

Lecture 5: Nominalisation and Presupposition

Nominalisation

In the previous lecture we were concerned with the way that agents of action can be concealed through the use of passivised verbs. Active agent deletion can be moved a stage further into nominalisation. This is the transformation of a process into a noun construction creating further ambiguity. For example:

The civilians were killed during a bombing raid
The death of civilians during bombing raid

In this case all sense of agency is removed. In the following case we can see this makes the process appear as neutral and more objective:

*We **analysed** (verb) the data. This revealed a number of trends.*
*The **analysis** (noun) of the data revealed a number of trends.*

The following two examples illustrate the difference between passive verbs and nominalisation:

The global economy was changed
The changed global economy

There is an important difference between simple removal of the agent and nominalisation. While the first of these two sentences uses a passivised verb to conceal the agent of the change the second presents it as a noun, as a thing. In fact 'globalisation' is often used as a noun when in fact it is a process. This itself can make it appear simply like a thing rather than the result of political decisions. Fairclough (2000) points out that such constructions there is:

“no specification of who or what is changing, a backgrounding of the processes of change themselves and a foregrounding of their effects. In backgrounding the processes themselves, nominalisation also backgrounds questions of agency and causality, of who or what causes change (p26).

We can see how this process of turning verbs into nouns, works in the following example:

*Every day shops **lose** thousands of dollars worth of valuable items.*
*The daily **loss** of thousands of dollars worth of valuable stock*

We can see the same here

The student lost their course work and was rather upset
The student was upset about the loss of their course work

and

I am sorry I have failed to return my library book on time
I am sorry about the failure to return my library book on time

By turning an action (lose) into a thing (loss), a sense of the action is retained, but as a noun we can now point to it, describe its physical qualities, classify it and qualify it.

Decisive and precise strikes on enemy positions have been successful....
The regretful failure to return my library books on time...

This addition of words that evaluate the noun create nominal groups. The nominal group is a noun (called the 'head') surrounded by other words that characterise that noun. Within any clause this nominal group works as though it were a single noun. So 'decisive and precise strikes' function as a single noun. These things can then themselves become units used for the basis of discussion. So the complex process of doing an attack, performed by a particular agent with a particular subject becomes something remote and formal in subsequent uses. Newspapers begin to talk about 'precision strikes'.

Nominalisations can be important ideologically. In a text we might find that one set of participants are responsible for actions meaning that they are responsible for the circumstances whereas another group are unable to act. In the following example the Prime minister is not confronted with processes to which he must react nor by specific agents. Nor is it clear where he has acted.

The Prime Minister rejected a call to carry out an inquiry into allegations of corruption. He announced that the tightening of sanctions was a decision that had been made through all the legal channels.

Also importantly here we can see that nominalisations are not marked for tense so they are outside of time. This has the effect of avoiding when and how likely something is which is necessary with verbs. When did someone call for an inquiry? Who made the allegations or tightened the sanctions? When and by whom was the decision the made?

Nominalisation can hide both agents and who is affected since our vision has been channelled and narrowed.

Fighting has affected the supply of services to rural areas.

This is a general and not specific act and is used here to gloss over who is the initiator and who is affected.

A demonstration against increased tuition fees took place in front of the main building that caused disruption to classes

Effects of Nominalisation

Changing a verb or process into a thing has several important effects:

1. People are removed and therefore responsibility for the action has also been removed. It makes it seem as though events just happen.

I am sorry I have failed to return my library book on time
I am sorry about the failure to return my library book on time

2. Since actions become a thing, it can be counted, described, classified and qualified through the resources of the nominal group. But this means that causality is now of secondary concern.

The regretful failure to return my library books on time
There were two failures to return my library books on time

3. Nominalisation can remove any sense of time

We can see this in the following example:

The Prime Minister rejected a call to carry out an inquiry into allegations of corruption.

4. Nominalisations can function as new participants in new constructions. This further increases the opacity of the nominals.

The Vice Chancellor said that the demonstration regrettably caused disruption to the education of students.

5. The nominals can themselves become then stable entities that will enter common usage

Globalisation should be seen as an opportunity for all of us

6. The process is still in the sentence, so the text accumulates a sense of action.

Instant blitz on his lair

7. The text is becoming more dense or compressed. Detail of events is reduced.

Fighting has affected the supply of services to rural areas

In sum we have deletion, simplification, collapsing of forms into single units

Making nominalised sentences

1. identify the active verb in the clause
2. change the verb into the noun form.

