Nominal agents and θ-licensing of external arguments

Mismatches between the thematic licensing and realization of external arguments (EAs) suggests that the projection where the EA is θ-licensed is distinct from the one in which it is merged, contra traditional theories of VoiceP (cf Kratzer 1996). I thus argue for the bifurcation of VoiceP into two distinct phrases: a θ-Licensing Phrase (LP) which introduces the 'AGENT'/'CAUSE' variable, and VoiceP, which binds/saturates this variable and assigns accusative case to the internal argument (IA). Event nominalization is one of the places where the distinction between LP and VoiceP can clearly be observed.

Grimshaw (1990) showed that deverbal nominalizations which refer to events (eg *'The publication of this book triggered a war'*) pattern very differently from deverbal nominalizations which refer to result states or entities (eg *'The publication lay on the table'*). One of the most noticeable differences between the two types is that the IA is obligatory for the event nominals, but not so for the result/entity nominals. In this talk, I focus on an interesting asymmetry within event nominalizations, which is that although the IA is obligatory, the EA never is. Some (eg Alexiadou et al. 2007) have argued that this is because VoiceP, the presumed θ-licenser of the EA, is not embedded below the nominalizing head. Drawing on data from Kinande (Bantu, DRC), I show that the EA *is* in fact θ-licensed below n, and thus the EA/IA-asymmetry cannot be attributed to differences in θ-licensing of arguments. I focus on event nominalizations in noun class 14 (which is distinct from the noun class which infinitives fall into), and show that they are compatible with modification which requires an EA to be licensed, eg agent-oriented adverbials (1a), agent comitative phrases (1b), and instrumental phrases (1c).

(1) (a) *Obú-gús-é   bw'-ebi-róngwe   **kinyamaká** ...*
          c14-throw-fv   AM14-c8-soil.lumps   energetically ...
          The throwing of the pods-of-soil energetically...

     (b) *Obú-seny-é bwa   Máte bw'-esyó-ngwi   **na   mw-álí   wábó**   ...*
          c14-chop-fv AM14   Mate AM14-c10-wood with   c1-sister AM1.PRN ...
          'Mate's chopping of wood with his sister...

     (c) *Obú-seny-é bw'   esyó-ngwi **omó-mbásá** ...*
          c14-chop-fv AM14   c10-wood   c18-c9.axe   ...
          The chopping of the wood with an axe...

The EA is thus clearly thematically licensed below n, which has lead Borer (2020) to argue that event nominals always embed VoiceP: when n embeds active Voice, the EA is realized as a genitive DP; when n embeds passive voice, the EA is omitted or realized as a *by*-phrase. The problem with this analysis is that n cannot embed passive morphology (2), even though it can embed other types of verbal morphology (eg causative morphology). Additionally, since Voice is assumed to be a case-assigner, the unavailability of accusative case for the nominal's IA is puzzling.

(2)   **Obu-halamb-w-a*
      c14-praise-PASS-fv
      Int: [the fact of] being praised

Event nominals therefore simultaneously have the EA θ-licensed and yet lack lack properties associated with VoiceP. I thus argue that θ-licensing occurs in a distinct phrase (the LP) from the one which introduces the A-position and licenses accusative case (VoiceP). The EA/IA-asymmetry arises because the nominalizer embeds LP (and its complement, which includes the IA) but not VoiceP.

References

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