

On Optionality in Mohawk Noun Incorporation

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The Mohawk language (Kanien'kéha) exhibits one of the most well known instances of noun incorporation known in linguistics. Baker (1996, 12) "Such noun incorporation (NI) is very common in Mohawk.... NI is quite productive, and speakers often consider incorporated and unincorporated versions of the same sentence to be essentially equivalent." The focus of our paper is a closer examination of this essential equivalence (see also Bonvillain 1989). Our examples come from one of the co-authors, a speaker of Kanien'kéha.

First, as shown in detail in Mithun (1984), it is important to remember that one language can have different types of NI (see also Johns 2007 and Massam 2009), each with slightly different restrictions. Thus Mithun's Class I incorporation, which involves regular activities will not allow NI if the N+V is not a collocation describing an activity that is regularly occurring, i.e. conventional.

- (1) a. wa'tiéntho' 'I planted (s.t.)'
b. wa'ksahe'taiéntho' - I planted beans
c. wa'tekkà:neren' 'I stared (at s.t.)'
d. *wa'teksahe'takà:neren' 'I stared at beans'
e. wa'tekkà:neren' ne osahè:ta 'I stared at beans'

In (1d, e) we see that a non-conventional verb such as 'stare' never permits incorporation. Similarly the verb meaning 'believe' behaves in the same fashion. We might characterize this class of verb as single event verbs. However other types of verbs in Mohawk, even though they describe a single event and are not conventional community activities, nevertheless allow what appears to be optional incorporation.

- (2) a. Wa-ha-'sere-ht-a-hninon-'
FAC-he-drag-NMLZ-LINK-buy-PUNC
'He bought a car.'
b. Kà:sere wahahní:non
Ka-'sere wa-ha-hninon-'
NEUTER-drag FAC-M.SG-buy-PUNC
'He bought **a car**.'
c. Wahahní:non' ne kà:sere
Wa-ha-hninon' ne ka-'sere
FAC-M.SG-buy-PUNC ne NEUTER-drag
'He **bought** a car.'

In (2a) we have 'car' incorporated, but in (2b), it is outside the verbal complex. The event is not a regular activity. The non-incorporated form in (2b) is more marked than the incorporated form in that it entails a focus/contrast of the object 'car.' Equally the non-incorporated form in (2c) is more marked, where the focus/contrast is on the verb 'bought.' Baker (1996) proposes that overt NPs in Mohawk are adjuncts, similar to Clitic Left Dislocation in Italian, etc. This might explain why focus would prevent incorporation in (2b) (but see Alexiadou and Agnastopolou 2000 for an argument that similar overt NPs in Greek are in argument position). But it leaves unanswered why focus on the verb would also prevent incorporation.

References

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