The argument structure of deverbal nouns in Germanic and Romance.  
An LMT account  
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Even a superficial look reveals that constructions containing a verb and constructions containing a deverbal noun derived from that verb present considerable differences in surface syntax as well as in the ways they link semantic participants of the event denoted by both verb and deverbal noun to syntactic positions. One of the striking generalizations one can draw across languages is that for a deverbal noun derived from a transitive verb like *destroy*, only the theme argument, but not the argument corresponding to the agent of the denoted event can be linked to the postnominal complement position, cf. (2) a. in contrast to b. Another generalization which has so far gone unchallenged is that while the agent argument can easily be omitted, the same does not hold for the theme argument, cf. (2) in contrast to (3).

(1) Engl. The enemy destroyed the city.  
(2) Engl. a. the destruction of the city  
   b. * the destruction of the enemy  
(3) Engl. a. the city’s destruction  
   b. * the enemy’s destruction  

Well-known accounts of the syntax and argument structure of deverbal nouns have explained these generalizations by assuming that the nominalization process suppresses the agent of the predicate, similarly to passive formation (cf. Grimshaw 1990, whose assumption is taken over in many recent studies). Recent derivational accounts explain the data by claiming that deverbal nouns, because of their being nominal constructions, syntactically embedded under D, are intransitive or unaccusative constructions that are unable to syntactically project an agent argument (cf. e.g. Marantz 1997, Alexiadou 2001).

The present study is based on a different assumption: it claims, first, that the argument structure of verbal basis and deverbal nouns, and second, that the number of syntactic argument positions governed by verbs and nouns do not differ. Rather, this study shows that the linking algorithm relating argument structure and syntactic argument positions works slightly different for verbs and nouns, leading to the observed contrasts in the way the semantic participants of the event denoted are linked to syntactic positions.

The account developed in this paper is cast in the framework of Lexical-Functional Grammar ("LFG"). It draws on Lexical Mapping Theory ("LMT"), the module concerned with formalizing the projection between semantic structure, argument structure and syntactic (i.e. functional) structure. Crucially, LMT assumes that both the arguments contained in the argument structure of a given lexeme as well as the grammatical functions governed by a given lexical category are specified in terms of the features [±objective] and [±restricted]. Arguments and grammatical functions are not fully specified, however, but remain underspecified for the two features, thereby assuring simultaneously a principled as well as flexible mapping between the two levels. Starting from standard assumptions about the way the mapping proceeds from argument structure to functional structure for verbal predicates (cf. Falk 2001: 108), this study shows that the standard mapping algorithm requires only a slight modification to account for the differential behaviour of verbs and deverbal nouns. In contrast to previous LMT approaches to the syntax of deverbal nouns (e.g., Markantonatou 1995, Laczkó 2000, Kelling 2003), it is assumed that deverbal nouns, at least in Germanic and Romance, govern not just one, but two unrestricted grammatical functions (cf. Chisarik & Payne 2003 for a similar assumption).

The data discussed in this study are drawn from English, German, French and Spanish. The mapping account described above is developed on the basis of the “standard” constructions found with event-denoting deverbal nouns, i.e., constructions in which the theme argument is realized postnominally in a PP introduced by Engl. *of* or French *de*, while the agent is expressed as an oblique function (English PP_{by}, French PP_{par}) or is omitted altogether, cf. (4).

Interestingly, the LMT approach developed here can also account for a variety of other constructions which have often been claimed to be problematic for theoretical approaches which assume that deverbal nouns have a suppressed external argument or that they are unaccusative constructions. In particular, the approach proposed here can derive (event-denoting) constructions with a prenominally realized agent argument, cf. (5), as well as (event-denoting) constructions with a prenominally realized theme argument, cf. (6) (based on assumptions by Doron & Rappaport...
1991); it can account for the difference between deverbal nouns that allow prenominal realization of the theme argument and those that do not allow it, cf. (6) in contrast to (7). Likewise, it explains the difference between deverbal nouns that allow postnominal realization of the agent argument and those that do not allow it, cf. (8) a., b. and c. In can also account for Spanish nominal constructions with the preposition a, which have previously been classified as “prepositional accusatives” (cf. Torrego 1998), but which in fact share no properties with prepositional accusatives in verbal constructions, cf. (9). In addition, on this account the often stressed generalization that all arguments of deverbal nouns, except the theme argument, can be omitted, falls out from assumptions made by Alsina (1996) on independent grounds, once the correct specifications for the grammatical functions governed by deverbal nouns are assumed. Finally, the linking mechanism proposed here can also explain why argument-taking deverbal nouns never allow exceptional linking, even if the base verbs do allow it (cf. Rappaport 1983).

(4) Fr. la destruction de la ville (par l’armée)
Engl. the destruction of the city (by the army)

(5) Fr. saagent destruction de la ville
Engl. theiragent destruction of the city

(6) Fr. stheme destruction
Engl. itsstheme destruction

(7) Fr. sontheme admiration
Engl. itsstheme admiration

(8) a. Fr. la destruction de l’arméeagent
Engl. the destruction of the armyagent
b. Fr. l’attaque de l’arméeagent
Engl. the attack of the armyagent
c. Fr. l’aboiement des chiensagent
Engl. the barking of the dogsagent

(9) Span. el ataque de un tanqueagent al hotel Palestina
Engl. the attack of a tankagent against the hotel Palestina

References