Aspect as a composed construct between lexical and syntactic information: a comparison of French and English event nominals

Deverbal nominalisations have been analysed from various viewpoints during the last 20 years. Up to now many theoretical approaches have focused on their aspectual properties, either from a lexical semantic point of view, where the composition of temporal and atemporal information on the word level is analysed (Krifka 1989, Lieber 2004), or from the syntactic point of view, where argument structure as a fundamental component for the expression of events as well as its syntactic representation is in the centre of the analysis (Grimshaw 1990, Borer 2001, 2005, Iordâchioaia/Soare 2008, Alexiadou 2001, 2009).

The complex French suffix landscape, where numerous highly ambiguous deverbal nominalisation processes co-exist (Lüdtke 1978, Corbin 1987, Dubois/Dubois-Charlier 1999), has been problematic for the latter kind of analyses. Doublets with the most productive French nominalisation suffixes, -age, -ment and -(t)ion, all can produce what Grimshaw 1990 calls Complex events, Simple events as well as Results (gonflage vs. gonflement, filtrage vs. filtration, acclimatatem vs. acclimatation). This is the reason why recent work on French nominalisations has mostly avoided the argument structure debate and focused on the difference in aspect which French derivational patterns express from a semantic point of view (Martin 2008).

The problem with the approaches mentioned above is that all the three areas which are of importance for the understanding of event nominalisations (syntax, semantics, morphology) have not been involved in the analysis to the same extent up to now. Some research focuses on the lexical-semantic impact of the verb (activity vs. accomplishment vs. state vs. achievement verb), other on the presence/absence of an internal argument (Complex vs. Simple event) and again other on the suffix (as an aspecual head), when distinguishing between different aspectual interpretations. In this paper, however, I introduce an approach by means of which all three areas and their representatives (quantification of the internal argument, base verb, suffix) play equally important roles. Moreover I show how (especially French) nominalisations behave in varying contexts (examples in (1)), which event types they are able to develop (examples in (2)) and how these semantic and syntactic differences can be represented.

(1)

a. L’attelage s’est rompu. (Dubois/Dubois-Charlier 1999)
b. L’attelage du cheval par le paysan

(2)

a. Le dénazifiage de l’Allemagne a abouti à sa dénazification. (Martin 2008)
b. #La dénazification de l’Allemagne a abouti à son dénazifiage.

In order to cope with the mentioned problems, I apply the framework of aspectual composition in the sense of Verkuyl 1972: by help of the plus principle, so-called „inner“ aspect can be derived from the temporal property of the base verb and the quantificational information of the internal argument. This system can be extended to nominal event types by adding an additional level of calculation to the compositional structure. The different suffixes carry temporal information which indicates, if an event is dynamic or not. This semantic property is expressed by the feature [+/-ADD TO] (Verkuyl 1972). My analysis understands nominal aspect as a composed construct to which the suffix adds its share of information, together with the base verb and the internal argument.

(3)

a. The destroy[+ADD TO] + -tion[+ADD TO] + the city[+SQA] → [+T]
b. The destroy[+ADD TO] + -ing[-ADD TO] + the city[+SQA] → [-T]
c. The destroy[+ADD TO] + -tion[+ADD TO] + cities[-SQA] → [-T]
d. The destroy[+ADD TO] + -ing[-ADD TO] + cities[-SQA] → [-T]
In (3c) you can see that derivational suffixes do not have the power to “turn around” unbounded or durative properties which have been introduced into the same structure by other elements. This is a quality which differentiates them, in my opinion, from inflectional morphology. Morphology from the latter category represents so-called “outer” or grammatical aspect, as can be seen below.

(4)  
   a. Peter drank a bottle of whiskey → inner aspect: [+T], outer aspect: [+T]  
   b. Peter was drinking a bottle of whiskey → inner aspect: [+T], outer aspect: [-T]  

In contrast to other aspectual analyses, such as Alexiadou 2001, Borer 2001 or Iordăchioaia/Soare 2008, who take aspect to be a structural feature that exists of its own account and is projected into the structure (different AspPs or NumP), mine illustrates the semantic properties of the participants in the nominal event and differentiates explicitly between different levels of information (syntactic vs. lexical), which also helps us for the distinction between inflectional and derivational morphology ((3) vs. (4)). In contrast to the classification by Grimshaw 1990, the aspect composition system can provide an analysis even for the highly ambiguous French suffixes as its event/non-event and durative/terminative interpretation is dependent on a) the surfacing and b) the nature of the three basic elements in the deverbal NP: base verb, suffix, internal argument.

References