

# Argument structure and morphologically underived nouns in Spanish and English<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

One of the main topics on the study of the relationship between argument structure and lexical categories is the proposal that nouns (and adjectives) structurally do not introduce arguments. This proposal is matched by some morphological facts, such as the one that observes that AS-nominals have to carry overt nominalizers. In this paper, we address some previously unexplained counterexamples to this generalization involving cases of morphological conversion relating nouns to verbs. We argue that these cases of conversion have to be divided in two groups, and that there is one class that carries verbal structure, even though the morphological make up does not reflect this directly. We argue that these cases have to be dealt with by using portmanteau exponents that synthetically lexicalize verbal projections and a syntactic nominalizer. In doing so, this article provides evidence in favour of the hypothesis that single exponents can lexicalize series of heads.

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## 1. Argument structure and grammatical categories

In the study of argument structure, some proposals have been made with respect to how different lexical categories can introduce arguments. Many different proposals have argued that verbs (and in some cases, prepositions) can introduce arguments syntactically, while, in general, nouns do not have this capacity at a structural level. The list of recent studies that develop this hypothesis is too long to be included here (see, for example, [Marantz, 1997](#); [Langacker, 1999](#); [Hale and Keyser, 2002](#); [Baker, 2003](#) and [Samek-Lodovici, 2003](#)). In other words: the structure associated with the verb *fight* is able to introduce syntactically at least an agent DP and a patient DP, but the noun *war* does not specify a DP as being its agent or its patient. The DP is introduced as a PP or a genitive modifier (*Charlie Wilson's war*), and the interpretation that it denotes someone that triggers the *war* or is affected by it is due to the conceptual interpretation that *war* receives as a noun: its encyclopaedic entry denotes some eventuality, and this allows the modifier to be interpreted as a participant in the eventuality even if it does not occupy a designated syntactic position for this.

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This asymmetry between verbs and nouns or adjectives has been discussed in several different accounts. In the lexical-syntax approach of [Hale and Keyser \(2002\)](#), verbs are heads that select a complement, while nouns are heads that do not take complements or specifiers. Adjectives are categories that semantically require a subject of predication, but they cannot introduce it, and as a result they need to combine parasitically with a category able to select a complement, so that the subject their semantics requires can be introduced structurally in the specifier of that projection (see also [Mateu, 2002](#)). Similarly, [Baker \(2003\)](#) also treats verbs as the only category able to introduce arguments by itself. Adjectives, in his account, need to combine with a predication phrase in order to have a subject (with associated agreement effects, see [Baker, 2008](#)). Nouns are defined by identity criteria, completely independent of argument structure. [Croft \(1991\)](#), from a functionalist perspective, makes similar observations whereby nouns are defined without reference to argument structure, and when they carry it, they have to be marked by some means. Naturally, the idea is also present in one form or another in traditional or structuralist accounts of language.

One conclusion that follows from these approaches, namely that if a noun has argument structure it has to be inherited from a verb, was present also in [Grimshaw's \(1990\)](#) classic work on nominalizations. Among nouns whose semantic structure is eventive, Grimshaw establishes a crucial distinction between complex event nouns (like *examination*) and simple event nouns (like *war*). Only the first class takes argument structure in the strong sense. Grimshaw's proposal is clear: complex event nouns carry argument structure because they are deverbal. It is not the noun that carries the argument structure, but the verb from which the noun has been morphologically derived, so that the nominal 'inherits' this structure from its base. Therefore, *examination* – related to *examine* – is a complex event noun, but *war* – which is not derived from a verb – is a simple event noun, that might be conceptually interpreted as involving notions like agent or patient, but does not introduce them syntactically. Other nouns that conceptually denote events but are not derived from verbs are expected to behave as simple event nouns, and this is confirmed in a first approximation to the data: *funeral*, *class*, *conference*, *storm*, *earthquake*...

One terminological note is in order before we proceed: the term 'result noun' has been used differently by different researchers. In some cases it refers to a nominal that denotes an eventuality, specifically the result state (see [Sleeman and Brito, 2010](#)). In other cases, it refers to the nominalizations that denote the output of a process or an element associated to it ([Grimshaw, 1990:49](#)); notice that the ambiguity of 'output' here allows for the interpretation that both result states and physical objects that are created by the process are result nouns. To avoid this potential confusion, we will follow the terminology used in [Borer \(1999\)](#): nouns that take argument structure, independently of whether they denote an event or a result state, are called AS-nominals; nouns that do not are called R-nominals, independently of whether conceptually they denote events (like *war*) or concrete objects (like *gift*). The generalization is, therefore, that underived nouns should be R-nominals.

The goal of this article is to address a class of nouns in Spanish and English that, *prima facie*, seem to contradict this general approach to grammatical categories and argument structure, as they do not contain verbal morphology or overt nominalizers, but show evidence of containing argument structure in the syntactic sense, as well as other properties typical of verbs. In the remainder of this section, we introduce a morphological generalization about the marking that a noun with argument structure contains, and we review [Borer's \(2009a,b, 2012\)](#) analysis of this pattern. In section 2 we introduce a class of Spanish nouns that apparently falsify the generalization. In section 3 we propose an analysis, where we argue that these nouns can be analyzed as the result of using portmanteau exponents in the lexicalization of syntactic structures containing verbal projections.

### 1.1. Morphological marking and argument structure: correlations

One of the merits of [Grimshaw's \(1990\)](#) distinction between complex event nominals – AS-nominals in the terminology adopted here – and simple event nominals – a type of R-nominals – is that the two classes have different morphological marking. AS-nominals in English have overt nominalizers. All nouns presented in (1) have a reading as AS-nominals, and they all can be morphologically decomposed into a verbal base (sometimes allomorphic) and a nominalizer suffix, while those in (2) do not come from verbs and do not show overt nominalizers.

- (1)
  - a. class-ific-ation
  - b. invas-ion
  - c. displace-ment
- (2)
  - a. war
  - b. party
  - c. conference

This morphological property is matched by the inability of simple event nouns to pass a variety of tests, as pointed out by [Grimshaw \(1990\)](#), [Alexiadou \(2001\)](#) or [Borer \(2003\)](#), among many others. As noted in [Williams \(1981, 2007\)](#),

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