

Book Review

Rochelle Lieber. *English Nouns: The Ecology of Nominalization*. Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 150. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 197 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-16137-5. Hardback and E-book 49.99 USD.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2017-0077>

This monograph is another important contribution by Rochelle Lieber, whose main interest for several decades has been English morphology. Lieber rightfully argues that the relationship between form and meaning in the nominalization process is never one-to-one. Rather, it forms a complicated network. She further demonstrates how this polysemous relationship can be captured in the modified Lexical Semantic Framework (LSF), which was mainly developed in Lieber (2004) from a formal linguistics perspective. Lieber's analyses and arguments are based on naturally occurring data extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008). In presenting her arguments, she uses the derivational ecosystem metaphor. In this metaphor, morphological types (specific affixes and conversion) are analogous to organisms, while *readings* (agent, location, etc.) are analogous to habitats. Here, Lieber emphasizes that complex forms are construed depending on the context as opposed to having fixed semantic content. While rigid semantic content is termed *meaning*, Lieber uses the term *reading* to refer to a context-dependent meaning.

According to Lieber, some habitats will have several morphological types that inhabit them, whereas other habitats are largely uninhabited. In the latter case, morphological types can expand their territories by deploying themselves to cover those underexploited semantic habitats. One example Lieber identifies for this particular case is the derivation of inanimate patient nouns. She observes that English does not have a primary morphological type that inhabits the inanimate patient semantic habitat. This previously unpopulated habitat is becoming inhabited by nominalizations derived with *-ing*, *-er*, conversion, and ATK (an acronym for *-ation* and kin) nominalizations, as exemplified by *washing*, *loaner* (as in *If I don't get a new computer soon, I hope I can get a loaner*), *melt* (as in *Before making the cake pops, I bought several colors of candy melts*), and *concoction*. She also suggests that the *-ables* affix, as in *collectables*, is in the process of evolution toward an organism that would eventually inhabit the

inanimate patient noun habitat. This particular affix, however, is evolving with a specific modal nuance. I find this example intriguing, and will come back to it later in my review.

This book is soundly written; the logical flow is natural, and the technical LSF analyses are well explained and easy to follow. The book is composed of three parts. Part I, which contains two chapters, provides necessary justifications for the research as well as the terminology and methodology adopted in this book. Chapter 1 identifies the overall goal of this monograph. Though much research has discussed Event/Result (E/R) and personal nominalizations, conspicuously less attention has been paid to the full range of nominalizations. In Lieber's words, "[n]either morphologists nor syntacticians have studied the full range of data pertaining to nominalizations or the intricacies of polysemy that nominalizations display" (p. 5). This, however, is the task Lieber has set herself: to include E/R and personal nominalizations, collective and abstract nominalizations, and a few seldom-discussed nominalizations in her analyses. This book undoubtedly achieves the goal by presenting some of the most thorough research on the full range of English nominalization. Chapter 2 sets out the terminology Lieber uses and discusses the sources for data. This is an important step because different people use different terms in dealing with nominalizations, which oftentimes causes confusion. In this chapter, Lieber defines oppositions, such as simplex vs. complex nouns, eventive vs. non-eventive readings, active vs. passive configurations, and argumental vs. non-argumental compounds, among other terms.

Part II, which consists of two chapters, is devoted to the discussion of previous claims and the current data. In Chapter 3, Lieber raises nineteen questions gathered from discussions in the extant research. These questions not only pertain to E/R and ATK nominalizations, but also to conversion and simplex nouns. Lieber demonstrates that the putative answers for the vast majority of these questions need to be reconsidered when we examine the data extracted from COCA (the Corpus of Contemporary American English). In sum, she argues that nominalizations are much more malleable than previous researchers have claimed. Chapter 4 starts out by providing readings of affixes with relevant examples. Throughout this process, Lieber states that we almost never find one-to-one relationships between affixes and readings. Her derivational ecosystem metaphor is best depicted in Figure 1, redrawn after Lieber's Figure 4.1 (p. 73). In this figure, each semantic habitat contains multiple morphological types, and one morphological type can occupy multiple semantic habitats. Morphological types rendered in regular font express the identified semantic habitats primarily, whereas the lighter font depicts morphological types that express the relevant habitat secondarily.

