

Noun incorporation in Present-day English: A corpus-based approach

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(1) English

- a. *While only a third of the estimated 70 million Americans who **bird-watch** every year are serious birders, the Forest Service says the total of those participating has more than tripled in 20 years. (WB)*
- b. *Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman are **house-hunting** in the Lake District. (WB)*
- c. *Sadly, I've missed a few matches recently **babysitting** the grandchildren. (WB)*
- d. *Rupert said: "There were some awkward scenes. There was a lot of **hand-holding** between me and Hermione." (WB)*

Noun incorporation

(2) Mapudungun (Araucanian, Chili)

ñi chao kintu-waka-le-y
my father seek-cow-PROG-IND.3SG.S

‘My father is looking for the cows.’

(Baker et al. 2005: 139)

= “grammatical construction where a nominal, usually bearing the semantic role of an object, has been incorporated into a verb to form a complex verb or predicate” (Massam 2017: Summary)

In English?

‘English has no significant use of incorporation’ (e.g. Rosen 1989: 295; Mithun 1984; cp. Olthof 2020: 132)

“The few English constructions that most closely resemble NI (e.g. *to baby-sit*, *to mountain-climb*, or *to word-process*), do not actually result from a productive compounding process, but are rather V's backformed from compound N's”
(Mithun 1984: 847)

- unproductive
- not without a related gerund form
- rarely with full set of inflections
- if fully-inflected: semantic relation of IN to V is different from what is observed cross-linguistically (no patient, location or instrument)

In English?

BUT from constructional perspective: productive process

-- i.e. N+V compound resulting in V

Feist (2013; cf. also Hall 1956; Rice & Prideaux 1991)

- IN in different syntactic position from its non-incorporate counterpart & at lower syntactic level
- IN: reduced morphosyntactic form/potential (no number, case, definiteness marking)
- IN shows semantic reduction: no longer referential; generic interpretation
- NI is a marked usage: exceptional in syntax, morphology and semantics

In English?

- Is NI in English productive and what are its features?
- How does NI in English fit in with earlier typological analyses of NI?

Outline

NI in English, from a typological perspective

→ Using corpora

1) Typological findings: 4-way classification by Mithun (1984, 1986)

2) Data & methods

3) Discussion of synchronic findings

→ Is NI in English productive and what are its features?

→ How does NI in English fit in with earlier typological analyses of NI?

1. Mithun (1984, 1986)

1) **Lexical compounding:** for “nameworthy” activities; often valence-reducing

2) **Manipulation of case:** oblique argument → primary case role

(3) Tupinambá (Tupi-Guaraní; Brazil)

a. *a-pisá-eytí'k*
I-fishnet-throw
'I net-throw.'

b. *s-ová* *a-yos-éy* / *a-s-ová-éy*
his-face I-it-wash I-him-face-wash
'I washed his face.' 'I face-washed him.'

(ibid.: 856, 857)

1. Mithun (1984, 1986)

3) **Manipulation of discourse structure:**
background IN in portions of discourse

4) **Classificatory NI:** external NP identifies
argument implied by IN; often results
in classificatory system

(4) Huahtla Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan, Mexico)

A: *askeman ti-'kwa nakatl.*
never you-eat-it meat
'You never eat meat.'

B: *na' ipanima ni-naka-kwa.*
I always I-meat-eat
'I eat it (meat) all the time.'

(ibid.: 860-1)

(5) Caddo (Caddoan, US)

a. kassi' háh-'ič'á-sswí'-sa'.
bead prog-eye-string-prog
'She is stringing beads.'

b. ka'ás háh-'ič'ah-'í'-sa'.
plum prog-eye-grow-prog
'Plums are growing.'

(ibid.: 865)

1. Mithun (1984, 1986)

Synchronically: implicational hierarchy

Diachronically: pathway of evolution

I > II > III > IV

2. Data & methods

11 lexemes

- *baby-sit, bird-watch, sky-dive, hand-hold, spoon-feed, cherry-pick, house-hunt, crowd-surf, gift-wrap, globe-trot, head-hunt*
- various semantic relations IN to V

