

Possession and Nominalization in Dan: Evidence for a General Theory of Categories

Mark C. Baker and Bleu Gildas Gondo
Rutgers University and Felix Houphouët Boigny University

Dan, a Mande language of the Ivory Coast, marks the alienable possessors of simple nouns differently from inalienable possessors: only the former occur with the particle *ba*.

- (1) a. Zòtá gò Zòtá gbí (inalienable possession)
 Zota head Zota son
 ‘Zota’s head’ ‘Zota’s son’
- b. Zòtá **ǂá** ná Zòtá **ǂá** já (alienable possession)
 Zota POSS child’ ‘Zota POSS yam’
 ‘Zota’s child’ ‘Zota’s yam’

This difference also shows up in an interesting way in nominalizations. When a verb is nominalized, its theme argument is expressed like the possessor of an inalienably possessed noun, without *ba*, as seen in (2). In contrast, when an adjective is nominalized, its theme argument is expressed like the possessor of an alienably possessed noun, with *ba*, as seen in (3).

- (2) a. Klà nū-sū è sā. (nominalization of a verb: unaccusative)
 Kla come-NMLZ 3.SG.PRS good.’
 ‘Kla’s coming is good.’
- b. Klà zā-sū è já. (transitive)
 Kla kill-NMLZ 3.SG.PRS bad.
 ‘Killing Kla is bad.’
- (3) Músò **ǂá** zōzō-ǂé è gbí. (nominalization of an adjective)
 Muso POSS foolish-NMLZ 3.SG.PRS big.
 ‘Muso’s foolishness is great.’

We show that this generalization holds for both a lexical type of nominalization, in which the nominalizer combines directly with the root before that root combines with any arguments, and for a syntactic type of nominalization, in which the nominalizer combines with a larger phrase. We account for this difference between deverbal nominalization and deadjectival nominalization using Baker’s (2003) theory of the lexical categories, according to which verbs intrinsically combine directly with a theme argument, whereas adjectives do not, but only become predicates of a theme argument with the help of a functional head like Pred. We also show that Baker’s category theory correctly predicts that denominal nouns like ‘childhood’ in Dan pattern with deadjectival nominalizations in this respect. As such, this study aspires to provide new empirical support for this particular theory of lexical categories, as opposed to ones which assume a stronger parallelism across the various lexical categories. However, this leads to the prediction that the difference should be robust across languages that have the relevant grammatical resources—e.g. a clear contrast between the two forms of possession, a discernable adjective-verb distinction, and productive processes of nominalization. As far as we know, this has not been investigated much in African languages—or even beyond—and it would be nice to discuss the prospects for doing that.