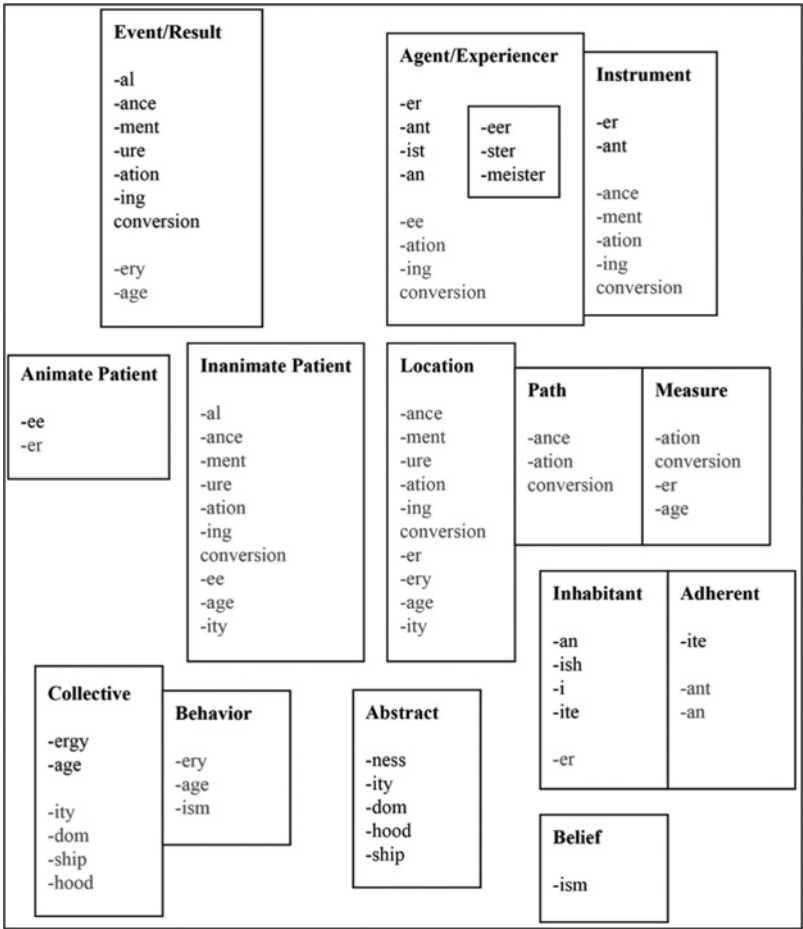


Figure 1: Habitats and Their Occupants.

Part III provides analyses of nominalizations in LSF. Chapter 5 lays out the basic concepts and notations of LSF necessary for the analysis of nominalizations. In addition to the seven semantic features provided in Lieber (2009), such as [+/- material] for concrete or abstract nouns and [+/- dynamic] for event or state readings, she adds one more feature critical to the analysis of nominalization: [+/- animate]. Based on her earlier work, she also introduces Principle of Coindexation (PC) and Principle of Feature Value Matching (PFVM). What PC does is to coindex the highest non-head argument with the highest head argument. For example, in the nominal, *the neighbor's construction of the garage*, the

head noun *construction*'s highest argument is marked <sentient>, and the sentient argument *neighbor* is coindexed with it, thereby leading to the subject-like reading of *neighbor's*. PFVM is needed to copy the feature of the base in the derived nominal. For example, the feature [+ dynamic] of the base verb *construct* needs to be copied to the nominalized form *construction* in *The construction took place last summer*. By contrast, *His preoccupation took place last summer* is not acceptable, because the base verb *preoccupy* is marked [–dynamic], and the negative value is copied to the nominalized form. With the technical preliminaries laid out in Chapter 5, the analysis of the event reading of E/R nominalizers naturally follows in Chapter 6. Lieber demonstrates how PC can be utilized in analyzing AKT/*-ing* nominalizations and conversion nouns. Remarkably, she demonstrates that the *-ing* nominalizations exhibit precisely the same pattern of behavior as ATK nominalizations.

