Bare nouns and morpho-syntactic reflexes of semantic incorporation: some new facts

Roodenburg (2004) has recently shown that bare arguments are not completely extinct in modern French, since they can still be found in coordinated contexts. The aim of this paper is to show that there are even more bare arguments than previously thought in that language, but that they are in disguise. We argue that the nominal in (1), (2) and (3) is in fact a bare argument that is semantically incorporated and that _de_ is a deficient/expletive determiner devoid of semantic content or, in other words, a morphological spell-out of semantic incorporation. The similarities between (1), (2) and (3) have not escape researchers over the years (Milner 1978, Obenauer 1976, 1983, 1994, Azoulay-Vicente 1989, Hirschbühler and Labelle 1993, Muller 1997, Rowlett 1993, 1998). They are all cases of so-called non-canonical quantification in the sense of Obenauer. This paper introduces some new facts about these constructions and links them to semantic incorporation, a topic that has received considerable attention in recent years (de Hoop 1992, Bittner 1988, 1994, Van Geenhoven 1998, McNally 1995, 1998, Dayal 1999, Chung and Ladusaw 2003, Farkas and de Swart 2004).

In a nutshell, the proposal is that (1) is the equivalent of the West Greenlandic (WG) incorporated structure (4), (2) the equivalent of WG (5), and (3) the equivalent of Hopi (6). First, the paper concentrates on the syntactic properties of incorporated nominals (INs, henceforth) and compares them with those of _de N_ nominals. With regard to INs and the nominals in _de N_ constituents, we note several common asymmetries, one of which being an asymmetry between subjects and objects. Noun incorporation (NI, henceforth) is impossible with subjects (or real subjects, i.e. agents) and the same constraint applies to _de N_. (7a) shows that NI is not possible because _louse_ is an agent. Only (7b) the non-incorporating structure is possible. Similarly, when the nominal is an agent splitting of _combien_ (how-many) and stranding of the nominal is not possible in French, as shown by the contrast in (8). The same constraint applies to _de N_ in negative contexts. (9a) where _de bateau_ appears in subject position is not possible whereas as shown by (9b) the sentence is fine if _de bateau_ appears in object position. Similarly, _beaucoup_ or _peu_ cannot be separated from the nominal with which it is associated if the nominal is in subject position. Second, themes incorporate freely while goals incorporate only if no lower ranked noun (e.g. a theme) on a thematic hierarchy (agent > goal > theme) is present in the sentence (WG allows only NI of direct objects, other languages with NI are more flexible). The example in (11) is from Southern Tiwa: (12a) shows that in French nothing in principle stops a split PP to raise to Spec-CP. (12b) is the full movement alternative for the sake of completeness. However, when a theme is present a goal can no longer split as shown by (13b). The constraint is also relevant for _de N_ in negative contexts (14) and to cases where _beaucoup_ / _peu_ are involved (15a). We also note anti-agreement effects with both INs and _de N_ and differences in behaviour for these items with i- and stage level predicates.

On the semantic side, we note that both INs and _de N_ always take narrow scope and that they can never receive a partitive interpretation. Finally, it is shown that _de N_ are, like INs, very natural in existential contexts, which suggests that _de N_ are indefinites. As for the discourse properties of INs, we show that contrary to WG INs, _de N_ cannot be picked up anaphorically. This is because the nominals in _de N_ strings are dependent on an operator. This operator acts as an intervener and anaphoric pick-up is blocked (cf. Chierchia 1995, Honcoop 1998). Apparent counter-examples are derived by an E-type analysis. Finally, we concentrate on the status of _de_ and argue that it is a morphological reflex of semantic incorporation. It is a determiner that does not mark gender or number and can be associated with mass or count nouns. The determiner is not referential, and this is why _de N_ never receive wide scope: they are always interpreted in the scope of other operators. We also show that there is a residual syntactic reflex of semantic incorporation involved in _de N_ structures. Although the _de N_ and the main predicate of the sentence do not form a phonological unit, there is a tight connection between the two elements, since no adverb can intervene between the verb and the _de N_ complex. In conclusion, French is like Maori in that incorporating structures make use of a special determiner, and like Kusaien, since a special post-verbal position is used for incorporated objects.
Combien as-tu lu de livres?  
How many books have you read?

Je n’ai pas mangé de pomme(s).  
I have not eaten any apple(s).

J’ai beaucoup / peu vu de films.  
I have seen many/few films.

Qassi-nik qimmi-qar-p-i-t ?  
How many dogs do you have ? (Van Geenhoven 1998:20)

Arnajaraq aalisaga-si-nngi-l-a-q.  
Arnajaraq didn’t buy any fish. (Van Geenhoven 1998:31)

Mö’wi-t engem na’yat ep a’ni kanél-qô-qya.  
‘At the bride’s wedding work party they butchered a lot of sheep.’ (Gronemeyer 1996:8)

*a. H-ate—tsi?kti-?se:-?.             (Onondaga)  
3MS-REFL-louse-crawl-ASP
b. H-ate-?se:-?    ne?o-tsi?kt-a?.
3MS-REFL-crawl-ASP the-PRE-louse-SUF
‘The louse crawls.’ (Baker 1988:87)

*a. Combien ont rigolé de personnes?  
How many people laughed?

b. Combien de personnes ont rigolé?  
‘How many people laughed?’

*a. De bateau n’est pas rentré au port.  
No boat returned to the harbour.

b. Je n’ai pas vu de bateau.  
I haven’t seen any boat.

*a. Beaucoup/peu de gens ont vu ce film.  
Many/few people have seen this film

b. De gens ont beaucoup / peu vu ce film.  
‘Many/few people have seen this film.’

*Ta-hliawra-wia-ban       (’u’u-de).  
I gave it (the baby) to the woman.’ (Baker 1988:279)

*a. Combien as-tu donné un livre DE personnes?  
To how many people have you given a book of persons

b. De combien de livres as-tu besoin?  
‘How many books do you need?’

*a. Marie a beaucoup / peu parlé à de sémanticiens.  
Marie spoke to many / few semanticists.

b. Marie a parlé à beaucoup / peu de sémanticiens.  
‘Marie spoke to many / few semanticists.’