

Body part incorporation cross-linguistically: At the crossroads of lexicon, semantics, and morphosyntax

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The proposed workshop aims to explore and understand what's special about body part noun incorporation compared to other types of incorporation found across the world's languages. Which particular body part terms tend to be incorporated, and what might this reveal about universal patterns in linguistic structure and meaning? By bringing together researchers working on diverse languages, this workshop seeks to uncover the distinctive characteristics, functions, and typological tendencies of body part incorporation. Through comparative discussion, we will highlight how these constructions contribute to our understanding of grammar, semantics, and the interface between language and cognition.

Noun incorporation (NI) is a grammatical process in which a noun (often the object) becomes bound to a verb, forming a single complex verb word as in *turep* 'lily root' + *ta* 'to dig' → *turep-ta* 'to dig lily roots' (= 'engage in lily roots digging') from Ainu (isolate, Northern Japan). NI is predominantly found in the Circum-Pacific region as defined by Bickel & Nichols (2006) and encompassing the Americas, Oceania–New Guinea–Australia, and eastern Asia up to the main coastal mountain range) (Caballero et al. 2008: 393). NI has attracted much attention and debate in research on particular languages and cross-linguistically, among others, on its coverage and delimitation from other processes (Massam 2009).

Body-part terms (BPTs) are frequently involved in NI (Kroeber 1909; Sapir 1911; Mithun 1984), and in some languages, they constitute the only class of incorporable nouns (Dahl 2004: 213–214), e.g., in Ngan.gikurunggurr (non-Pama-Nyungan; Australia) (Reid 1982), Totonac (Totonac-Tepehua; Mexico) (Caballero et al. 2008), and Palikúr (Arawak; Brazil) (Aikhenvald & Green 1998: 451). This pattern is understandable, given that NI is an effective backgrounding device and BPTs are often backgrounded in discourse (Mithun 1984; Lehmann 2022). To cite Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm (1998: 44), “what really matters is not so much the body part as such but rather the affected person or animal. This motivates syntactic constructions such as possessor ascension/external possession and body-part incorporation”.

However, what makes noun incorporation of BPTs noteworthy is the unique combination of grammatical constraints it displays: when used independently, BPTs semantically—and, in languages with obligatorily possessed nouns, syntactically—require a possessor (Bugaeva et al. 2022), whereas incorporated BPTs tend to resist all types of modification, including possessive. In addition, BPTs even in one and the same language do not form a homogenous lexical class, and may differ in their properties, including their propensity to be incorporated.

Languages vary in how they handle the original possessor-modifier, with possessor ascension to the subject or object in NI being a commonly attested strategy in Mohawk (Iroquoian; USA) (Mithun 1996) (1a, b), Chukchi (Chukchi-Kamchatkan; Russia) (Vinyar 2023), Lakota (Siouan; USA) (de Reuse 1994), Washo (isolate, USA) (Lemieux 2010), Palikúr (Arawak; Brazil) (Aikhenvald & Green 1998), Panare

(Cariban; Venezuela) (Payne & Payne 2013), Movima (isolate, Bolivia) (Haude 2006), Paraguayan Guaraní (Tupi-Guaraní) (Velázquez-Castillo 1996), and many others, though not the only strategy. For example, in Mayali (dialect of Bininj Kun-Wok; non-Pama-Nyungan; Australia) and a few other head-marking polysynthetic languages of Australia, body-part incorporation does not alter argument structure or follow a possessor-raising pattern; instead, body parts are syntactically in apposition to their wholes, and incorporation selects one of the two apposed nominals (Evans 1996: 91) (2a).

Further variation is determined by possessor–subject coreferentiality options in the case of transitive incorporating verb. While BPTs incorporated by intransitive verbs can only belong to the subject of NI (My hands are cold > I am cold**handed**) (1a), BPTs incorporated into the object slot of transitive verbs can either belong to the subject (possessor–subject coreferentiality: I washed my face > I **face**washed) (4a) or to some other person (no possessor–subject coreferentiality: I washed his face > I **face**washed him) (1b). Thus, in Ainu, incorporation of BPTs typically results in the promotion of the possessor to subject with intransitives (3b), deletion of the coreferential possessor with transitives (4b) (cf. base clauses in (3a) and (4a)), and no incorporation when the possessor is not coreferential with the transitive subject (i.e., it is impossible to incorporate a BPT when it does not belong to oneself) (4c) (Bugaeva & Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2025).

