## Nominal Possession in American Sign Language

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#### 1 Introduction

Nominalizations formed via reduplication in American Sign Language (ASL) exhibit an apparent prohibition against hosting theme arguments in the possessor position (Abner In prep.).

(1) a. POSS<sub>i</sub> COLLECT.RED FINISH HAPPEN<sup>1</sup>

His collection already happened

✓ His = Collector # His/Its = Collectee

b. POSS<sub>i</sub> ADOPT.RED FINISH HAPPEN

His adoption already happened.

✓ His = Adopter # His/Its = Adoptee

This restriction cannot be attributed to an animacy hierarchy effect with respect to the interpretation of Possessors in ASL, nor can it be straightforwardly accommodated by semantic approaches analyzing possession as a contextually-defined relational variable (see Barker 1995 for English). The analysis here does account for this restriction, appealing only to (a) independently-motivated properties of Poss possessives and (b) their interaction with the nominalization reduplication process. I begin with syntactic and semantic evidence in favor of forming reduplicated nominals low in the decomposed verbal structure (ResP). This approach necessitates that Possessors be introduced inside of the DP, not promoted from a verbal argument position. Restriction against theme argument Possessors are thus not phraseable as such and are instead shown to be an epiphenomenon arising as a consequence of the possessive relations Poss can encode.

### 2 Nominalization via Reduplication in ASL

Supalla and Newport (1978) first described this reduplication process as a morphological means of generating individual-referring nouns that have a phonologically and semantically related "verb for the action performed with [them]" (Supalla and Newport 1978:100)—a means of deriving theme and instrumental participant nominalizations, in terms of contemporary theory.

(2)	Verb	Noun	$Traditional\ Gloss$	$\approx$ Nominalization Meaning
	SWEEP	SWEEP.Red	BROOM	'a thing to sweep with'
	SIT	SIT.Red	CHAIR	'a thing to sit on'

Not—to my knowledge—explicitly addressed by Supalla and Newport nor in research thereafter is the ability of morphological reduplication to derive nominals with a non-participant interpretations.

<sup>\*</sup>The author is grateful to all of the individuals who have patiently shared their time and language. Without them, this research would not have been possible.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>The transcriptions adopted here are modified from traditional glosses to reflect certain aspects of morphological complexity. For this brief discussion, I abstract away from issues of inter-speaker variation, morphophonological alternation (Brentari 1998), and neutralization in rapid signing (Launer 1982). The analysis of reduplicated nominal and POSSessor combinations presented here is applicable only to possessive constructions formed with POSS in ASL. For the interaction of nominalizations with other expressions of possession in the language, see (Abner In prep., Chapter 3).





(3)	Verb	Noun	$Traditional\ Gloss$	$\approx Nominalization Meaning$
	LEARN	LEARN.Red	EDUCATION	'what results from learning'
	BE-HOT	BE-HOT.Red	HEAT	'what results from being hot'

Moreover, preliminary evidence suggests that the morphological process of reduplication is not only ambiguous with respect to the kinds of nominalizations it derives, but that a single derived form may be ambiguous as to whether it receives a participant or non-participant interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

(4)	Verb	Noun	Traditional Gloss	$\approx Nominalization Meaning$
	VOTE-FOR	VOTE-FOR.Red	VOTE	%'a thing to vote with'
			ELECTION	'what results from voting'
	GO-BY-PLANE	GO-BY-PLANE.RED	AIRPLANE	'a thing to go-by-plane with'
			FLIGHT	%'what results from going-by-
				plane'

### 3 The Structural Size of Reduplicated Nominals

Diagnostics that distinguish complex event nominalization from that happening lower in the verbal structure (Grimshaw 1990; Alexiadou 2001; Borer 2005) provide converging evidence that it is the latter type at play in nominalization via reduplication in ASL, deriving constituents that have predominantly nominal properties.

First, reduplicated nominals uniformly display the referentiality and evaluability expected of low, non-eventive nominalization, with the referent of the non-participant reduplicated nominal being the result of the associated verbal event.

- (5)  ${}_{\rm i}{\rm VOTE\text{-}FOR.Red}$  PRO ${}_{\rm i}{\rm N}$  IN NEWSPAPER, PRINT DISSEMINATE The election was in the newspaper.
- (6) POSS<sub>i</sub> VOTE-FOR.Red WRONG

  His election was wrong (... because I supported someone else/there was a case of election fraud).

Second, the mechanisms responsible for introducing possessors are the same as those used in DP-internal attributive possession. As such, possessors of these reduplicated nominals need not refer to participants of the associated verbal meaning.

(7) POSS<sub>i</sub> ADOPT.RED FINISH HAPPEN His adoption already happened.

 $\checkmark$  His = Judge approving the adoption

i. MEASURE.RED-PERSON

ii. \*MEASURE-PERSON

ii. MEASURE.RED

engineer ('one who is responsible for the result of measuring')

No reduplication.

