-did/arrival-ACC did

‘Five limited express trains arrived at Ueno station.’ (Miyagawa 1989)

**Conclusion.** Thus, the structural realization of roots is closely tied with the argument structure, which consequently supports the view that theta-grid information is somehow encoded in roots (Marantz 1997).

**References**


Marantz, A. 1997. No escape from syntax: don’t try morphological analysis in the privacy of your own lexicon.


