A nanosyntactic account of Romance VN compounds

Ludovico Franco
Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia

Romance VN compounds (henceforth: R_{VN}C) are somewhat challenging because of their apparent headlessness (see Scalise, Fabregas & Forza, 2009 on exocentricity in compounding). R_{VN}C, illustrated in (1) for Italian and Spanish respectively, are the result of a very productive process. A syntactic (or, at least, a sub-lexical) analysis is empirically motivated by neurolinguistic studies on language-impaired populations (see e.g., Mondini et al., 2004) and many competing syntactic hypotheses (Di Sciullo & Williams, 1986; Ferrari-Bridgers, 2005; Schroten, 2010, among others) have been put forward in order to account for the shape of R_{VN}C. Basically, they have been analyzed as nominalizations of VP. A fact that has been overlooked is their inherent modifying nature and Scalise (1992: 191) states: “One type of highly productive compound is the V+N compound which is always a noun”. Only recently Ricca (2005) has shown that, while there are many instances of R_{VN}C alternating between a nominal and adjectival reading (2), there are also many purely adjectival R_{VN}C (3). I take the aforementioned empirical evidence as a crucial hint in order to advance here the proposal that all R_{VN}C originates in reduced restrictive relative clauses, which I assume to be prenominal modifiers in the extended projection of a (possibly abstract) noun. In doing so, I follow the unifying analysis of Cinque (2003; 2010), which is roughly sketched in (4). The proposal that R_{VN}C are derived from relative clauses is not completely new (Tollemache, 1945; Coseriu 1978; Bok-Bennema & Kampers-Mahne, 2005). What is new here is the attempt to fit this analysis into the theoretical framework of Nanosyntax (Starke, 2009). Specifically, I resort here to the nanosyntactic principle of Phrasal Spell-Out, which states that any node in the tree can correspond to a lexical item, or, in other words, Spell-Out applies to syntactic phrases, which are stored in lexical entries (see also Neeleman and Szendroï, 2007). Hence, syntax is a pre-lexical system and Lexicon is merely a way of interpreting syntax. According to this view, R_{VN}C are lexical items, which correspond to entire (lexically-stored) constituents (namely, reduced restrictive relative clauses). An analysis of this kind matches Starke’s (2009) interpretation of idioms as multiterminal expressions stored in the Lexicon such as they are (see also Fillmore, Kay & O’Connor, 1988). More technically, I assume that for R_{VN}C the principle in (5) holds. Thus, I argue for a “cartographic” version of Phrasal Spell-Out by which elements that are licensed in the Spec of a functional X°, can be spelled-out in XP. Notice that these lexically-stored phrasal constituents are drained of their functional morphology, when reanalyzed as nouns (or adjectives). The noun part of the R_{VN}C basically surfaces as a bare singular when the noun involved is a mass noun and a bare plural when is a count noun; the verb portion of the R_{VN}C is a sort of “pure theme” (Pagliaro 1930: 161) and [V_{THEME} + THEMATIC VOWEL] emerges, with the end vocalic segment possibly appearing as an independently motivated phonological “empty marker” (Vogel & Napoli, 1995). Notice that the principle in (5) is possibly constrained by Kayne’s (1994) Linear Correspondence Axiom (informally, the Spell-Out of a non terminal may impair the asymmetric c-command relation necessary for linearly ordering the terminals of a given tree). Notice also that (5) can generally explain the word order rearrangements in most of the cases in which a noun phrase, cross-linguistically, appears without a noun (Dryer, 2004; Cinque, 2005). Furthermore, the empirical observation that R_{VN}C compounds indicate habitual (not episodic) actions seems to rule out the proposal, recently updated (Progovac and Locke, 2009; Floricic, 2008), that the verbal stem in R_{VN}C corresponds to imperative mood (for further arguments against the imperative hypothesis, see Ferrari-Bridgers, 2005). In conclusion, in this work I have argued for a nanosyntactic account of R_{VN}C as reduced relatives. With such an approach: i) no (costly) compounding rules are involved; ii) we efficiently explain the adjectival VN compounds investigated in Ricca (2005); iii) we may further propose an unified analysis of other alleged exocentric compounds in Romance (e.g. PN compounds of the fuoribordo [outboard] type or NN compounds of the pellerossa [redskin] type).
References