

Noun-incorporation in English as a valency-changing device

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Abstract

This paper explores changes of verb valency by means of noun-incorporation. We claim that noun-incorporation in English manifests itself in verbs formed by compression and backformation, such as *to baby-sit*, *to head-hunt*, *to whistle-blow*, and denominal verbs formed by transmutation, for example *to doctor*, *to nest*, *to knife*. Analysis of more than 6500 contexts with English incorporation complexes taken from corpora has shown that noun-incorporation in English leads to simple or complex change of valency. Semantically a sentence with noun-incorporation can be either complicated, due to extra connotations and metaphorical meanings of incorporation complexes, or simplified, due to reduction of semantic valency and morphosyntactic reduction.
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1. Introduction

Noun-incorporation – integration of a noun into a verb – is a distinctive feature of polysynthetic languages, for example Chukot, Mohawk, Iroquois, Shoshonean, Pawnee, Takelma, etc. Complex words of the *noun + verb* type, however, are present in different groups of Indo-European languages, which are not polysynthetic, notably in English. Noun-incorporation in English has been studied previously (see, for instance, [Hall, 1956](#); [Rice and Prideaux, 1991](#); [Feist, 2013](#)) through examples of verbs formed by compression and backformation such as *to baby-sit*, *to head-hunt*, *to whistle-blow*. We believe, that noun-incorporation in English is not limited to compound verbs, but also manifests itself in denominal verbs formed by transmutation, for example *to doctor*, *to nest*, *to knife*. We call verbs of both the types, *incorporation complexes*, and assume that noun-incorporation is the phenomenon which has syntactic and semantic consequences due to its ability to change the valency of the affected verbs. To our knowledge, there are no works focusing on noun-incorporation in English as a valency-changing device. This paper intends to contribute to understanding the syntactic and semantic role of noun-incorporation in the English language.

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We hypothesise that

- (1) noun-incorporation in English, like that in polysynthetic languages, leads to valency change;
- (2) the type of incorporated *actant* (Subject, Object, Instrument, etc.) should be taken into account in the analysis of valency change caused by noun-incorporation;
- (3) noun-incorporation affects both the syntactic and semantic structure of a clause.

The analysis of the literature on the topic shows that the most common terms for the elements accompanying a predicate are *argument* and *actant*. Since the former is widely used in logic, and hence in logical semantics, while the latter belongs to the sphere of semantic syntax, which we are now more involved in, we have settled on the term ‘actant’. By actant we mean a lexical set of nouns or their equivalents (a single word or multi-word item) denoting living beings and things which in some way participate in the situation described by a verb.

Our assumptions rest on two facts. First, the study of polysynthetic languages shows that noun-incorporation either increases or decreases the valency of a verb (see, for example, Mithun, 2000; Muravyova, 2004; Weir, 1990; Evans et al., 2007). Empirical data demonstrates the presence of similar valency changes caused by noun-incorporation in the English language. Second, data from polysynthetic languages testified to the semantic role of noun-incorporation (Mithun, 1984; Farkas and de Swart, 2003; Bonvillain, 1989a,b). The analysis of dictionary definitions and corpus examples demonstrated the presence of extra connotations in meaning and metaphorical meanings of some English verbs with incorporated actants. This means that noun-incorporation can make the semantics of a sentence more complicated while, at the same time, simplifying its syntactic structure. On the other hand, reduction of semantic valency and morphosyntactic reduction of incorporation complexes entail simplification of the semantic structure of a sentence. Therefore, we claim that semantic consequences of noun-incorporation can be twofold.

The linguistic data used to test our hypotheses comes from the British National Corpus and Leipzig University Corpus of English. To find out how noun-incorporation changes valency of the verbs, we first classified English incorporation complexes into five groups based on the incorporated actant type. Then the semantic and syntactic structures of corpus examples containing incorporation complexes were analysed.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical background of the topic under study. Section 3 describes the data and method of analysis used. Section 4 presents the classification of English verbs with incorporated actants based on the actant type. Section 5 gives the main reasons for the changes to the valency structure of verbs with incorporated actants. Corpus examples are used to explore the cases when semantic structure of a sentence is affected. In Section 6, we conclude our discussion.

2. Theoretical background

Noun-incorporation in English and in polysynthetic languages is undoubtedly different in nature. Hall (1956:87) distinguishes three sources of incorporation complexes in English: (1) back-formations from nouns in *-er* indicating doers of an action:

(2) (a) *kidnapper, eavesdropper, meat chopper, etc.*;

(2) back-formations from nouns which indicate actions:

(2) (b) *muckraking and mass production*;

(3) “from the transfer to verbal function of compound nouns, in which the second part is both noun and verb”:

(2) (c) *fingerpaint or stage whisper*.

The incorporated actant in these verbs is present adherently, i.e. holds a separate syntactic position.

Apart from these verbs, English has a large number of denominal verbs which we also consider to be examples of incorporation complexes whose actant is present inherently, i.e. does not hold a separate syntactic position. These verbs were explored by Prenner (1938), Clark and Clark (1979), Jackendoff (1990), Buck (1993). Jackendoff (1990:164–170) distinguishes: (1) denominal verbs with an incorporated Theme:

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