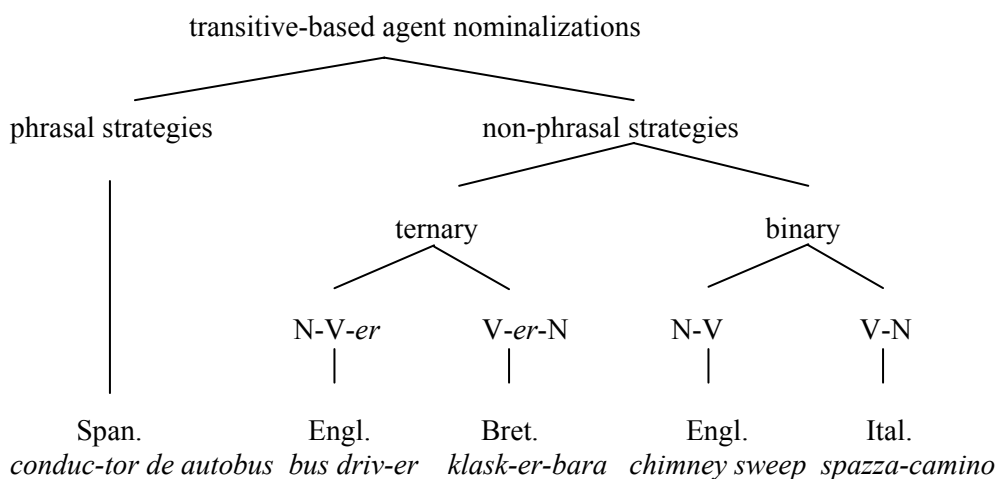


How to say ‘the x who Vs Ns’: transitive-based agent nominalizations in comparative perspective

Volker Gast (Freie Universität Berlin)

While only little variation can be observed in the expression of deverbal agent nominalizations without an explicit specification of the object (*drink-er*, *writ-er*, etc.), European languages differ considerably in the way such nominalizations are expressed when the object is made explicit. In contemporary European languages there are three major types: (i) lexicalized phrasal expressions (e.g. Spanish *conduc-tor de autobus*, lit. ‘driv-er of bus’), (ii) (ternary) synthetic compounds of the form N-V-*er* (Engl. *bus driv-er*), and (iii) (binary) V-N compounds (e.g. Ital. *spazza-camino*, ‘chimney sweeper’, lit. ‘sweep-chimney’). More patterns can be found when minor and extinct European languages are taken into consideration. Breton has ternary compounds in which the verb precedes the noun (e.g. *klask-er-bara*, lit. ‘seek-er-bread’; cf. Pilch 1996: 77). Ancient Greek had V-N compounds of the Italian type (e.g. *ferē-nik-os*, ‘victory bringer’, lit. ‘bring-victory-INFL’), but prevalent was a type of compound in which the noun precedes the verb (e.g. *anthropo-fag-os*, ‘man eater’, lit. ‘man-eat-INFL’). This latter type of compound is also relatively common in Latin, though it is restricted to a closed set of verbs, which could thus be regarded as derivational suffixes (e.g. *-fer* as in *fructi-fer*, ‘fruit-bringer’, lit. ‘fruit-bring’, *-ger* as in *armi-ger*, ‘weapon carrier’, lit. ‘weapon-carry’). Binary agent nominalizations of the N-V-type are also attested in earlier stages of Germanic (cf. Kastovsky 1968), and traces of it have even been preserved in Modern English, e.g. *chimney sweep*.

The types of ‘strategies’ described above can be classified as shown in the following diagram:



Given this range of variation, the question arises of what determines the availability of specific strategies in particular languages, and whether there are any correlations between the existence of specific types and other properties of the languages in question. There are two major parameters which seem to allow for such generalizations: (i) the degree of ‘synthesis’ (phrasal > ternary > binary), and (ii) the order of verb and object (cf. Bork 1990 and Gather 2001, among others). While neither parameter seems to allow for robust generalizations when taken by itself, combining the two dimensions of classification may deliver more promising results. For instance, while it would be premature to say that the order of verb and object within compounds correlates with the order of verb and object in clause structure (Modern English constitutes a counter-example), this generalization does seem to hold for the most synthetic types, i.e. binary compounds. Strategies associated with a low degree of synthesis seem to reflect the order of head noun and genitive, rather than the one of verb and noun, in clause structure. On the basis of such a purely synchronic comparison, I will also address the question of possible and impossible historical developments in the domain of investigation.

Selected references

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