In contrast, in Mayali, “the incorporated body part is never construed with the transitive subject. ...the incorporated form ‘hand’ must be construed as the object’s; to specify that the subject used his hand, a free nominal plus the ‘from’ suffix must be used” (Evans 1996: 84) as in (2b). In Nadëb (Nadahup; Brazil), too, the possessor coreferential with the transitive subject in NI requires special reflexive marking, whereas non-coreferential possessors behave differently: first- and second-person possessors are easily promoted to object position as in typical possessor ascension, while a non-coreferential third-person possessor is simply deleted, with its reference being recoverable from context (Weir 1990: 325, 328).

Another feature that makes BPT noun incorporation distinctive is that, in some languages, incorporated body-part nouns may be referential, as in Ainu (Satō 2012, 2016; Bugaeva 2017) (see *-e* (POSS) in (3b)), Washo (Lemieux 2010: 153), Nadëb (Weir 1990), Panare (Payne 1995: 309), or Bininj Kun-Wok (Evans 2003: 235), which is not the case with other incorporation types.

Further parameters of BPT NI variation include the possibility of incorporating arguments only as in Ainu (Bugaeva 2022), or arguments and adjuncts as in Chukchi (Vinyar 2023) with different semantic roles, which include not only Patients but often Instruments and Locations (Olthof 2020).

And finally, it has long been noted that some BPT lexemes are more prone to incorporation than others: “Most incorporating languages do incorporate such terms as ‘body’ and ‘mind’, since they provide a device for qualifying V’s which pertain to the physical or mental aspect of a person or animal.” (Mithun 1984: 856). However, this too appears to be subject to linguistic variation: in Ainu, the most frequently incorporated lexemes are ‘mind’, ‘eye’, and ‘hand’ (Bugaeva & Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2025), i.e., not ‘body’. Moreover, in Paraguayan Guaraní, ‘body’ even resists incorporation since “the whole body functions as an active zone indicating complete identification between body and person,” and only BPTs that “are attributed some sort of cultural importance” are allowed to incorporate (Velázquez-Castillo 1996: 157).

While it is clear that certain BPT lexemes are more prone to certain semantic role interpretations in NI, which is accommodated by language-specific morphosyntax (Lexicon > Semantics > Morphosyntax), the cross-linguistic variation and possible interdependencies have not been consistently described so far. The present workshop, which is primarily concerned with illuminating the above-described and other features that make BPT NI special compared to other types, aims at bringing this into focus.

- (1) a. *tewakahsyó:tanos* (Mohawk)

*te-wak-**absyot**-anos*

DUALIC-1:SG:PAT-hand-cold:STATIVE

‘My hands are cold.’ (Literally: ‘I am coldhanded.’)

- b. *wahikuhsohare?*

*wa-hi-**kuhs**-ohare-ʔu*

PAST-1:SG:AGT/3.M:SG:PAT-face-wash-PUNCTUAL

‘I washed *his* face.’ (Literally: ‘I facewashed *him*.’) (Mithun 1996: 643)

- (2) a. *A-bid-garrme-ng* *daluk.* (Mayali)

1/3-hand-grasp-PP woman

‘I touched the woman on the hand.’

- b. *Gun-bid-be* *nga-garrme-ng* *daluk.*

IV-hand-from 1/3-grasp-PP woman

‘I touched the woman with my hand.’ (Evans 1996: 84)

- (3) a. *a-tek-e* *páse* (Ainu)

4.(A)/POSS-hand-POSS heavy

‘My hands are heavy.’

- b. *tek-e-pase-an*

hand-POSS-heavy-4.S

lit. ‘I (=the protagonist) am hand-heavy.’ = I feel as if I’ve aged. (Satō 2022: 558, modified)

- (4) a. *a-kema-ha* *a-huraye* (Ainu)

4.(A)/POSS-foot-POSS 4.A-wash

‘I (=the protagonist) washed my feet.’ (Kokuritsu C0008L00018)

- b. *kema-huraye-an*

foot-wash-4.S

‘I (=the protagonist) washed my feet.’ (Tamura 1996: 292) (modified)

- c. *e-kema-ha* *a-huraye*

2.(A)/POSS-foot-POSS 4.A-wash

‘I (=the protagonist) washed your feet.’ (constructed example)

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