Nominalization, relativization, and attribution in Lotha, Angami, and Burmese

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Lotha Naga, Angami Naga, and Burmese are Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in a region which includes Burma (Burmese) and the northeast Indian state of Nagaland (Lotha and Angami). In these languages, as in Tibeto-Burman more generally, grammatical subordination typically involves nominalization. In this paper, we will be concerned with three types of nominalized structures:

1) Relative clauses (e.g. 'The boy who is eating bananas...')
2) Attributive adjectives ('The fat boy...')
3) Sentential complements ('...likes to eat bananas/eating bananas')

Also included in the third category are Purpose and Reason clauses, with or without an overt complementizer (e.g. 'He came (in order) to eat a lot of fried bananas'; 'He got sick from (because of) eating too many bananas').

What such apparently diverse grammatical phenomena have in common is that in each — at least in the three languages considered here — a verb or verbal clause is subordinated to a head element (an NP in the relative and attributive types, and a VP in the case of sentential complements) by means of nominalization. Nominalized sentential complements are a common phenomenon in English, and thus pose no conceptual difficulty for the English-speaking linguist. Relative and attributive clauses, on the other hand, are not adjectival, as one might expect, but rather function in some sense as nominal appositives (e.g. 'the [banana-eating one] boy'; 'the [fat one] boy').

The tendency to nominalize embeddings holds across the language family as a whole. However, individual Tibeto-Burman languages vary in the number of different nominalizers they employ, and in the kinds of distinctions these encode. Angami Naga and Burmese are good examples of the opposite extremes of differentiation that can be found. In Angami, all of the subordination types mentioned above are effectuated by means of a single nominalizing morpheme, k'ə-. In Burmese, by contrast, the expression of relativization, attribution, and sentential complementation

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2 See for example Matisoff (1972).
involves no fewer than seven distinct nominalizing forms. In addition to
distinguishing categorically between the various grammatical types of
embedding (relative clause vs. sentential complement, etc.), these forms
systematically indicate whether the situation expressed by the embedded
clause is aspectually realized or unrealized. Burmese nominalizers thus
grammatically encode distinctions which in Angami must be derived from
context or specified by means of additional (e.g. aspect) morphology.

In between these two extremes lie most other Tibeto-Burman
languages, including Lotha Naga. In Lotha, two formally distinct
nominalizers cover the same functional territory as that of Angami kə-
and the seven Burmese embedding nominalizers. However, while the meaning
distinctions encoded by the Burmese forms are highly systematic, the
functional contrast between the two Lotha forms appears to resist
systematic description. Given English-based sensibilities and the
grammatical subordination types mentioned above, one might predict that
the two markers would be used to distinguish formally between NP-
modifying types (i.e. relative and attributive clauses) and those that modify
VP's (sentential complements). However, such is not the Lotha situation.
Rather, the available evidence suggests that the two forms are used, at least
in one area of the grammar, to contrast realized and unrealized embeddings,
as in Burmese. The evidence for this observation, as well as its implications
for language change, are considered in what follows.

1. Angami

We will begin by considering the Angami system. As mentioned above,
Angami has a general nominalizer kə- which is employed in a diversity of
functions: to derive gerundives and abstract nouns from verbs, to
subordinate relative clauses and adjectival verbs to nominal heads, to embed
sentential complements, and to derive deverbal adverbs. kə- is prefixed
either directly onto the verb, or onto the clause-final verbal marker (VM) if
one is present. When the nominalizer attaches directly to the verb, the
resulting form, taken out of context, may have several possible
interpretations: for example kəməsə, (from məsə ‘to clean’) could mean
either ‘cleaning’ (gerundive), ‘cleanliness’ (abstract noun), ‘clean’
(attributive adjective), ‘cleanly’ (adverb), or, when followed by a definite
article, ‘the clean one’ or ‘one who cleans’!

Of course, structural and semantic factors help to distinguish between
these functions in actual contexts of use. In relative clause constructions.

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2 This figure does not represent the total number of nominalizers in Burmese; however, for
the purposes of this paper I am only considering those which correspond to the basic
grammatical subordination types identified in the first paragraph.
verbal markers (VM’s) indicating tense, aspect, valency, etc. are common, and kè- attaches to these rather than to the verb. Relative clauses are further distinguished by the presence of a definite article (e.g. ụ ‘masculine/inanimate singular’), or head noun + definite article, following the nominalized clause. Examples of Angami relative clauses are given in (1) - (3) below:

1) [mhà lè kè- bá] thëmìg ù...
thing think NZR- VM man the
‘The man who thinks...’

2) [thëmìg ù lësòda ù pyè mèrènyò o tṣè kè-va] ù...
man the book the take orphan the give NZR-VM the
‘The book the man gave to the orphan...’

3) tṣhè [gì kè-li] ù...
or
[tṣhè gì kè-li] ò ù...
animal kill NZR-VM the
‘The animal that was killed...’ or
‘The one who killed an animal...’

Head nouns in Angami relative constructions commonly appear to the right of the relative clause, as in (1), although they may also be clause-internal, as in (2). Left-headed and headless relatives are also found; example (3) is ambiguous, depending on whether the relative head is taken to be the overt nominal tṣhè ‘animal’, or whether the clause is interpreted as headless (‘the one’).

What is also to be noted in these examples is aspect marking in the embedded clause. Aspect is indicated by means of VM’s — e.g. bá ‘stative’ and liè ‘resultative’ — rather than through the choice of nominalizer, which remains kè- throughout.

Adjecitval modification in Angami is similar to relative modification, except that while relative clauses may be either left- or right-headed, the head in adjectival constructions is always to the left. A further difference is that the nominalizer kè- is prefixed directly to pure ‘adjectival’ verbs such as sa ‘be new’, zìvì ‘be beautiful’, etc.

4) kì [kè-sa] ù...
house NZR-be.new the
‘The new house...’
When other than adjectival verbs are involved, however, VM’s may be part of the embedding, and kè- attaches to these. In such cases, the distinction between relative and adjectival modification is largely blurred, although word order (head-modifier vs. modifier-head) still influences whether the construction receives a relative or an adjectival interpretation.

6) [kí- nù kè- bá] tèpfé ù...
   house-loc NZR-VM dog the
   'The dog that is in the house...'

7) tèpfé [mēziē kè- tá] ù...
   dog be-tired NZR-VM the
   'The tired dog...'

In general, head-modifier order (as in the 'adjectival' construction in (7)) is preferred when the attributed state is viewed as inherent or internal to the person or thing modified, and modifier-head order (as in the 'relative' construction in (6)) is preferred when the attributed situation is viewed as circumstantial or external to the person or thing modified.3

Another important function of Angami kè- is the nominalization of sentential complements. As with relative clauses, the nominalizer attaches to the VM of the subordinate clause, which precedes the verbal 'head' that embeds it. The same construction is employed regardless of whether the complement functions as subject (ex. (8)) or object (exx. (9) - (10)) of the matrix sentence, and regardless of the aspectual value of the subordinate clause (generic in (8); unrealized in (9); realized in (10)):

8) [thèvọ- tshọ tse pàkrā kè-tsō] kòmiciè bá.
   pig- flesh eat a lot NZR-VM danger have
   'Eating too much pork is dangerous.'

9) [puo tìo kè-tìo] ã mère bá.
   3s go NZR-VM 1s hope VM
   'I hope [that she will go].'

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3 Cf. Egerod (1991: 375) for an observation relating this phenomenon to Tibeto-Burman as a whole.