

## “And the Rabbi Begins the Benediction...”: Declarative Shell Nouns in English

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### Abstract

Although in cognitive linguistics it is generally assumed that whether a verb/noun/adjective can or cannot occur in a construction is a matter of compatibility between the meaning of the verb/noun/adjective and the meaning of the construction, in the case of nouns, studies that focus specifically on which substructures (or lack thereof) in the conceptual structure of lexical items are relevant for linking and integration of elements in a construction are missing. In this paper, we focus on nouns and investigate the constructions in which declarative shell nouns, i.e., nouns that report declarative speech acts (e.g., declaration, abrogation, exoneration) occur. In particular, the patterns in which a set of declarative shell nouns occur are analysed and compared with previous results obtained on assertive,<sup>1</sup> and on commissive shell nouns,<sup>2</sup> i.e., nouns that report assertive (e.g., assertion, claim, guess) and commissive (e.g., promise, threat, bet) speech acts, with the aim of showing that only specific substructures (or lack thereof) in the conceptual structure of these nouns are relevant for linking and integration, thus explaining the noun behavioural profile, i.e., the constructions they occur with.

### 1. Introduction

This study focuses on motivating the distribution of declarative shell-noun constructional patterns. The term “shell noun” reflects the idea that the nouns encapsulate a content (“shell content”) that is usually expressed in a complement or even separate clause or sentence. An example of shell noun (in bold) and shell content (underlined) is shown in (1).

- (1) Leonard Cohen labels his **declaration** that “there is only one achievement in life and that’s the acceptance of your lot” an oversimplification.

The topic of shell nouns in English has received the most extensive coverage in Schmid’s<sup>3</sup> groundbreaking work on shell nouns, although the term “shell noun”<sup>4</sup> had already appeared in a previous publication by the same author.<sup>5</sup> The notion is defined in functional terms as “an open-ended functionally defined class of abstract nouns that have, to varying degrees, the potential for being used as conceptual shells for complex, proposition-like pieces of information”.<sup>6</sup> According to

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<sup>1</sup> Vergaro, “Ways of Asserting.”

<sup>2</sup> Vergaro and Schmid.

<sup>3</sup> Schmid, *English Abstract Nouns as Conceptual Shells*.

<sup>4</sup> Other terms referring to similar phenomena include “container nouns” by Vendler, *Linguistics in Philosophy*, and Id., *Adjectives and Nominalization*; “unspecific nouns” by Winter, “Unspecific versus Specific”; “anaphoric nouns” by Francis, *Anaphoric Nouns*; “anaphoric encapsulation” by Conte, “Anaphoric Encapsulation”; “signaling nouns” by Flowerdew, “Signalling Nouns in Discourse.”

<sup>5</sup> Schmid, “Constant and Ephemeral Hypostatization.”

<sup>6</sup> Schmid, *English Abstract Nouns as Conceptual Shells*, 4

Schmid,<sup>7</sup> the combination of three functional properties distinguish shell nouns: (i) on the cognitive level, shell nouns are used to partition large units of information into single concepts, thus allowing to conceptualise experience as a thing, so, reifying it; (ii) on the level of meaning, they are used to characterize the propositional content expressed in the shell content, thus specifying it in terms of the semantics of the noun; (iii) on the level of discourse, they serve the function of linking text segments in specific ways, creating cohesive ties within the text. The three functions are combined in a unique way in shell nouns. Indeed,

[s]hell nouns share with deictic elements their ability to refer to contextually determined targets of reference, but in contrast to typical deictic elements such as personal or demonstrative pronouns, they include, by virtue of their characterizing and encapsulating function, a noticeable symbolic potential in addition to the referring or pointing one. While anaphoric pronouns like this and that in the function termed “extended reference” and “reference to fact” by Halliday and Hasan (1976: 52–53, 66–67) also have the ability to instruct hearers and readers to select and re-activate complex propositional content (rather than singular entities introduced by referring noun phrases), they fail to accomplish the strong concept forming effects achieved by the use of nouns.<sup>8</sup>

Illocutionary shell nouns are illocutionary nouns, i.e., nouns that name speech acts, which are exploited in the function of shell nouns. From the morphological point of view, illocutionary nouns, though not all of them, are deverbal abstract nouns derived from speech-act verbs and, as such, they fall under the broad category of *nomina actionis*. More specifically, they are a subgroup of *nomina actionis* in that the action they refer to is a specific one, namely the illocutionary force denoted by the speech-act verb from which they come.

The topic of *nomina actionis* has been widely studied in linguistics (see, for example, Hopper and Thompson; Bierwisch; Brinton; Gaeta; Heyvaert)<sup>9</sup> and major linguistic schools have addressed, to different degrees, the issue of English nominalisation in their representative works. The main function of deverbal nominalisation is of a syntactic nature, i.e., that of determining – by predicate reifying – a recategorisation. As for the reification feature, it refers to the fact that the predicate is conceptualised as an object, and, as such, is endowed with the properties that nouns have, and is treated grammatically as if it were an entity. For instance, it can participate in the properties generally ascribed to nouns, like, for example, the possibility of being pluralised.