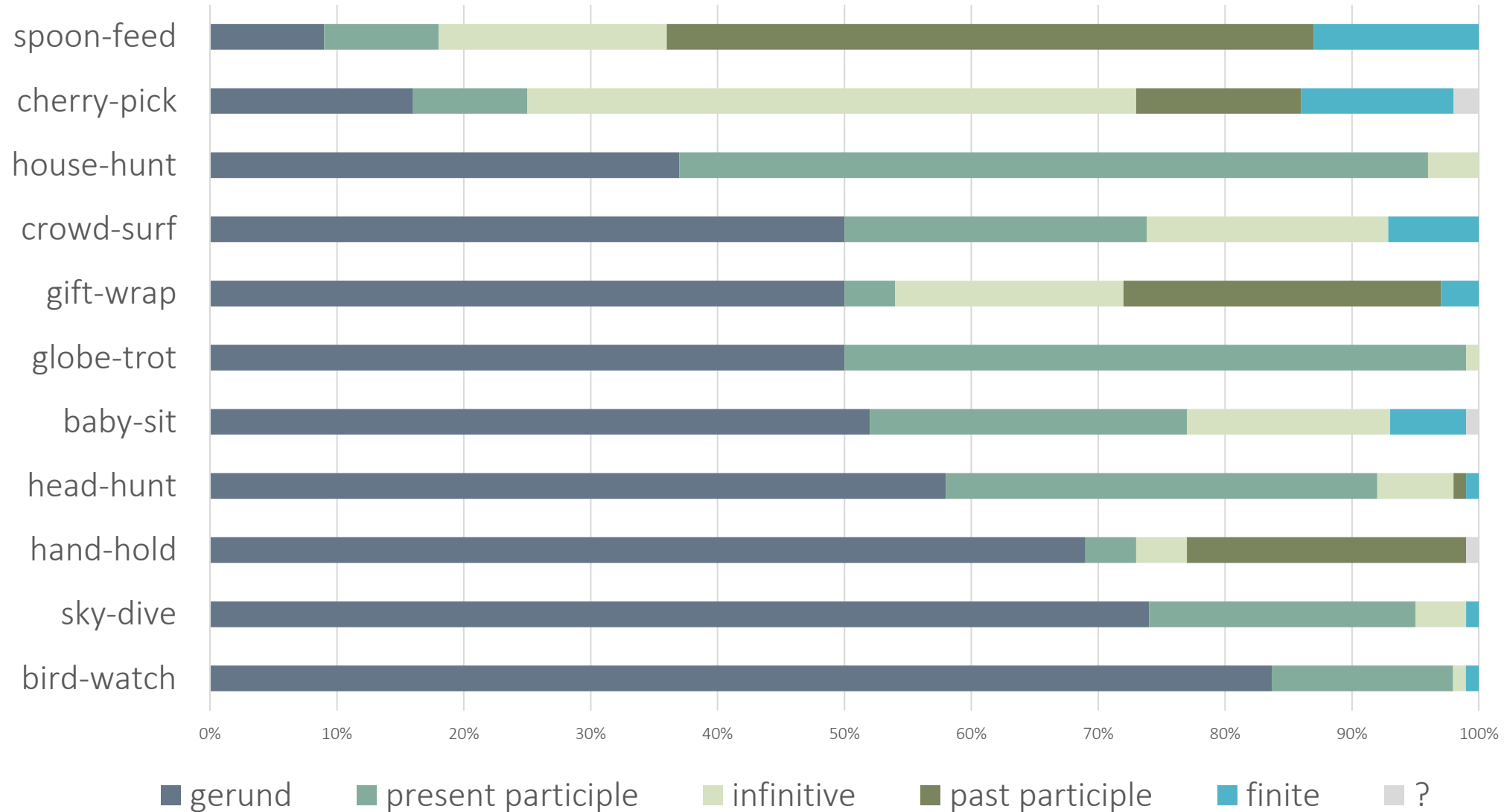
WordBanks Online: random 100-hit samples

- all spellings
- *crowd-surf*: exhaustive, 42 hits
- analytical parameters: V form, transitivity, animacy of 'patient' (if applicable), type Mithun, literal/figurative

