Relational nouns and locative expressions in Mesoamerican languages

In this workshop we will discuss the syntactic status of some words that express locative relations and that, in many cases, are related diachronically but not synchronically to nouns that express body parts or mereological relations. We will analyze the syntactic properties in Mesoamerican languages from different linguistic families in order to discuss whether they are in fact heads of (regular) noun phrases or rather form different syntactic structures, mainly adpositional and adverbial phrases.

Mesoamerican languages are known for having Relational Nouns (RN). In fact, according to Campbell, Kauffman & Smith (1986), it is one of five features that encompass Mesoamerica as a linguistic area. However, the first problem we encounter is that it is not entirely clear what a RN actually is, because it is a semantic category. In principle, semantically, a RN could be any noun that relates a noun head with an argument. So nouns denoting kinship, body part and locative relations, among others, could be a RN insofar it is a syntactic head that expresses a kinship, mereological o locative relation, respectively, with another noun phrase, as illustrated in (1).

1. a)   Bill's cousin.
    b)   The table's leg.
    c)   The back of the house.

However, in Mesoamerican languages, relational nouns are usually taken to be those "expressing locative and related notions, but composed of a noun root and possessive pronominal affixes" (Campbell, Kauffman & Smith 1986: 545). Part of the problem is that any word that inflects for possession is taken to be a noun, as in (2), whose only gloss in the original source is 'Relational Noun':

2. Sakapultek

    k-∅-in-k'um-uul   jun   etz'b'a'l   **r-eech**   w-al-tixtyoox
    INC-3SG1SG-bring   ART   toy   3POSS-**RN**   1POSS-son-god
    'I brought a toy for my godson.'

Nonetheless, it is known that around 34% of the world languages that do have adpositions inflect for person (Bakker 2013). So, strictly speaking having possessive morphology is not enough for stating that *eech* in (2) is a noun that heads a NP. In addition to that, in many cases the third person possessive affix in locative constructions is zero, as in many Zapotec (cf. Lillehaugen & Sonnenschein 2012 and the different analyses therein) and Mayan languages:

3. Sakapultek

    k-∅-i-min   q'aa'   chi   ∅-xee'   l-a'ts-aam
    INC-3SG-3SG-put.in fire   PREP 3POSS-under ART-salt
    '(S/he) puts fire under the salt.' (Mó Isém 2006)

With respect to locative relations, some authors use the term "meronyms" to indicate that body part words are used in the locative domain (Bohnemeyer 2009; Bohnemeyer & Pérez Báez 2008). However, this label is also semantic in nature and it could be misleading insofar it might suggest that it includes all words expressing mereological relations and says nothing about the morphosyntactic properties of such words. In any case, it would be necessary do discuss them language by language.

Regardless of the proper semantic analysis and terminology of such morphemes, what we are interested in addressing in this workshop is the morphosyntactic properties of so called RN in Mesoamerican languages and, particularly, if they head a Noun Phrase or other syntactic construction, as well as the structure of their complements.

In some cases, the locative expression is headed by a locative marker, as in (4a), or by a general adposition, as in (4b), that takes a noun as argument:

4. a) San Pedro Potla Mazahua

Nù=ɓúɾu   Ø=dḭ́ntʰɨ   a=ʃî́tʰɨ   k'a=ŋgùmɨ
ART=donkey 3PRS=tie   LOC=back   DEM=house
'the donkey is tied behind the house' (Mora Bustos 2014)

   b) Oxchuc Tzeltal

Tek'-l-an   ta   s-ni'   carro.
stand-EST-IMPER.I   PREP   A3-nose   car
'stand in front of the car.' (Polian 2013)

However, even in this cases, we want to know whether the RN really has all the syntactic properties of regular nouns or a narrower distribution.

In other cases, there is no locative marker or adposition and the RN seems to head the locative construction itself, as in (5). One can ask whether the RN is still a noun or rather has grammaticalized into an adposition or an adverb, even if it still has some fossilized nominal markers (cf. Bez 2020 for Assamese).

5. Coatlán Zapotec

nà gúr nâ   ngùb má   ndô   yû   wê
and now REL   COMPL:fall   3A   face   groud   here
'when (he) fell on the ground' (Beam de Azcona 2013)

Finally, in some other cases, RNs are bound morphemes that form morphologicaly complex locative words, as in Mixe languages:

6. Ayutla Mixe

Yë'ë   tseen   tam   **kojkp-këpäjk-p**
DEM   pine   DEIC   hill-tip-LOC
'El pino está en la punta del cerro'

As will be shown in the workshop, in many Mesoamerican languages RN are in a grammaticalization process that produces other word classes and, in fact, in many cases they are not longer nouns despite retaining some noun features. In this respect, they can be studied as a type of heterosemy (Enfield 2006, among others). In addition, even if they are not fully grammaticalized into adpositions or adverbs, they are not regular nouns and belong to a closed lexical class.

Selected References:

Bakker, Dik. 2013. Person Marking on Adpositions. In Dryer, Matthew S. & Haspelmath, Martin (eds.) *WALS Online* (v2020.3) [Data set]. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7385533

Bez, G. 2020. The relator noun construction in Assamese. *Journal of South Asian Languages and Linguistics* [https://doi org/ 10 1515 /jsall 2020 2023]

Campbell, L., T. Kaufman & T. Smith Stark. 1986. Mesoamerica as a linguistic area. *Language* 63: 530-558.

Cholsamaj.

Enfield, N. 2006. Heterosemy and the grammar lexicon trade off. In Ameka, Dench & Evans (Eds), *Catching Language The Standing Challenge of Grammar Writing*, pp 297-320. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton

Mó Isén, Romelia. (2007). *Rikemiik Li Tujaal Tziij. Gramática Sakapulteka*. Guatemala: