

What's in a verbal noun? Achievements and nominalizations in Romance

Verbal nouns have been repeatedly observed to display interesting features connected with the inheritance of actional values from the base verbs. In particular, in Romance languages it has been shown that different types of nominalization are sensitive to the one or the other actional value, often displaying interesting restrictions as for the actional class of the base verbs selected (cf. Author forthcoming for a survey). In this regard, achievements are fairly well individuated by at least two clear-cut effects on the nominalization type and on their concrete relation to other competing nominalization devices.

First, when comparing nominalized infinitives and action nouns formed by means of the most productive competing suffixes, one converging result is observed. In fact, while the nominalized infinitive is generally possible with any verbal base and does not seem to force any shift in its semantic properties except for a certain effect of backgrounding of the telic component, this is not the case for suffixed action nouns. In this case, achievements are shown to combine only with the nominalized infinitive when the duration of the event leading to the resultant state is emphasized, while the action noun, in contrast, is odd. This is revealed by the combination with so-called container predicates focusing on the inner dynamics of the event as in the following examples from Italian:

- (1) *L'ottenere il rimborso ci portò via due ore.*
the-obtain:INF the reimbursement us brought away two hours
'Obtaining the reimbursement took us two hours.'
- (2) *??L'ottenimento del rimborso ci portò via due ore.*
the-obtainment of:DEF reimbursement us brought away two hours

Therefore, the combinability of the verbal noun with this kind of container predicates provides a reliable diagnostics to identify achievements as an actional class.

Second, the action nouns based on the feminine form of the past participle which can be analyzed as packaging operators (cf. Author 2000) are generally not flanked by other action nouns formed with other suffixes, while this is normally possible with the other bases as in the following Spanish examples:

- (3) a. *caer* 'to fall' → *caída* / **caimiento*/ **caición*
llegar 'to arrive' → *llegada* / **llegamiento*/ **llegación*

- salir* ‘to leave’ → *salida* / **salimiento* / **salición*
venir ‘to come’ → *venida* / **venimiento* / **venición*
 b. *calentar* ‘to heat’ → *calentamiento* / *calentada*
investigar ‘to investigate’ → *investigación* / *investigada*
llamar ‘to call’ → *llamamiento* / *llamada*
mirar ‘to look’ → *miramiento* / *mirada*

This restriction is apparently due to the punctual meaning intrinsically displayed by achievements, which naturally select a nominalizing device specifically developed to provide verbal nouns with a bounded value. It has to be added that achievements are often associated with an unaccusative argument structure, which is mirrored in these derivatives when the verbal bases allow an unaccusative alternation, as in the following examples from French (cf. Ferret, Soare and Villoing 2010):

- (4) a. *Marie a percé son abcès.* → *le perçage de l’abcès*
 ‘Marie burst her abscess.’
 b. *Son abcès a percé.* → *la percée* / **le perçage de l’abcès*
 ‘Her abscess burst.’

Moreover, the unbounded value of the French suffix *-age* as observed in (5a-b), in which a derivative based on an accomplishment is shown to be only possible with an imperfective container predicate, makes it compatible with punctual verbs but only on the condition that the event is seen as in progress and pluractional:

- (5) a. *Le perçage* / ??*la percée du tunnel a progressé.*
 the drilling / the drill:FEM:PSTPTCP of:DEF tunnel has made progress
 b. *après ??le pesage* / *la pesée du bébé*
 after the weighing / the weigh FEM:PSTPTCP of:DEF child
 c. *L’arrivage/??l’arrivée des ouvriers a été interrompu(e) par un convoi de police.*
 ‘The arrival of the workers has been interrupted by a police crew.’

In (5c), the imperfective container predicate *interrompre* presupposes an unbounded action noun while the plural-dependent genitive requires a pluractional interpretation of the action noun, in which several arrivals are understood.

References

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