3. Findings

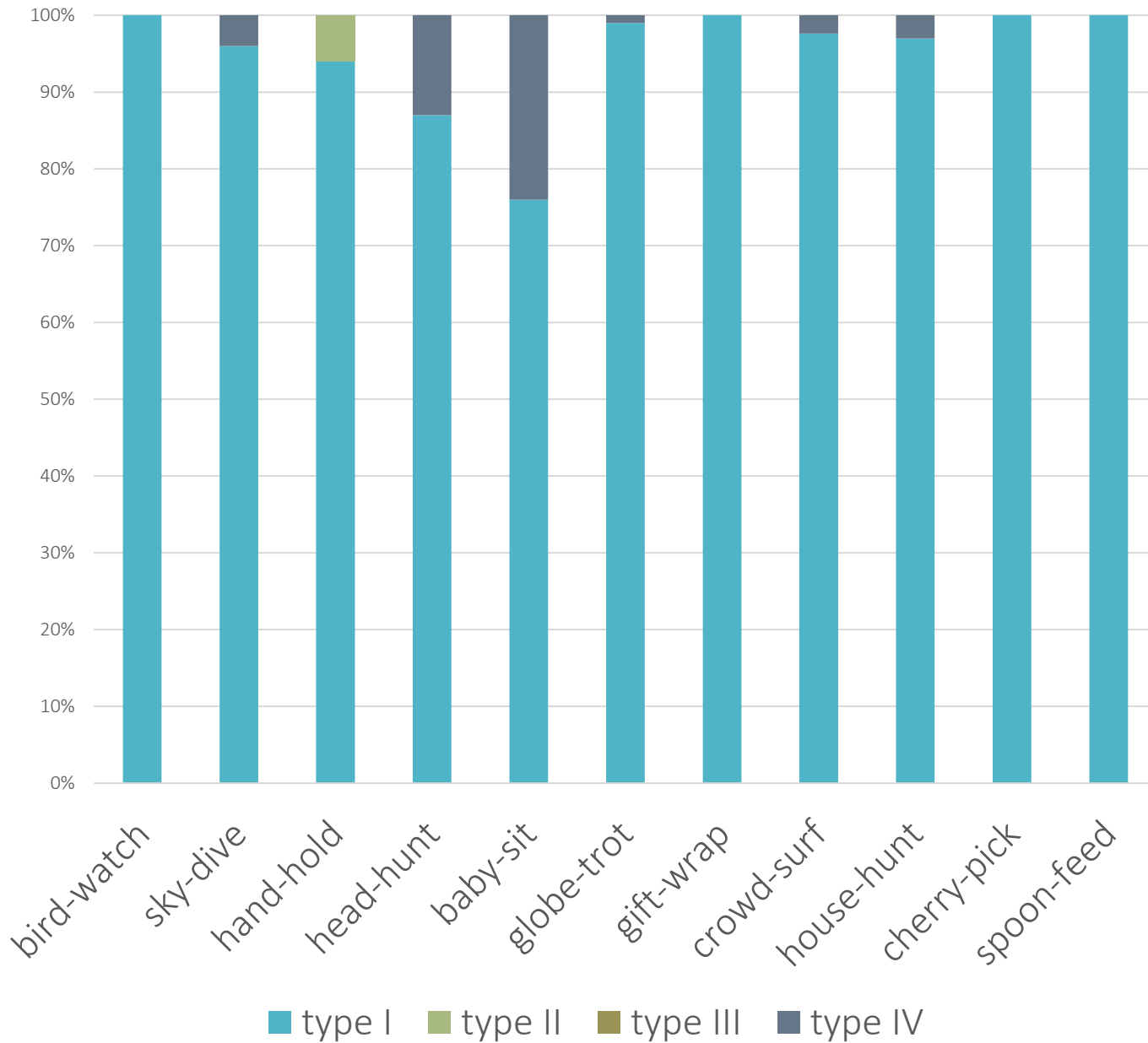
Noun incorporation is productive; not only gerunds

3. Findings



3. Findings

Types of NI cf. Mithun (1984)?



Mithun's typology

- Overwhelmingly type I
- Types II and IV found
- Type III lacking

Type I: lexical compounding

- (6) a. *For now, though, he will **globe trot**, following his game. (WB)*
- b. *All along, you know exactly what is happening, you are practically **spoon-fed** every plot twist, [...]. (WB)*
- c. *[...] members of Bloc Party **crowd surfed**, and the song [...] ended with all four bands walking to the front of the stage and taking a bow. (WB)*
- d. *[...] it would be impossible to **hand-hold** the camera and keep it still during the interview which would run for well over an hour. (WB)*

- Not always valence-reducing: transitive and intransitive compound verbs
- Literal and figurative uses

Type II: manipulating case roles

- (7) a. *Mama's sleepless nearly ever night now and I sometimes sit with her hours-long **handholding her** and saying it's all right Mama it's all right. (WB)*
- b. *But if you were going to choose someone **to hand-hold you** through all this, Turner would be your man. (WB)*

➤ ~ holding her/your hand

➤ cf. also Rice & Prideaux (1991: 285), Feist (2013: 170)

Type III: manipulating discourse

Not found.

↔ Feist (2013): when indirect participant is incorporated, and resulting predicate is intransitive

(8) *At the base of a reef 65 feet down, ribboned sweetlips peer from a towering coral tree (right). The small school often shuffled its formation, but never left the sanctuary of the branches. They were like condors soaring on thermals, mantas with wingspans often feet and more, caught by sunlight as they glided and looped in currents ripping through Dampier Strait. While mantas **filter-feed** in this murky broth of plankton, yellow-striped jacks find protection among the giants.* (Feist 2013: 168, from COCA)

Not clear why this would be type III.