 $PERSON\ drop.$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Data also shows that agent nominalizations formed with PERSON in ASL are built on these reduplicated nominal, not on the verbal root itself, contrary to their traditional description. The dropping of PERSON in informal speech therefore yields an additional ambiguity.

### (8) PRO<sub>i</sub> ADOPT<sub>i</sub> BABY FINISH

He has adopted a baby.

# He = Judge approving the adoption

Third, as is expected of nominalizations with little verbal structure and extensive nominal structure, these reduplicated nominals display quantificational variability, can surface with explicit marking of indefiniteness, and can host number morphology in the form of dual inflection in both their participant (Supalla and Newport 1978) and non-participant usage.

- (9) EACH HELP.RED.DIST BOTHER PRO<sub>1</sub> Each (event of) helping bothers me.
- (10) SOME VOTE-FOR.RED GOOD SOME BAD Some elections are good, some are bad.
- (11) FORBIDDEN SIT TWO CHAIR.DUAL MUST PICK ONE It is forbidden to sit in two chairs, you must pick one.
- (12) NEWSPAPER DISCUSS ABOUT TWO DIFFERENT VOTE-FOR.RED.DUAL The newspaper discussed two different elections.

Fourth, nominalizations formed via reduplication do not manifest the morphological properties of higher verbal structure in ASL, such as the path movement properties that may be associated with the inner aspect of the verbal event (Wilbur 2003) or the incorporation of spatial loci used in the verbal agreement system (see, for example, Pfau et al. 2011).

- (13) a.  $POSS_1 iBOSS iADVISE_1 PRO_1$   $My \ boss \ advised \ me \dots$ 
  - b. \*POSS<sub>i</sub> (\*i) ADVISE.RED(\*1) his (\*him-)advising(\*-to me)

Finally, the dearth of verbal structure in nominals formed via reduplication makes them incompatible with both agent-oriented modifiers (WILL 'willingly', also used as an agentivity diagnostic in Benedicto and Brentari (2004)) and frequency modifiers (OFTEN, produced with tapping across the palm of the non-dominant hand). As instantiated here by a class of mouth adverbials in ASL, manner modification is also impossible with reduplicated nominals, speaking not only to the non-eventive status of reduplicated nominals but also to the crucially adverbial—not adjectival—status of mouth modifiers in ASL.

- (14) a. ✓WILL TO-INFORM b. \*WILL TO-INFORM.RED
- (15) a. ✓OFTEN TO-INFORM b. \*OFTEN TO-INFORM.RED
- (16) a.  $\frac{\text{th-adv}}{\sqrt{\text{INFORM}}}$  b.  $\frac{\text{th-adv}}{\sqrt{\text{INFORM.RED}}}$

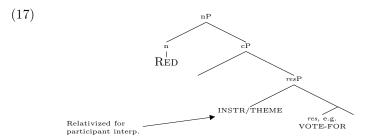


### 4 A Syntactic Account of Reduplicated Nominals

If the locus of nominalization determines the behavior exhibited by the derived nominal, the pattern above can only be accounted for if an appropriate target for nominalization is provided by the verbal complex. Verbal decompositions of the type pursued in Ramchand (2008) and related work independently argue for the existence of a verbal projection with the appropriate properties: the Res(ult) Phrase that is responsible

for encoding event telicity and has the potential to introduce low event arguments.<sup>3</sup>

With this decomposition in place, reduplicated nominal formation can proceed either through direct nominalization of the ResP projection, yielding result interpretations, or with an additional step of relativizing the (silent) verbal argument inside of the ResP projection, yielding participant interpretations.



Crucially, the nominalizing nP projection is present regardless of the derivational path chosen, thus accounting for the surface homophony between participant and non-participant nominalizations.

### 5 Solving the (Apparent) Possessor Puzzle

Despite superficial word order similarities, possessor structures in ASL do not behave like English prenominal genitives, patterning instead with possessive constructions that are typologically known to be more semantically restrictive, such as possessive adjectives and construct state possession.

(18) ¡JOHN POSS; SHOE, TABLE PUPPY ... John's shoe, table, puppy, ...

As argued for in Abner (In prep.), the Poss morpheme found in Possessor constructions exhibits the morphosyntactic behavior of a (verbal) predicate in ASL, and, as such, is at liberty to impose its own selectional restrictions on the Possessor it introduces. This analysis is particularly apt at capturing the apparent prohibition against Possessors interpreted as theme arguments of reduplicated nominals, as theme-like Possessor interpretations are unavailable even when the possessed nominal is 'underived'.

### (19) ¡CHAD POSS; PICTURE NICE

Chad's picture is nice.

✓ Chad = The one who took the picture # Chad = The one who is in the picture

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Morphosyntactic evidence from the domain of incorporation in ASL provides independent evidence that instrumentals of the type targeted for nominalization via reduplication appear low in the verbal structure, on a par with theme arguments.