



From denominal derivation to incorporation[☆]

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Received 31 December 2011; received in revised form 24 May 2012; accepted 24 May 2012
Available online 20 July 2012

Abstract

This article investigates the synchronic status and diachronic origin of an incorporation-like construction in Japhug, a polysynthetic Sino-Tibetan language of Eastern Tibet. This construction constitutes the intermediate stage on a path of development from denominal derivation to incorporation, the opposite of the usual path of development from incorporation to denominal derivation.

Additionally, this article shows that similar phenomena exist in other languages, and that coalescence between noun and verb is not the only attested diachronic origin of incorporating verbs.

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Keywords: Rgyalrong; Japhug; Incorporation; Denominal verbs; Composition; Grammaticalization; English; German

1. Introduction

This article deals with the diachronic origin of incorporation and its relationship to denominal derivation, drawing examples from Japhug Rgyalrong, a polysynthetic language belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family.

Most studies dealing with incorporation in a diachronic perspective (for instance [Mattissen, 2006](#); [Haugen, 2008](#); [Mithun, 2009](#)) discuss the development of new constructions (denominal derivation, manner or classifier morphemes, etc.) out of incorporation, rather than the origin of incorporation itself.

[Mithun \(1984:872\)](#) suggests that the genesis of incorporation is the result of the coalescence of nouns (especially indefinite direct object) with the verb, and this observation is certainly valid for most incorporating languages. In languages where the incorporated noun is always the outermost element of the verb, the explanation of incorporation in terms of coalescence is obvious and hardly deserves a justification.

The present study will however show that incorporation does not always derive from coalescence of noun and verb, but originates in some cases from denominal derivation. This pathway of development is exemplified in Japhug, where incorporation is a relatively recent phenomenon, but traces of it can be found in other languages.

This article is divided into five parts. First, we provide a definition of incorporation to distinguish it from related but distinct phenomena. Second, we provide a detailed description of an incorporation-like construction in Japhug.

[☆] I would like to thank Anton Antonov, Denis Creissels, Romain Garnier, Antoine Guillaume, Gong Xun, Nathan Hill, Aimée Lahaussais, Lai Yunfan, Johanna Mattissen, Alexis Michaud, Thomas Pellard, Wu Tong, Mark Van de Velde and three anonymous reviewers for useful comments on this article. This research was sponsored by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (France) as part of the research project "What defines Qiang-ness? Towards a phylogenetic assessment of the Southern Qiangic languages of Muli" (acronym PASQi) (ANR-07-JCJC-0063) and by the Labex EFL (Empirical Foundations of Linguistics, GD1, Typology and annotation of information structure and grammatical relations). Glosses follow the Leipzig glossing rules, except for the following: CISL, cislocative; CONST, constative; COORD, coordination; EMPH, emphatic particle; GENR, generic; IDEO, ideophone; INV, inverse; NEU, neutral; STAT, stative.

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Third, we describe denominal derivation in Japhug and its similarities with the incorporation-like construction.

Fourth, we analyse the development pathway that led to the creation of the incorporation-like construction in Japhug, and evaluate whether this construction represents true incorporation.

Fifth, we propose to distinguish two types of incorporation in cross-linguistic perspective, direct (the classical type) and indirect (the type observed in Japhug), and show the existence of indirect incorporation in Germanic languages.

2. Incorporation and its relationship to other morphological phenomena

The term “incorporation” is generally used, according to Mithun (1984:848)'s definition, to designate a “particular type of compounding in which a V and N combine to form a new V”. Such a definition allows for broad or narrow interpretations, depending on one's understanding of “compounding”, “verb” and “noun”. Since this article discusses the diachrony of incorporation and its relationship to related but distinct constructions, it is preferable to opt for a more restrictive definition, following Sapir (1911), Gerdts (1998) and Mattissen (2003:169).

We define incorporation as the compounding of a nominal root with a verbal root into a verb, on the conditions that (1) both the nominal and the verbal stems in question exist as independent words (even with morphophonological changes), (2) the resulting incorporational construction can occur in finite forms, (3) the resulting incorporational construction constitutes both a phonological and a morphological word, (4) verbs and nouns are clearly distinct parts of speech in the language in question (without excluding cases of noun/verb homophony).

This definition can distinguish genuine incorporation from three processes that some authors have analysed as incorporation: denominal derivation, noun stripping and lexical affixes.

First, denominal derivation and incorporation are related concepts, and the term “incorporation” is sometimes used to include both verbs deriving from nouns and compound verbs built from a nominal and a verbal root (see in particular the debate between Mithun, 1984, 1986 and Sadock, 1980, 1986). As Sadock and other authors such as Haugen (2008) have argued, in some language families, especially Eskaleut and Uto-Aztecan, denominal derivation and incorporation present systematic parallelism, and denominal verbs can even be analysed as a sub-class of incorporating verbs, one in which the verb root “requires incorporation of a nominal root or stem for morphophonological reasons” (Haugen, 2008:120). Mithun (2009:13), discussing Eskaleut data, objects that even though denominal verbs in these languages are historically derived from incorporating verbs, the fact that the verb root cannot appear independently precludes analysing it as incorporation synchronically. Her data includes a few examples in which the same root appears both as an independent verbal root and as a suffix, such as Central Alaskan Yupik *atus-* “to use, to sing, to wear” (Fortescue et al., 2010:57) and the corresponding suffix (postbase) *-tus-* “eat X”, less commonly “use, wear” (Fortescue et al., 2010:473). According to our definition of incorporation, the Eskaleut denominal suffixes that have no verbal equivalent should not be analysed as incorporation, but examples of the suffix *-tus-* cited by Mithun should, even though the morphological shape of the suffix is not entirely predictable from the base verb and some semantic differences can be discerned.

We propose the following definition for denominal verb derivation: a morphological process that derives a verb out of a noun either by (1) addition of an affix and/or non-concatenative morphology, (2) zero-derivation. In cases where the affix is etymologically related to a free verb like the postbase *-tus-* “eat X” in Yupik mentioned above, it is preferable to analyse the construction as incorporation rather than denominal derivation.

Second, some authors consider noun stripping to be a form of incorporation: Mithun (1984:849–854) analyses as noun stripping cases where a noun is juxtaposed to a verb without any element occurring in between and loses its syntactic status as an argument of the sentence while remaining a phonologically independent word. Our definition of incorporation excludes such cases, though as pointed out by Mithun (1984:872), incorporation might originate from noun stripping by progressive coalescence of a nominal and a verbal root.

Third, in Northwest North American languages such as Wakashan and Salish, lexical affixes with meanings corresponding to nouns or adverbs in European languages can be attached to the verb; these lexical affixes strongly resemble incorporation at least in function. However, these affixes generally have no synchronic relationship with free lexical elements, and even when they do, the fact that Salishan and Wakashan languages lack a strong noun–verb distinction makes it difficult to determine with confidence whether a particular compound is a verb–verb or a noun–verb compound. However, the situation is different in the case of Algonquian, a family with a very strong verb–noun distinction. In Algonquian languages, the so-called MEDIAL stems (Goddard, 1990) are (generally nominal) lexical affixes, some of which have a clear relationship with the corresponding free noun. Incorporating verbs in Algonquian follow the general template:

(1) INITIAL + MEDIAL + FINAL

Only INITIAL roots can appear on their own; they can be either verbal or nominal. FINAL roots are mainly derivational morphemes, in particular voice and valency markers.

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