Modifying Event Nominals: Syntactic Surface Meets Semantic Transparency

In German, there is ample evidence for syntactic base positions of adverbial modifiers dependent on the semantic objects they relate to (cf. i.a. Maienborn 2003, Pittner 2004 and related work). E.g., the adverbial *schnell* ('fast') is internally interpreted if projected in V-adjacent position while it relates to the whole event if generated above the VP:

(1) a. Paul hat [$_{VP}$die Daten [$_V$ [$_{AP}$schnell] [$_V$verarbeitet]]].
Paul has [$_{VP}$the data   [$_V$ [$_{AP}$fast]   [$_V$processed]]].
'the processing activity itself is fast'

b. Paul hat [$_{VP}$ [$_{AP}$schnell] [$_{VP}$die Daten verarbeitet]].
Paul has [$_{VP}$ [$_{AP}$fast]   [$_{VP}$the data   processed]].
'the time span of the whole event is short'

In my talk, I will be concerned with modifiers relating to event nominals. It will be argued that data on nominal modification reveal structural differences to the verbal domain challenging a strict compositional make-up of their semantic contribution. Adhering to a surface-oriented syntax and thus refraining from analyses based on underlying invisible syntactic structure (cf. for an overview Alexiadou 2007), they will be explained via a highly flexible syntax-semantic interface.

Event nominals corresponding to (1) do not show the same structural effect: in case of a prenominal modifying adjective, both readings are conveyed by (2). In case of specifying the manner reading by a postnominal prepositional phrase, the structure differs from the VP in ruling out head-adjacency of the modifier, cf. (3a) vs. (3b). The reason is syntactic: German adnominal genitive can only be checked in N-adjacent position.
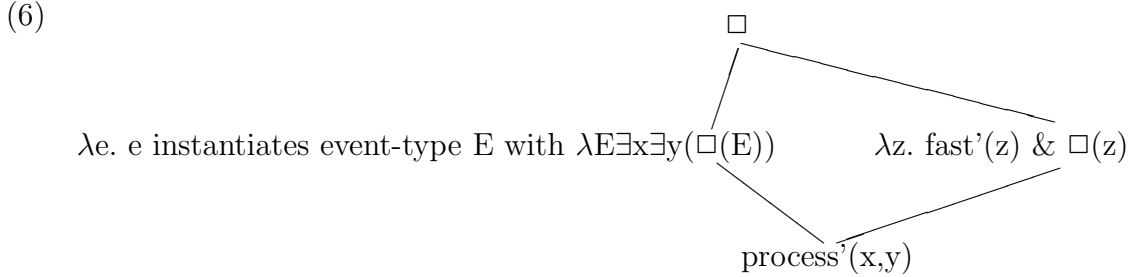
(2) die schnelle Verarbeitung der Daten   durch Paul
the fast   processing   the data$_{GEN}$ by   Paul

(3) a. die Verarbeitung der Daten   auf schnelle Weise
the processing   the data$_{GEN}$ in   fast   manner

b. *die Verarbeitung auf schnelle Weise   der Daten
the processing   in   fast   manner the data$_{GEN}$

The same holds for locative modifiers: whereas an adverbial internal locative has its base position next to the head V, cf. (4) and Maienborn (2003) for details, the PP in the corresponding nominal surfaces in distance to N, cf. (5).

(4) Der Koch hat das Hühnchen in einer Marihuanatunke zubereitet
the cook has the chicken   in a   marihuana-sauce prepared

(5) a. die Zubereitung des Hühnchens in einer Marihuanatunke
the preparation the chicken$_{GEN}$ in a   marihuana-sauce

b. *die Zubereitung in einer Marihuanatunke des Hühnchens
the preparation in a   marihuana-sauce the chicken$_{GEN}$

While the verbal data can straightforwardly be accounted for by mapping syntactic c-command on semantic scope (cf. e.g. Pittner 2004), the nominal data challenge strict

compositionality: in their internal reading, the modifiers apply to just one part of the expression modified syntactically. Following Egg (2006), the different readings will be compositionally derived via a flexible syntax-semantic interface built upon underspecification. Interface rules compute representation (6) for example (2):[1]

(6)

$$\Box$$

λe. e instantiates event-type E with $\lambda E \exists x \exists y (\Box(E))$ λz. fast'(z) & $\Box$(z)

process'(x,y)

Starting from the left, i.e. identifying the hole in the left fragment with the topmost hole, derives the internal reading, cf. (7a). By first identifying the right-hand hole with the top, the modifier relates holistically to the event, cf. (7b). PPs are captured analogously.

(7)   a. λe. e instantiates event-type E with $\lambda E \exists x \exists y$. fast'(E) & process(x,y,E)

        b. λz. fast'(z) & z instantiates event-type E with $\lambda E \exists x \exists y$. process(x,y,E)

Additional evidence for the proposed solution will be drawn from interacting operators. Due to a c-commanding existential quantifier in the locative, the surface structure of (8)

(8)   die Zubereitung aller Hühnchen   in einer Marihuanatunke
        the preparation all $chicken_{GEN}$ in a   marihuana-sauce

predicts narrow scope of the genitive universal quantifier. In fact though, (8) allows for both wide and narrow scope. It will be shown how this interaction can be reconciled with surface-oriented syntax by the underspecification mechanism sketched above.

Sebastian Buecking, University of Tuebingen
sebastian.buecking@uni-tuebingen.de

References

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[1] I assume existential binding of thematic arguments in nominalizations; but nothing hinges on that.