

Study Guide for Chomsky (1970): “Remarks on Nominalization”

Linguistics 105: Morphology

1 Background

This article presupposes a bit of familiarity with a debate which was raging at the time of its publication. The debate was over the answer to the question: what part of the grammar is responsible for the semantic interpretation utterances? There were, at the time, two popular answers to this question:

1. Semantics is *interpretive* — syntax generates structures which are then fed to a separate semantics component which interprets the syntactic structure.
2. Semantics is *generative* — semantics is read off the deep structure of a syntactic derivation before transformations apply.

Position (1) is the position we’ve been assuming this quarter, without much explicit argumentation, however. Position (2) was the answer provided by people working in a framework which would come to be known as GENERATIVE SEMANTICS. Among others, one of the more famous claims of this research program was that the semantics of words could be generated by a syntax-like structure applying over basic meanings that were taken to be basic. Thus, in that framework one could speak of *x kills y* as being derived from the abstract structure in (1):

(1) [*x* [CAUSE [*die* *Y*]]]

There were many arguments for an approach to semantics like that in (1), but one prominent one had to do with the predictability of the meanings of certain nominalizations of verbs. The idea was that if meanings of nouns formed from verbs could be predicted, then that fact should be captured in the generative portion of the grammar and not interpreted in a later component.

Generative Semantics ended up largely abandoned in the period immediately following the publicization of the arguments in *Remarks on Nominalization* and a few other now-famous papers. However, at the time of writing, Chomsky was occupied with some questions that were commonly asked in the context of the Generative Semantics debate:

- Does syntax build words, or operate on already-formed words?
- Are there smaller semantic or syntactic parts to seemingly simplex words?
- What about words which look derived from other words, such as nominalizations?

What Chomsky offered in place of Generative Semantics was the claim that deep structure was only *partly* responsible for interpretation. Specifically, deep structure was the place in the grammar where particular subcategorizational restrictions of heads were met and θ -roles assigned, but that was as far as it went. An independent component of semantic interpretation derived both similarities and differences in meaning that are not relatable to subcategorization or argument structure.

2 Sections & Headings

One of the hardest things about some linguistics papers is the lack of section headings or clear part divisions. Here is a list of possible section headings one could assign to the paper and the locations at which they could be placed.

(2) Table of Section Headings:

SECTION NUMBER	LOCATION	POSSIBLE TITLE
1	pp.184–6	Intro: Basic Assumptions
2	187–9	Gerunds vs. Derived Nmlz
3	190–2	The Lexicalist Hypothesis
4	193–5	Derived Nmlz are Lexical
5	195–9	Problems for Lexicalism
6	199–202	The Status of Possessors
7	202–7	The Status of Complex NPs
8	207–10	The Status of Features
9	210–1	Nominal & Clausal Expressions: Parallels
10	212–4	The Status of Derivational Morphology
11	214–5	Mixed Forms: Poss-ing and PRO-ing

3 Particular Notes

- page 185:
 - A *phrase marker* is a formal description of a syntactic structure — Phrase Structure Rules generate phrase markers.
 - The dummy symbols Chomsky talks about are generally written as a letter abbreviating the category they represent (*e.g.*, N, V, A, P); you might have used these in your rules in Syntax I/Syntactic Structures.
- page 187:
 - Footnote 7 contains Chomsky's actual proposed phrase structure rules for gerundive nominals, and it is worth understanding.
 - His point about their syntactic derivation stands regardless of the particular rules written to capture this data, though (and you should make sure you see why this is).
- page 189:
 - Footnote 10 can be misread if you're not careful: Chomsky does not mean the structure to be *His negative attitude toward [the proposal's disruption of the plans]*. He means *[His negative attitude toward the proposal]'s disruption of our plans (bothered Bill)*. Hopefully you agree that this is clumsy.
- page 190:
 - Chomsky doesn't give the full range of data concerning the argument that derived nominals have the structure of nouns. It is worth writing out for yourself each of the corresponding pieces of data with the gerundive nominal in *-ing* to see how the problems disappear.
 - Note the endorsement of something like THE SEPARATIONIST HYPOTHESIS halfway through this page. It is how Chomsky can propose a lexical analysis without giving up the idea that derived nominals have some relation to their verbal counterparts.

- BOOLEAN is a technical term for a condition with only two choices.
- page 191:
 - There is a lot of data compressed in this page; it is a large part of the empirical portion of Chomsky's argument. Make sure you follow how the data is derived under the lexicalist assumptions.
- page 192:
 - fn. 16: The notion DIRECT vs. INDIRECT causation is something we'll talk about later this quarter. It is a distinction based on whether or not the subject in a causative construction like *John made the door open* is construed as directly causing the event him/her/itself or whether the event is brought about by some other means.
 - The argument that begins in the last paragraph of this page is famous — Marantz (1997), which we will read later, picks up on this.
- page 193:
 - If you have not seen particle verbs before, note that they had two word orders which were/are typically related by transformation: *Matt looked up the problem*/*Matt looked the problem up*.
- page 194:
 - The distinction between DIRECT and DERIVATIVE generation is based on the idea that the base may generate a structure that speakers then apply to strings that are similar but not covered under the original phrase structure rule.
- page 198:
 - Δ was a symbol used in the transformational days to denote a syntactic position that had no phonological content associated with it.
 - The end of this page and the beginning of the next is the start of the observation that all phrase structure rules have a similar scheme to them — in other words, the start of the observations that led to X'-Theory.
- page 199:
 - Chomsky did go on to propose that basic categories are derivative of more abstract features. He proposed two binary features, the settings for which generated the lexical categories {N, V, A, P}.
- page 200:
 - The distinction ALIENABLE and INALIENABLE has to do with whether or not the *possessum* can logically be separated from the possessor. Body part nouns and kinship terms are especially inalienable in many languages.

4 Study Questions

If you can answer the following questions about the article, then you probably understood it at the level we're hoping for:

- (3) **(p.186)** What are Chomsky's arguments for *not* deriving *John felt sad* from the deep structure *John felt [John is sad]*?
- (4) **(p.187–8)** Chomsky gives three general properties which distinguish gerundive from derived nominals. What are they?
- (5) **(p.189–90)** What are the syntactic features that Chomsky uses to argue that derived nominals have the "internal structure of noun phrases"?
- (6) **(p.190)** In Chomsky's analysis, does the lexicon tell us what part of speech a word like *eagerness* is?
- (7) **(p.193–5)** Chomsky gives four arguments to support the idea that derived nominals have a different deep structure than gerundive nominals. What are they?
- (8) **(p.203)** Is the formation of passive structures lexical or syntactic for Chomsky? Why is the answer to this question relevant to nominals?
- (9) **(p.205–6)** Chomsky notices that *John's picture* has three distinct readings. What are they?