Then, Lieber moves on to Chapter 7, which deals with various referential readings nominalizations can convey. I find this chapter the most interesting in this monograph. This chapter provides in-depth analyses of the referential readings for ATK, *-ing*, conversion, personal, abstract, collective, and inanimate patient nominals. Lieber argues that the various readings of these nominals arise through the interplay between the skeletal configurations and the two aforementioned principles. It is worth noting that she introduces another important concept, *contextual coercion*, which is needed to determine some of the feature values within the larger context in which the nominalization occurs. In the example *The Guggenheim, ..., provided President Fraga with an example of a successful construction that helped to remake a city's image*, contextual coercion allows us to infer that *construction* is a concrete entity, leading to the assignment of the positive value to the [material] feature. Likewise, in analyzing the *-er* affix, Lieber assumes that the referential argument of the affix is underspecified for the [animate] feature, and the positive or negative value is assigned drawn from the general context through contextual coercion.

Chapter 8, which is somewhat independent of the other chapters and largely overlapping with Lieber (2016), focuses on compounding. Similar to Chapter 3, Lieber starts out by summarizing the claims made by previous researchers, and then she debunks the claims based on the data extracted from COCA. Non-argumental compounds – attributive (such as *atomic bomb*) and coordinative (such as *teacher-scholar*) – are straightforwardly accounted for in LSF because both the first and the second elements have only one referential argument; however, encyclopedic information plays an important role in determining the readings. By contrast, argumental compounds – synthetic (such as *truck driver*) and non-affixal (de)verbal (such as *attack dog*) compounds – require more complicated indexation mechanisms but are less dependent on contextual and

encyclopedic information. Overall, this chapter observes new types of data hitherto unrecognized.

The last chapter, Chapter 9, concludes this book by repeating the derivational ecosystem: “I believe that studying complex nouns in their natural habitats – nouns in the wild, as it were – leads us to understand the workings of derived nouns in a much deeper way” (p. 185). Here, the natural habitat of course refers to large corpora.

There is no denying that this book makes significant contributions both empirically and theoretically. Be that as it may, I believe there are several weaknesses. First, Lieber emphatically states that one nominalizing affix has multiple readings, which are intricately connected with each other through polysemous relationships. In fact, this is one of her main theses in this book. Although this type of polysemy network has rarely drawn full attention within the formal linguistics camp, there is a long tradition that deals with polysemous word and affixal meanings in the cognitive linguistics enterprise. Due to space limitations, I will not introduce a comprehensive list of the relevant research, but some of the previous studies exclusively focus on nominalizing affixes like *-er*. They include Heyvaert (2003), Panther and Thornburg (2002), and Ryder (1999), among many others. It is unfortunate that these researchers’ work has not been incorporated into this monograph. Lieber clearly points out that the lack of communication between syntacticians and morphologists is a hurdle for the advancement of our understanding of nominalizations (p. 6). Nevertheless, she seems to ignore the majority of the work achieved outside of the formal linguistics tradition, which I believe is somewhat ironic, considering her criticism on the lack of communication among linguists.

Second, Lieber states, “I look at this problem [how meaning happens] from the perspective of a generative morphologist, one who believes that only a carefully crafted formal system can yield precise predictions that can be tested against linguistic data” (p. 180). I have no issues with carefully crafted formal systems, and I strongly believe formal systems have their own values. However, formal systems have many limitations, and we can certainly make precise predictions without the help of formal apparatus. Consider Lieber’s claim that some semantic features are validated through contextual coercion, which requires understanding of the larger speech context. Although she relies on contextual coercion when dealing with referential readings, she does not provide any formal mechanism for that process, let alone a carefully crafted version. Nevertheless, contextual coercion becomes crucial in deriving desirable readings and making correct predictions in her analysis. I wish Lieber had delved into the nature of contextual coercion more deeply, because in the current definition, it is overly vague and open to many interpretations.