From the syntactic point of view, *nomina actionis* are characterised by the fact that they take arguments. Their valency structure is inherited from the verbs from which they are derived, but, as already stated, valency structure undergoes a reduction.

From the semantic point of view, illocutionary nouns name the verbal action that the speaker performs when addressing someone with an intention that her utterance counts as *F*-ing, namely as having a specific illocutionary force. When illocutionary nouns serve the function of shell nouns, they are used as metalinguistic devices to report utterances with a propositional content (P) and having a force (F), and thus to describe or characterise a verbal action – conceptualised as a THING – that the speaker performs.

Declarative shell nouns report declarative speech acts. Example (2) illustrates this type of noun.

- (2) I put my hand on her head and prayed over her the **benediction**: “May the Lord bless you and keep you.”

The speech acts reported by these nouns are “a very special category of speech acts”,<sup>10</sup> distinguished from all other classes by the fact that they bring about some alteration in the world

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>8</sup> Schmid, “Shell Nouns in English,” 112.

<sup>9</sup> Hopper and Thompson; Bierwisch; Brinton; Gaeta; Heyvaert.

<sup>10</sup> Searle, “A Classification of Illocutionary Acts,” 15.

solely in virtue of the successful performance of the act. They have a double direction of fit and are dependent upon extra-linguistic conventions. The notion of “declarative” has been equated with that of “performative”. However, the two notions do not coincide. All speech acts can be used performatively, but declaratives are different from the other speech acts as far as performativity is concerned. This difference had already been individuated by Searle in 1976, and later restated in terms of self-referentiality and executiveness: “they are self-referential in a special way, they are not only about themselves, but they also operate on themselves. They are both self-referential and executive”.<sup>11</sup> However, to be executive, they need an extra-linguistic reality which is conventionally associated with their successful performance.

Verschueren<sup>12</sup> claims that the distinction between self-referentiality and executiveness is superfluous because a completely self-referential utterance can only be an instance of the act it describes. If the possibility to be completely used self-referentially is a semantic-conceptual property of individual verbs and if this property coincides with executiveness, then those verbs that contain lexical information associated with executiveness will be the ones most commonly used performatively. Verschueren applies his model for the explanation of performativity to linguistic action verbs, but he states repeatedly that what can be said for verbs can also be applied to any metapragmatic term, therefore to nouns as well.

What is relevant here of this debate is that it remains to be seen whether the fact that it is part of the conceptual meaning of the noun that the speech act reported is self-referential and executive at the same time can have consequences on linking and integration between noun and construction, and thus on the noun behavioural profile.

The present paper reports the results of an analysis of the constructions in which a set of declarative shell nouns occur. The analysis has been motivated by two observations: first, the domain of illocutionary nouns has not yet been thoroughly described. The only existing descriptive analysis specifically focusing on English illocutionary nouns is Chapter 8 of Schmid’s<sup>13</sup> broad-brush study on shell nouns, in which declarative shell nouns are not even included. A fine-grained analysis of the type proposed here was not possible in that study. Secondly but more importantly, studies that focus specifically on which substructures (or lack thereof) are relevant for the integration between the meaning of the shell nouns and the meaning of complements in the constructions in which they occur are missing.

To redress these shortcomings, the present study focuses on the constructional patterns of declarative shell nouns with the aim of answering the following research question: what specific substructures present in the declarative noun conceptual structure are responsible for the occurrence and the distribution of nouns in specific constructions?

## 2. Theoretical framework: Basic concepts

The theoretical assumptions underlying the study are rooted in Cognitive Grammar, which is associated with Langacker,<sup>14</sup> and is one of the various Construction Grammars developed over the years.

The pivotal claim of Cognitive Grammar is that meaning comprises both content and construal. As Langacker puts it, “An expression’s meaning is not just the conceptual content it evokes – equally important is how the content is construed. As part of its conventional semantic value, every

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<sup>11</sup> Searle, “How Performatives Work,” 551.

<sup>12</sup> Verschueren, 309.

<sup>13</sup> Schmid, *English Abstract Nouns as Conceptual Shells*.

