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Nominalization as modification

This paper examines the role of nominalization in modification in Dënesu , a Northern Athabaskan language. In Dënesuline, nominalization is the most productive structural device for creating modifiers of nouns: Nominalizations have the combined distribution of adjectives and relative clauses in languages such as English.

I will argue that the reason for this is that the standard semantic mechanism for attributive nominal modifiers, predicate modification, is not used (see Compton 2007). Predicate modification combines two predicates – the modifier and the head noun – into one. This mechanism assumes that nouns are of type <e,t>, predicates, at the stage of attributive modification (syntactically, below D/DP).

In Dënesu , however, there are good reasons to believe that nouns are already of type <e>, entities, when they enter the syntax (Wilhelm 2011, based on Chierchia 1998). Since predicate modification does not apply straightforwardly to entities, the language goes another route: In order to become a nominal modifier, a predicate is nominalized into an expression of type <e>. As a nominal expression (type <e>), it can modify another noun of type <e> in two constructions available in the language: a possessive construction or an appositive construction.

A study of texts reveals that this highly productive modificational use of nominalizations has been extended from nouns to clauses: Adverbial clauses and parentheticals may also take the form of nominalizations.

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