Noun incorporation in Sora:
A case for incorporation as morphological merger

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This presentation provides an analysis of noun incorporation of non-canonical arguments in Sora, a Munda language spoken in eastern India. I propose that incorporation of arguments is not limited by syntactic class or semantic category, as previously proposed (Mithun 1984; Baker 1988, 2009; inter alia), and that these structures can be derived via morphological merger (m-merger) rather than through traditional analyses of head movement.

Noun incorporation, the process by which a noun becomes part of a verb stem, has been treated as a lexical process (Mithun, 1984) but more often as a syntactic process (Sadock, 1986; Baker, 1988), in which the underlying structure of a sentence with incorporation is identical to one without it. Cross-linguistically the incorporation of patients of transitive verbs is very robust, but the incorporation of patients of intransitive verbs or of instruments or locations is less common (Mithun, 1984). Incorporation of agents, whether of transitive or intransitive verbs, is widely unattested and lacking from theoretical work on the phenomenon.

However, Sora challenges these claims, as it allows for incorporation across syntactic and thematic role. Object/patients unsurprisingly incorporate (1b), but so do locations, instruments and even subject/agents (2b). Furthermore, multiple arguments can be incorporated into a single verb stem (3).

(1) a. ɲen kina-n ɲam-t-aj
   I  tiger.N catch-NPST-1SBJ
   ‘I will catch the tiger’
   (Ramamurti, 1931, 40)

   b. ɲen ɲam-kit-tɔ-n-aj
      I  catch-tiger-NPST-VR-1SBJ
      ‘I will catch a tiger’

(2) a. kina-n ɲam-t-iŋ
    tiger.N catch-NPST-1OBJ
    ‘The tiger will catch me’

   b. ɲam-kit-t-iŋ
      catch-tiger-NPST-1OBJ
      ‘A tiger will catch me’

(3) dzo-me-bob-dɔm-tɔ-n-aj
    smear-oil-head-RFLX-NPST-VR-1SBJ
    ‘I will anoint my head with oil’
    (Ramamurti, 1931, 143)

The data in (1-3) necessitate a reenvisioning of the models of incorporation, as Baker (1988) accounts for noun incorporation through head movement. Head movement is incompatible with incorporation in Sora as the Head Movement Constraint (Travis, 1984) cannot derive the incorporation of non-patients as only complements of the verb can undergo head movement. In addition, the incorporation of multiple arguments is incompatible with the HMC as traditional analyses of argument structure do not permit multiple complements.

Although some approaches (Barrie & Mathieu, to appear) have called for an abandonment of head movement in incorporation, in this presentation, I propose that noun incorporation is best modeled using a modification to m-merger (Matushansky, 2006). M-merger is a reworking of head movement using two separate movements: merger to the specifier and then...
morphological merger to the head. For noun incorporation, I suggest that m-merger can act in conjunction with phrasal movement. Thus, any argument, regardless of its syntactic position, can move to the specifier of the attracting head via phrasal movement and subsequently lower to the attracting head via m-merger.

Further support for this analysis in Sora comes from the interactions of noun incorporation with valency marking, agreement marking, and possessor raising. Or, perhaps most interestingly, from the interaction of modification and incorporation in some dialects of Sora and other languages like Chukchi (Spencer, 1995).

References