<sup>14</sup> Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. 1*; Id., *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. 2*; Id., “A Dynamic Usage-Based Model”; Id., “Constructions in Cognitive Grammar”; Id., *Cognitive Grammar*; Id., *Investigations in Cognitive Grammar*.

symbolic structure construes its content in a certain fashion.”<sup>15</sup> A relevant example of a construal operation is the process of profiling. Profiling refers to the process of according prominence to something, which, as a consequence, will stand out as the specific focus of attention. Thus, expressions can choose different profiles within the same base (i.e., the cognitive structures presupposed by a domain), and, consequently, contrast from the semantic point of view. Langacker explains: “for example, hub, spoke and rim all invoke as their base the overall configuration of a wheel but contrast semantically by virtue of profiling different portions of it”.<sup>16</sup> What is profiled “is obligatorily accessed, accorded special prominence, and functions as the focal point within the immediate scope of predication”.<sup>17</sup>

Both grammatical constructions and lexical elements are meaningful units, the only difference between them residing in the higher level of specificity of lexical items compared to the more schematic character of grammatical units. Therefore, the meaning of lexical items and that of grammatical units need to be compatible to be integrated and yield felicitous syntagmatic combinations.

Indeed, central to cognitively oriented research is the question of the different distribution of complement types over the inventory of complement-taking predicates, under the assumption that a higher degree of syntactic integration between the matrix and the complement clause correlates with a higher degree of conceptual integration, and that differences in syntactic realisation imply a difference in the meaning conveyed or a change in construal. The relationship of complementation is explained by Langacker<sup>18</sup> in terms of conceptual dependence: in a construction the complement elaborates, i.e., characterises in a finer-grained detail, a salient feature of the head, leaving the rest in the background. This elaboration is possible because, although even in the case of grammatical patterns a one-to-one relationship between a meaning and a grammatical pattern cannot rigidly be posited, research has rather successfully shown that certain meanings are more central for some complementation types.

### 3. Data and methodology

The complete list of declarative shell nouns includes 21 nouns (see the Appendix). However, there are 14 noun types under scrutiny in this study because seven nouns were not found used in the shell-noun function. Moreover, given that two of the nouns in the corpus have fewer than 200 tokens in COCA (abrogation 146, exoneration 116), the dataset consists of 2,662 examples.

The analysis consists of two steps: a semantic analysis and a grammatical analysis. The first focuses on the conventional knowledge that, in a specific speech community, is associated with a particular lexical item, whereas the second focuses on the usage and the distribution of individual tokens, i.e., their occurrence in grammatical constructions.

For the semantic analysis, we adapted to the exigencies of this study the descriptive formalism used by Proost,<sup>19</sup> which is based on Searle’s<sup>20</sup> conditions for the production and comprehension of speech acts. Following Proost,<sup>21</sup> we consider three types of specifications as necessary and sufficient for a systematic analysis of the noun conceptual structure: categorial aspects, attributes and attribute values.

*Categorial aspects* refer to the conceptualisation of the conditions for the successful and non-defective performance of a speech act. In the descriptive model used in this study, categorial aspects

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<sup>15</sup> Langacker, *Cognitive Grammar*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. 2*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 551.

<sup>18</sup> Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. 1* and *Id.*, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. 2*.

<sup>19</sup> Proost.

<sup>20</sup> Searle, *Speech Acts*.

<sup>21</sup> Proost.

are speaker's "Propositional attitude", speaker's "Intention", speaker's "Presupposition", and "Propositional content". They correspond to the rules or conditions that, following Searle,<sup>22</sup> underlie the production and comprehension of speech acts.

As is well known, Searle envisages the following conditions: the preparatory condition, which concerns the beliefs and desires of the interlocutors that are presupposed for the felicitous performance of the act.

The propositional content condition states that certain illocutionary forces specify what is acceptable in terms of propositional content. For example, a promise cannot be about a past action. The sincerity condition refers to the fact that, when one performs an illocutionary act with a propositional content, one expresses a certain psychological state relative to that content. The expression of the psychological state is internal to the performance of the illocution: when one performs the speech act, one necessarily expresses the sincerity condition.

Lastly, the essential condition is the condition that has to be fulfilled if the act is to be recognised as a successful act of a type. Therefore, a request is claimed to be a directive only if the speaker has the intention to get the hearer to do something.

In the set of classification criteria that distinguishes one illocutionary class from the other, Searle<sup>23</sup> chooses three among the twelve dimensions of variation that he lists to differentiate speech acts: illocutionary point, psychological state expressed and direction of fit. The illocutionary point is the purpose of the (type of) act. Some illocutions have as part of their illocutionary point to get the words to match the world, others to get the world to match the words. Assertions belong to the first type, promises to the second. This is what Searle means by direction of fit. The direction of fit always depends on the illocutionary point and determines the propositional content condition. The psychological state expressed refers to the attitude the speaker has towards the propositional content, i.e., the sincerity conditions. The illocutionary point is the most important of the three in Searle's classification. However, the crucial role that the speaker's propositional attitude plays in the identification of the illocutionary force of an utterance has been widely demonstrated in speech-act literature.

