

Why does Beserman need two event nominalizations?¹

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It is rather common for languages to have multiple productive event nominalizations. In major European languages, which have received most attention in this respect, particular nominalizations tend to be available or preferred for particular lexical or morphosyntactic classes of verbs (Varvara 2017). In other languages, such as Mari, nominalizations allow for different amount of clausal structure (Voznesenskaia 2019). But what if several nominalizing derivations are absolutely productive and have same syntactic constraints?

Beserman (Permic < Uralic) has three absolutely productive derivations that satisfy the definition of complex event nominals (Grimshaw 1990). We label them by their main allomorphs: *-on*, *-em* and *-âmtē*. All three also exist in Udmurt, a language Beserman used to be classified as a dialect of; their morphosyntactic properties are very similar. All three suffixes also function as participles in both Beserman and Udmurt. Dékány and Georgieva (2020) claim that Udmurt *-em* always represents a head in the extended verbal projection, and its different uses are explained by different syntactic configurations it is used in; similar analyses can probably be provided for the other two. However, I am only considering the nominalization uses in this descriptive account, which can be clearly delineated from the participial ones.

The derivation in *-âmtē* nominalizes negated events and thus has a disjoint set of contexts with the other two. The affirmative nominalizations in *-on* and *-em*, however, are very similar at the first glance. E.g. both forms derived from the base *bašt-* ‘take; buy’, i.e. *bašton* and *baštem*, would be translated as ‘taking; buying’ in the absence of context. Both suffixes are compatible with voice and aspectual derivations, incompatible with the nominal plural marker or adjectival modification, and allow for the same amount of clausal structure. What is the difference between them?

Based on both corpus data and elicitation in the field (Shamardan, Yukamenskoe district, Udmurtia), I claim that it is the context that strictly determines the choice of a nominalization in the majority of occurrences. Particularly, this involves the matrix verb (for nominalized argument clauses) or the case or postposition (for inflected forms and postpositional complements that do not head argument clauses).

The distribution of *-on* and *-em* by contexts exhibits clear trends connected to aspect and modality. The *-em* nominalization normally denotes an event which ends within or before the topic time, if there are no references to its duration. The *-on* nominalization either denotes an ongoing process (progressive or habitual) or refers to a potential event. Matrix verbs that select for an argument clause nominalized with *-em* denote perception or a mental activity. Those that select for *-on* mostly denote bringing an ongoing activity to an end. A handful of contexts that allow for both forms highlight this difference, as with the postposition *šarâš* ‘about’ (1-2) or *punna* ‘for; because of’ (3-4).

(1) *Ton* *mânâm* *č’eber* *d’erem* *bašt-on* *šarâš*
you.SG:NOM I:DAT beautiful shirt buy-NMLZ about
malâ-ke *ed* *verašk-â*.
why-INDEF NEG.PST.2 say-CNG.SG

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‘For some reason, you didn’t tell me you were going to buy a beautiful shirt. {I learned that you had expressed interest in buying one; maybe you have already bought it, maybe not.}’

(2) *Pojezd-len* *keṃa* *sâl-em-ez* *śarâś*
train-GEN long stand-NMLZ-3SG.POSS about
mon *tânâd* *vera-j=ñi*.
I:NOM you.SG:DAT tell-PST.1SG=already

‘I have already told you [about the fact] that the train had not moved for a long time.’

(3) *Kort-ez* *vel’ât* *kar-on* *punna*
iron-ACC smooth make-NMLZ for
so-je *potpilka-os-ân* *ñârja-lo*.
that-ACC file-PL-INS process-PRS.3PL

‘In order to make the iron smooth, one processes it with files.’

(4) *Anaj-zâ* *piñal’-l’os-se* *zâl’-e*
mother-3PL.POSS child-PL-ACC.3SG.POSS scold-PRS.3SG
pukon *kija-m* *punna*.
chair break-NMLZ for

‘The mother is scolding her children for having broken a chair.’

Nevertheless, the distribution of the derivations remains arbitrary to a certain extent, from the semantic point of view. This is best illustrated by four synonymous contexts involving relational nouns and adverbs that all mean ‘before’. While two of them (NMLZ.NOM + *až.pal*; NMLZ.GEN2 + *až.pal* / *wal’l’o* / *ažlo*) require the nominalization in *-on*, the other two (NMLZ.NOM + *až.palan*; NMLZ.NOM + *ažân*) require the one in *-em*. These selectional requirements are strict. They are not canceled if the event in question is completed, potential or habitual, so they are not superseded by such factors as aspect and modality.

Apart from the semantic properties of the event nominalizations, there is a notable difference in the average degree of compositionality between these nominalizations when they form referential nominals. There are only five lexicalized referential nominals in *-em* (e.g. *kužatânâ* ‘make sour, ferment’ > *kužatem* ‘cottage cheese’), while more than 80 have been attested for *-on* (e.g. *ñâlânâ* ‘swallow’ > *ñâlon* ‘throat’). Whether this is connected to the semantic properties described above is a question for further research.

References

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