The third weakness concerns the rise of polysemous meanings. For example, in analyzing the *-er* affix, Lieber relies on four components: skeletal configurations of the affix and the base, PC, PFVM, and (potentially) Principle of Coercion. These components collaborate to create various readings of *-er* nominals. Since *-er* nominals can be used for non-agentive entities like *loaner* discussed above, she underspecifies the [animate] feature for the referential argument of *-er*. This is a somewhat unsatisfactory resolution because *-er* historically originated from agentivity (Heyvaert 2003) and the vast majority of *-er* nominals still represent agentivity. For this reason, I believe her underspecification approach is motivated more by a theoretical convenience than based on empirical grounds. As for the rise of the polysemous meanings, I believe there are many examples that cannot be easily explained by the interplay of the four aforementioned components. Consider the oft-discussed example, *cliffhanger*, which means ‘suspenseful event’. Panther and Thornburg (2002) provide one of the most elaborated analyses of English *-er* nominals based on metaphoric and metonymic shifts. According to them, the source concept HUMAN (EXPERIENCER) PARTICIPANT undergoes metonymic shift to the target concept EVENT, thereby leading to the reading ‘event that the human participant is crucially involved in.’ In addition, the base *cliffhang* is also elaborated metonymically by the CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy: from activity (cliffhanging) to effect of activity (suspense). In other words, new polysemous meanings arise due to metonymic and metaphoric shifts that operate both on the base and the affix. In this approach, we can also identify the fully specified primary meaning of the *-er* affix. I believe Panther and Thornburg’s metaphor/metonymy-based approach to English nominals will answer many unanswered questions in Lieber’s LSF-based analysis. Perhaps, a similar type of analysis might be extended to the *-ables* affix, which derives inanimate patient nouns.

Fourth, some technical LSF analyses need more attention. For example, the [dynamic] feature for the *-ing* affix is underspecified. This is so because the polarity value needs to be copied from that of the base. The noun *dwelling* inherits the negative value for [dynamic] from the stative base *dwel*. This copy mechanism cannot explain many examples such as *droppings* as in *bird’s droppings*, because the base *drop* is marked [+ dynamic], but the noun *droppings* needs to be marked [– dynamic]. Another technical challenge is observed when dealing with the *-ables* affix. To incorporate the modal nuance of the affix, Lieber introduces the modal operator symbol used in modal logic without further discussion on how this modal nuance arises. Once again, I believe this is more likely a technical convenience rather than an explanation or an analysis. Consequently, while the discussion is based on an interesting and astute observation, the analysis suffers from a lack of detail.

Finally, Lieber completely ignores two other types of nominalizations known as *POSS-ing* and *ACC-ing* as in *his destroying the sandcastle* and *him destroying the sandcastle*, respectively. I understand that she focuses on lexical nominalizations, which are more morphologically oriented than the gerundive nominalizations. However, both *POSS-ing* and *ACC-ing* nominalizations need to reflect the base verb's argument structures one way or another. Since LSF is also highly reflective of the base's argument and skeletal configurations, asking for a discussion on these nominalizations does not seem to be too far-fetched.

Overall, this book will be of interest to those working in the field of English nominalization. It also has a great potential for people who are working on languages typologically different from English to see how LSF can be adopted in the analysis of those languages. There is undoubtedly great merit in trying to develop an inclusive theory that accounts for a full range of nominalizations, as Lieber does in this book. That said, I believe incorporating the findings discovered in cognitive linguistics would make the research on nominalizations much more interesting and fruitful. It is unfortunate that the neglect of relevant cognitive linguistics research makes the book a less satisfying read than it would have been otherwise.

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