Type IV: classificatory

- (9) a. “Listen, go to the fucking concert, okay? I don’t need you **baby-sitting** me all the time. I mean, for fuck’s sake.” (WB)
- b. Cut to Florida’s Keys and Rick Broca, a retired cop **babysitting** the yacht of his boss. (WB)

- *me* identifies the argument implied by the IN *baby* (cf. Mithun 1984: 863)
- *baby* semantically classifies the referent of *me*
- *baby* has widened its semantic scope, e.g. it has lifted animacy restrictions

baby = entity in need of care

cf. also Rice & Prideaux (1991: 285);
Feist (2013: 137) rejects analysis in
terms of type IV

Type IV: classificatory

- (9) c. *Now they and their children [...] are **househunting** for a luxury home. (WB)*
- d. *When my husband and I went **house-hunting** for a family home, we never planned to build a house. (WB)*
- e. *Bruce Wasserstein [...] has wasted no time in **headhunting** bankers from his old firm. (WB)*
- f. *You can **head-hunt** for them. (WB)*
- g. *Her ideal was to have no context at all, only weightlessly to **crowd-surf** on an endless sea of strangers who would hold, fondle, and pass along every facet of her glamorous existence. (WB)*
- h. *It centres around his bid to claim a unique world record by **skydiving** from the edge of space, [...]. (WB)*

type of house

head = person

type of crowd

place in the sky

Type IV: classificatory

➤ Different from Mithun's examples

- classifying an object, prepositional complement or optional adjunct
- lexical restrictions
- cannot be used to keep topic straight over stretch of text (cf. absence type III)
- no broad classification system

rather mini-systems: *baby-sit, dog-sit, pet-sit, house-sit*

head-hunt, house-hunt, apartment-hunt

→ data from Corpus of Historical American English (1820-2019)

x-sit: a mini classification system?

Humans

- (14) a. *How long have you been **baby-sister-sitting**?* (COHA, 1965)
- b. *“Thanks anyway,” Chris said. “I’ll take care of Jason myself.” He didn’t add that he’d had most of the day to figure out that he could combine **Jason-sitting** with a morning at the community center.* (COHA, 1998)

Animals

- c. *[...] and became a pet sitter. **Pet sitting** is a lot more dangerous than people think.* (COHA, 2012)
- d. *Where the hell have you been? I’ve been **cat-sitting** for a friend.* (COHA, 2006)
- e. *She had no one to **dog sit** her little black pup yesterday [...]* (COHA, 2016)
- f. *But I thanked him for his fine assassin bug, **insect-sat** it for an hour, only later read that they can sting.* (COHA, 1987)

x-sit: a mini classification system?

Houses

- (14) g. *My parents also **farm-sat** at critical times during the season.* (COHA, 1988)
- h. *I'm **house-sitting** a friend's cabin this weekend and I wouldn't mind a little company.* (COHA, 1994)
- i. *Or better yet, find a friend who has one and offer to **cabin-sit** for them.* (COHA, 2017)

Compare

- (15) a. *I was wondering, would any of you mind **baby-sitting** the dog? I mean, he just hates to be left alone.* (COHA, 1995)
- b. *She needed to keep her ass at her own house instead of **babysitting** Jay's house while he was in jail.* (COHA, 2010)

x-sit: a mini classification system?

Either: very specific items incorporated

- does not add to classification system
- not catching on; creative uses

Or: more general items incorporated

- adds to classification system
- catching on (esp. *dog-sit*, *house-sit*)
- also specific *dog* and *cat*; more frequent than *pet*
- *dog/cat-sit* equally common as *babysit a dog/cat*

Overall: following *baby-sit*

- From 1960s on: increase of type I *x-sit* (with various forms)
- From 1980s: type IV (cp. *baby-sit* 1950s)
- Indicative of productivity and incipient classification system

gift-wrap, cherry-pick?

- (9) *Listen, go to the fucking concert, okay? I don't need you **baby-sitting** me all the time. I mean, for fuck's sake.* (WB)
- (10) a. *The big poppyseed bun **gift wrapped** the burger, and the American cheese (my choice) quite nicely.* (WB)
- b. *Others will **cherry-pick** a narrow slice of data for publication while consigning the rest to the file drawer.* (WB)
- ~ wrap the burger which is a gift / as a gift / so that it becomes a gift?
~ pick a slice of data as if it were a cherry (i.e. carefully)
- Also type IV, if we broaden it to include also other types of predicative relations?
- (10a): resultative; change-of-state
 - (10b): hypothetical state

Mithun's (1984) typology

Hierarchy doesn't work for English:

Type I > Type II > ~~Type III~~ > Type IV

Explanation?

English = analytic language with overtly expressed external arguments

↔ languages displaying types III & IV: typically synthetic, with pronominal indexing (Mithun 1984: 859-872)

Conclusion

NI is productive in English

- no reason not to analyse as NI
- wide range of semantic relations
- varied distribution of forms

Nuancing Mithun's (1984) typology

- based on wide range of unrelated languages
- English: no type III, but type IV (though different characteristics)

Explanation?

Analytic vs. synthetic languages

References

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