The Semantics of (Pseudo) Incorporation and Case

Nutshell: A number of researchers, notably Dayal (2011), have noted that the semantics of pseudo noun incorporation (PNI) is remarkably similar to that of noun incorporation (NI). The difference between PNI and NI lies in the morphosyntax such that NI involves a tighter morphological relation. The question arises as to what gives rise to the semantics of both PNI and NI if it is not in the morphosyntactic structure. We propose that the lack of differentiated Case gives rise to the semantic properties of (P)NI. We bolster this claim with evidence from Chinese which has Case, but crucially does not have morphologically differentiated Case. We show that full DPs (with undifferentiated Case) have the same semantic properties as found in PNI and NI.

Background on Case: The distribution of DPs is generally thought to be governed by Case theory (Vergnaud, 1974, 2008). It has been generally assumed that incorporated nouns (IN), given their reduced structure, are not assigned Case and are not governed by the Case Filter. This can be extended to pseudo incorporated nouns (PIN) along the lines of Chung and Ladusaw (2004), where saturation is understood to be available only to Case marked DPs. Like INs, PINs are typically functionally reduced, although PINs may be larger than INs. It is the reduction in functional structure that allows the PIN to escape the Case Filter.

Chinese Non-canonical Objects: Lin (2001) notes the existence of instruments, locations and temporals in the typical postverbal object position in Mandarin Chinese. Li (2010) shows that these replace and behave like objects – non-canonical objects (NCO). Strikingly, the set of elements that can appear as non-canonical objects is glaringly similar to the set of elements that can undergo NI: instruments, paths, locatives and temporals (Barrie, 2012; Mithun, 2004). Comitatives, sources, goals and benefactives cannot appear as non-canonical objects in Mandarin Chinese. Consider the following examples.

1) a. ta zai canting chi (fan) he at restaurant eat (meal) ‘He eats at the restaurant.’
   b. ta chi canting he eat restaurant ‘He eats at the restaurant.’

2) a. ta xihuan yong zhe zhi maobi xie (zi) he like use this CL pen write (word) ‘He likes to write with this pen.’
   b. ta xihuan xie zhe zhi maobi he like write this CL pen ‘He likes to write with this pen.’

3) a. wo gei ta zuo dangao I BEN him make cake ‘I make cake for him.’
   b. *wo zuo ta I make him ‘I make (food) for him.’

4) a. wo ji gei pengyou liwu. I send to friend present ‘I sent presents to friends.’
   b. *wo ji pengyou. I send friend ‘I sent friends.’

5) wo chi-guo mei-jia Michelin canting. I eat-EXP every-CL Michelin restaurant ‘I have eaten at every Michelin restaurant.’

Furthermore, like NI and PNI, non-canonical object constructions typically describe an institutionalized or cultural activity. Thus, chi kuaizi (‘eat chopstick’ = ‘eat with chopsticks’) is
possible in Chinese, but *chi chazi (‘eat fork’) is not. In (1b), there is an implication that the
subject is typically eats in restaurants or eats restaurant food.

**Proposal:** We propose instead that Chinese does indeed have Case (Li, 1990), but that it has
*undifferentiated Case*. Unlike other languages, there is no morphological reflex of accusative vs.
nominative Case in Chinese. More specifically, we propose that *differentiated Case* (that is
accusative vs. nominative vs. partitive, etc.) is correlated with particular semantic properties
(Kiparsky, 1998; Kratzer, 2004; Mithun, 1991). As such undifferentiated Case is not associated
with any particular semantic property. It functions purely to license the presence of overt DPs.
Furthermore, the semantic properties associated with accusative Case discussed in the literature
do not play a role in Chinese syntax, suggesting the absence of a distinct accusative Case.

**Discussion:** The properties in common to NI, PNI and NCO are the following: (i) typically
describes an institutional or cultural activity, and (ii) can be found with themes, paths, locatives,
temporals, and instruments. Frozen scope and number neutrality are typically restricted to NI and
PNI. The lack of frozen scope and number neutrality in Chinese NCOs is linked to the large
functional suprastructure present in these constructions (see example 5). Thus, we propose that
these two properties are not defining characteristics of semantic incorporation. This is bolstered
by the observation that frozen scope is a general property of reduced nominal expressions and
not just INs or PLNs (van Geenhoven, 1998).

**Summary:** We have proposed that semantic incorporation is a property not only of NI and PNI,
but also of non-canonical objects in Chinese. We argued that the defining properties of semantic
incorporation include (i) institutionalized or cultural activities, and (ii) availability to themes,
paths, instruments, locatives and temporals.

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