The course was constructed with the aim of generating maximum income

Change the verb into the noun form

verb: constructed  noun: construction
 nominalisation

The construction of the course aimed at generating maximum income

The nominal group and relative clauses

Further, we can expand, modify or describe the information contained by a nominal group through the addition of a clause containing further nominal groups. A type of clause common to

nominal groups is a relative clause. These are dependent clauses meaning that they cannot stand alone without the independent clause. They are linked to the main clause by relative pronouns such as which or who, or by relative adverbs such as where, when and why. For example:

The students who were part of the demonstration against increased fees created difficulty for staff entering the building

Here on the one hand students are not depicted as demonstrating (verb) but as part of a demonstration (noun). It is also hard to tell if they were deliberately preventing access to the building. This is reminiscent of Tony Blair's comments on the massive demonstration against the war in Iraq. He explained that many people took part in the demonstration and that this showed how alive democracy and political participation were in this country.

Presupposition

Presupposition is to do with what kinds of things are assumed as given in a text. In fact it is basically impossible to not use presupposition when we speak or produce a text as they are part of the structure of language. Even the sentence 'the bag is heavy' involves the assumption that you know what a bag is and what heavy is. This is presupposition a sort of background belief. Of course much of this is subconscious. We aren't continually monitoring that we know what people mean, although in some contexts we may come to be aware that someone is using a slightly different meaning than we would normally do for something. And when we speak we can't forever be saying exactly what we mean by things so we have to rely on shared presuppositions. But as we have found so far on this course language is continually used to foreground some things and silence others. Therefore looking what is assumed in a text can be revealing. What is a text setting out as 'the known'? We can see an example of this in the EMDA mission statement analysed for lexical content previously.

The vision is for the East Midlands to become a fast growing, dynamic economy based on innovative, knowledge based companies competing successfully in the global economy.

This presupposes that there is indeed a global economy and that this is a taken for granted identifiable thing despite the fact that many analysts see global economic processes as far from equal around the planet and being characterised by particular relations of power and driven by certain interests Fairclough (2003: 163). We can also ask what a 'dynamic economy' is and what is a 'knowledge based company'? We see the same thing in a sentence such as:

British culture is under threat by immigration

This assumes that there is such a thing as 'British culture'. Studies in Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies have shown that this idea of monolithic, what they call 'essentialised' cultures, is incorrect hiding massive variation and change within. Yet such concepts can be used for particular interests and ideologies.

In a Christian society such as Britain is there place for single faith schools based on Islam

This assumes Britain is a Christian society. What this means, at what level, and by whom is not articulated.

Presupposition can be used in order to build a basis for what sounds like a logical argument as above. There is such a thing as British culture and therefore immigration must be seen as a threat. In the following sentences we can see how speakers don't actually say explicitly what they mean but that this creates the basis of what they can then go on to say:

This new model of organisation.... suggests that there was an old one.

Militants launched a new wave of attacks today.... assumes that there was an old wave distinctive from this one.

The real issue is..... suggests that there are other issues but that they are not so important.

Have you stopped smoking... assumes that you were smoking .

We should take this opportunity ... assumes that it is an opportunity.

All of these examples show how text producers can establish what is known and shared.

Fairclough (1995) discusses the way that language can reconstitute the social world. If the fact that there is a global economy becomes accepted as a given, as it has for the most part in the Western news media , then we sideline the fact that it is open for contestation, that it is part of political decisions and choices that are being made right now. If we can make everyone accept that there is a British culture then they can be more easily persuaded that it is something that must be protected and that things not part of this culture can be identified and dealt with. The same goes for the sentence:

The British people are a generous lot, but their patience is being tried on the subject of immigration....

Here it is assumed that there is a 'British people' who would identify themselves as such. The inclination to align with this group is made more attractive by the evaluation of them as generous. But this serves the same role as accepting that there is a British culture. For Van Dijk (1995) this is a classic move of racist rhetoric.

The following examples appear as routine cases of the use of presupposition. But they are useful for recognising less obvious forms.

Every time you... (you are repeatedly doing something)

A politician might announce 'Everytime I hear an objection to the possibilities offered by the introduction of private finance into the health services....' This gives a sense of routine, that the politician is used to such objections, and even bored by them.

Let me address your concerns. (you have concerns: I assume I know what they are). Politicians often use this presupposition to control what concerns you are permitted to have.

Every reasonable person knows that... (what follows is universally reasonable according to some undisclosed system of measure - to which the speaker has privileged access)

We should take this opportunity. (there is an opportunity - in my opinion – which from another point of view might be a problem or danger)

We need to discuss the underlying issues (that what we have already discussed is just the surface and that what is to be said will be more crucial and fundamental)

The real issues are... (there are other issues deemed not real. The speaker assumes arbitration of reality)

What is your reaction to that? (assumes that you do have a reaction to something)

And are we sure about this? (The speaker implies that there is uncertainty)

A journalist might ask a politician: *What action are you going to take against the Afghan dictatorship after they have thwarted trade agreements?* (description of regime and assumption they will act.