Nominalization beyond the nominal domain – the case of Yakkha (Kiranti)

Oral/poster

This paper describes the various functions of a nominalization pattern found in Yakkha, addressing both its role in syntax and in information structure. Tibeto-Burman languages are well-known for employing nominalizations beyond referential use; not just in relative clauses, complement clauses or auxiliary constructions; also independent finite clauses occur in nominalized form, typically with some effect on the information structure (Bickel 1999, Watters 1998, Yap et al. 2010). These structures may further develop into regular verbal inflection (DeLancey 2011), which is precisely what happens in Yakkha.

The markers discussed here are =*na* (singular) and =*ha* (nonsingular); etymologically related to a set of demonstratives. They may derive noun phrases, but also subordinate clauses with certain nominal features, such as relative clauses and finite complement clauses. Furthermore, and in line with findings from other Tibeto-Burman languages, nominalization in Yakkha extends its function into discourse, namely when it is found on finite main clauses. It may mark both backgrounded information and contested information, and thus, it is hard to find a neat label that subsumes its discourse functions. While others have described the nominalized clause as the marked structure, whether this is also the case in Yakkha cannot be answered straightforwardly. The frequency of nominalized main clauses depends highly on the respective text genre. In isolation, e.g. in elicitations, the inflected verbs always occur in the nominalized form. In narratives, nominalized clauses are rather rare; they are used to set the stage for further events, and they also mark the completion of a narrative episode. By omitting the nominalizer, the speaker conveys that something else is to come, i.e. that some fact is not yet fully established. In conversations, on the other hand, nominalizers are rather the norm, as conversations are generally about exchanging or negotiating facts and their truth value. Nominalizers are frequently found in questions and in the respective answers, and also in constructions expressing deontic modality. Notably, they are absent in non-assertive sentence types, such as imperatives and subjunctives.

As they are so frequent, and as they also show agreement with the verbal arguments, the nominalizers are developing into an integral part of the person inflection in Yakkha. They even have their own alignment pattern, a mixture of ergative and reference-based alignment. DeLancey has proposed that nominalization has played a major role for syntactic change in Tibeto-Burman (DeLancey 2011). Albeit showing many parallels and similarities, these constructions and their functions do not behave uniformly across the languages of the family. Yakkha provides another interesting piece to the puzzle of Tibeto-Burman nominalizations and their developments.

References

Bickel, Balthasar. 1999. Nominalization and focus constructions in some Kiranti languages. In Yadava and Glover (eds.), Topics in Nepalese linguistics, 271–296. Kathmandu: Royal Nepal Academy.

DeLancey, Scott 2011. Finite structures from clausal nominalization in Tibeto-Burman. In Yap et al. (eds.), Nominalization in Asian Langugaes, 343-359. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Watters, David. 2002. A Grammar of Kham. Cambridge: CUP.

Yap, Foong Ha and Karen Grunow-Hårsta. 2010. Non-Referential Uses of Nominalization Constructions: Asian Perspectives. In Language and Linguistics Compass 4 (12), 1154–1175.