

Noun Incorporation-like phenomena in Japanese:  
At the crossroads of polysynthesis and agglutination

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Despite Baker's (1996) polysynthesis parameter that holds that Noun Incorporation (NI) is a distinctive trait of polysynthetic languages, Japanese, an agglutinative language with no person/number agreement between verb and subject or object, exhibits a variety of NI-like phenomena (including what Shibatani and Kageyama (1988) called “post-syntactic compounding”) whose behavioral properties closely resemble the “genuine” NI in polysynthetic languages. In terms of the degrees of verbal synthesis, then, Japanese is located halfway between isolating and polysynthetic languages. Focusing on NI-like operations in Japanese that productively create Noun-Verb complexes in syntactic rather than lexical structure, this paper will attempt to clarify similarities and differences between “genuine” NI in polysynthetic languages and its kin in Japanese. Specifically, it will be suggested that two kinds of elements must be sharply differentiated in elucidating the nature of the phenomena: (i) behavioral properties of incorporated nouns that are observed as a result of incorporation such as their argument-structural restrictions and referential properties in discourse, and (ii) substantial motivating factors that trigger the NI and NI-like operations. Although the behavioral properties (i) do not diverge significantly between polysynthetic NI and Japanese NI-like phenomena and therefore are likely to be attributed to certain universal principles of human language, the motivating factors (ii) crucially differ. In contrast to polysynthetic NI, which is supposed to be triggered by a rich agreement system, the productivity of Japanese NI-like processes appears to be contingent on the “non-finiteness” of head verbs, forming a gradient of “incorporability”. The least productive is the type “N + Tensed Verb” (e.g. *ki-zukau* (attention-pay) ‘pay attention’), and the most productive is the type “N + non-finite Verbal Noun” (so-called “post-syntactic compound” such as *toshō-koonyū* (*no sai*) ‘in purchasing books’). In the middle ground will be the type “N + gerundive V” (e.g. *tegusune-hii-te* (hand.ointment-apply) ‘being ready’) and the type “N + adnominal verb” (e.g. *michi-yuku* (*hito*) (street-walk (person)) ‘passerby’).