Complex Noun Phrases and Linkers

1 Complex noun phrases cross-linguistically contain meaningless elements (such as Chinese *de*, Dutch *van*, English *of*, Romance *de/di*, Persian *-(y)e*, Takia *-n*, Thai *thîi*) whose sole function is to serve as linkers of predicates to their subjects (cf. traditional Persian grammar’s term *ez ْfe ‘putting together, linking’; copula*). In some languages, those linkers double as complementizers (cf. Romance *de/di* and Thai *thîi*). It may seem tempting to reduce these two classes of meaningless functional elements to one. This paper will argue that such a reduction is not warranted, however, on the basis of a detailed comparative investigation of French and Thai complex nominals of the type ‘NP – *de/thîi* – AP’. Apart from laying bare some striking similarities between the French and Thai constructions which fall out directly from the analysis presented, we will show that the Thai construction is ambiguous between two parses (which can be teased apart with the aid of syntactic and interpretive diagnostics): (i) a structure in which *thîi* introduces a relative clause and (ii) one in which it is a linker of the AP–predicate and its subject. The latter (which we also find at work in French ‘NP – *de* – AP’ constructions) has syntactic and interpretive properties which cue an analysis in terms of syntactic inversion of the AP–predicate around its subject (which is signaled by the emergence of the linker element), followed by a restoration of the underlying order of subject and predicate, all within the bounds of the complex noun phrase.

2 While in languages like Chinese, Persian and Takia (Western Oceanic), a linker element is obligatory in all cases of noun-phrase internal modification, in French and Thai a linker occurs in between the head noun and the post-nominal adjectival modifier only optionally — and when it does, the interpretation of the complex noun phrase is different from its linker-less alternant. As Milner (1978) and Azoulay-Vicente (1985) note, when *de* is present, the noun phrase tends to take on a *contrastive* interpretation; the same is true for Thai noun phrases with *thîi* (cf. (1)–(2)).

\[
\begin{align*}
(1) & \quad \text{une pizza } (\text{de}) \text{ chaude} \\
& \quad \text{a pizza } \text{DE hot-F.SG}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
(2) & \quad \text{pitsa } (\text{thîi}) \text{ róon} \\
& \quad \text{pizza } \text{THII hot}
\end{align*}
\]

[Lagae (1994) points out that the ‘NP – *de* – AP’ construction has the unusual property of having the AP represent old rather than new information; this property is shared by Thai ‘NP – *thîi* – AP’ constructions as well. Lagae characterizes this as an ‘inverted’ information structure. We take Lagae’s point to heart and translate it into a syntactic derivation of the ‘NP – linker – AP’ construction involving inversion of the AP–predicate around its subject. Predicate Inversion in copular constructions is known to invert information structure: while the default information structure representation of a canonical copular sentence such as (3a) is one in which the subject represents old information and the predicate supplies new information about it, in the inverse copular sentence in (3b) the focus or new information is *John*, and *my best friend* is old information.]

\[
\begin{align*}
(3) & \quad \text{a. John is my best friend} \\
& \quad \text{[canonical copular sentence]}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
(3) & \quad \text{b. my best friend is John} \\
& \quad \text{[inverse copular sentence]}
\end{align*}
\]
The term ‘inverse copular sentence’ that we used with reference to (3b) appeals to an analysis of this construction type by which it is syntactically derived from the same underlying representation which also underlies (3a), via syntactic inversion of the predicate nominal around its subject (cf. Moro 1997, den Dikken 1995). That subject–predicate inversion is a syntactic operation is supported in particular by the fact that its application gives rise to the obligatory emergence of meaningless functional elements (cf. I consider my best friend *(to be) John). The obligatoriness of a linker in a Predicate Inversion construction, derivable from the syntactic theory of locality (cf. den Dikken 1995), can be exploited as a powerful diagnostic for Predicate Inversion across different languages and construction types. The presence of meaningless linkers inside complex noun phrases thus helps us identify noun-phrase internal Predicate Inversion cases. This leads us to an analysis of (1)/(2) in terms of Predicate Inversion, AP inverting around NP. But on the surface we do not find AP preceding NP in (1)/(2); the word order effect of Predicate Inversion is undone later in the derivation. Thai quantified noun phrases tell us how this is done.

Thai quantified noun phrases featuring adjectival modifiers have three possible realizations, shown in (5): there is an obligatory classifier following the quantifier, which is optionally doubled to the left of the adjective; this latter incarnation of the classifier is in complementary distribution with the linker thîi. This tells us two things: (i) the token of the classifier in penultimate position is not a copy of the classifier between the head-noun and the adjective in (5a) but instead, each is generated in the head position of its own Classifier Phrase (cf. Singhapreecha 2001); and (ii) the head position of the Classifier Phrase realized by the leftmost token of khan in (5a) serves as the landing-site of movement of the linker thîi in (5b). With NP raising to the specifier of this Classifier Phrase, the key part of the derivation of (5b) reads as in (6); subsequent steps involve a succession of massive pied-piping movements to the A1–specifiers higher up in the noun phrase.

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(5) a. rôm  (khan) jàj sâm khan nân
      umbrella CLF big three CLF DEM
      ‘those three big umbrellas’

   b. rôm  thîi jàj sâm khan nân
      umbrella THII big three CLF DEM
      ‘those three big (as opposed to small or medium-size) umbrellas’

(6)   [DP Spec [nân [C1IP Spec [khan [QP Spec [sâm [C1IP NP, [thîi, [FP AP, [t, [t, [t]]]]]]]]]]]]
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Huot (1981) proposed that the French constructions we have analyzed in terms of linker–de are derived from relative clause constructions; but Azoulay-Vicente (1985) shows unequivocally that, even though de does have complementizer incarnations elsewhere, the ‘NP – de – AP’ construction has nothing in common with relative clause constructions at all. For Thai, things are more subtle: the grammatical marker thîi is ambiguous between a complementizer of relative clauses and a linker; consequently, ‘NP – thîi – AP’ constructions may be structurally ambiguous; but they cannot be analyzed exclusively in terms of a relative clause structure. From among the various diagnostics teasing apart the use of thîi as a linker and its use as a relative complementizer, we single out here the fact that thîi+AP with thîi qua linker precedes quantifiers and classifiers while thîi+AP qua relative clause follows them, like relative clauses in general. This will be analyzed in detail, along with the structure of relativized noun phrases in Thai and UG.

Complex noun phrases featuring a predicative AP separated from the NP it is construed with by a semantically meaningless linker element (French de, Thai thîi) which alternate with
linker-less counterparts come about via Predicate Inversion applied to the AP, its word order effect being undone by movement of the NP part to the specifier position of a Classifier Phrase and raising of the linker to the head of this Classifier Phrase. This analysis of these constructions (i) further underscores the significance of Predicate Inversion, (ii) emphasizes the role of linkers as purely functional aides, (iii) clarifies the syntactic/semantic contrasts between relative clauses and linker constructions, and (iv) helps us map the territory between D and NP, thus furthering our understanding of the structure and derivation of complex noun phrases, esp. head-final ones.