In the descriptive model used here, "Propositional attitude" corresponds to the psychological state expressed in the sincerity condition; "Intention" to the illocutionary point which is expressed in the essential condition; "Presupposition" to the preparatory condition; and "Propositional content" to the propositional content condition.

Each of them can be further specified by *attributes* having a specific *value*. Thus, speaker's "Propositional attitude" can be further specified by attributes such as "Epistemic" (value: S knows P, and S takes P to be true), "Evaluative" (value: S considers P good/bad), "Emotive" (value: S feels joy/anger/sorrow because of P).

Speaker's "Intention" may have, among others, the following attributes and values: Epistemic attitude of H (values: S wants H knows P, or S wants: H recognise S takes to be true P), reference to action of H (value: S wants H do/not do P).

Speaker's "Presupposition" refers to utterance position (values: initial, reactive, re-reactive), expectability of P (value: P expectable, P not expectable), conditionality of P (value: P conditional, P not conditional), interest of S and H (value: not in the interest of H, or in the interest of H), and world of interaction, namely the social domain or the institutional setting in which the interaction of S and H takes place (values: private, official, public, institutional).

Lastly, the attributes of the "Propositional content" have to do with the event type of P (values: action, event, state of affairs), temporal reference of P (values: Past, Present, Future), in the case that P is an action, the agent of P (values: S, H, Third Person, H or Third Person), and so the control of P.

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<sup>22</sup> Searle, *Speech Acts*.

<sup>23</sup> Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts."

As for the grammatical analysis, the data source is represented by the Corpus of Contemporary American English<sup>24</sup> (henceforth COCA), a balanced corpus of more than 520 million words covering the period from 1990 through 2015. Two hundred randomly sampled tokens were extracted from COCA for each noun type. Then, the tokens were analysed for (1) shell-noun usage and (2) occurrence in grammatical constructions.

The methodology used for data analysis involves descriptive as well as exploratory statistics. As for descriptive statistics, we used Reliance to measure the occurrence of a noun in a construction. Reliance is a syntagmatic measure that accounts for the combinations of nouns with types of patterns.<sup>25</sup> Reliance scores refer to the relative frequency of tokens of a noun type in a construction vis-à-vis tokens of the same noun in other constructions, and thus capture the degree to which a particular noun relies, or depends, on a pattern for its occurrence. Reliance scores were then converted into tables. Each line of the table represents a set of reliance scores for one noun, and this vector of reliance scores represents the noun behavioural profile.<sup>26</sup>

As for exploratory statistics, a hierarchical cluster analysis was applied to the data to complement the descriptive part. This technique organises sets of data into clusters or groups such that the members of one group are very similar to each other and at the same time very dissimilar from members of other groups. In so doing, it provides a transparent representation of the data that emerge from descriptive statistics.

#### 4. Analysis and results

The following paragraphs report the semantic analysis (Section 4.1) and describe the results of the grammatical analysis (Section 4.2).

##### 4.1. Semantic analysis

Table 1 reports the combination of specifications of the prototypical declarative noun.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Consistent with what has been said about declarative speech acts, a prototypical declarative noun names a speech act situated in a specific institutional context, in which the speaker commits herself to the belief that she is changing the world so as to make the propositional content true. The act is momentary, without duration. What differentiates the nouns belonging to the domain are the values of the attribute “Presupposition of S” linked to the institutional setting in which the speech act has effect.

*Declaration* is the prototypical noun of the domain, in that “it is a characteristic feature of all declarations that the speaker makes something the case by declaring it to be the case”.<sup>27</sup> All the other nouns in the domain are elaborations of the prototypical noun.

Also following Proost’s<sup>28</sup> classification for declarative verbs, according to their institutional setting, therefore, the nouns that elaborate the prototypical noun can be grouped into three groups: Church, Law and Profession. Nouns that belong to the first group (*absolution, blessing, benediction, christening, consecration, excommunication*) name speech acts that refer to religious ceremonies;

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<sup>24</sup> Davies.

<sup>25</sup> Schmid, *English Abstract Nouns as Conceptual Shells*, 54–5.

<sup>26</sup> Gries.

<sup>27</sup> Searle and Vanderveken, 206.

<sup>28</sup> Proost, 279–81.

those belonging to the second group (*abrogation, exoneration, repudiation, veto*) to legal procedures, and the nouns in the third group (*nomination, designation, appointment*) to situations in which an authorized speaker causes a change in the hearer's career.<sup>29</sup>

## 4.2. Grammatical analysis

### 4.2.1. Uses in shell-noun function and descriptive statistics

[Insert Table 2 here]

As shown in Table 2, in which the proportion of declarative nouns that actually serve as shell nouns are reported, declarative nouns are very rarely used as shell nouns. Out of 2,662 examples analysed, only 109 could be classified as shell-noun use (4.1%).

The constructions in which declarative shell nouns were found are reported in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Results show that the most frequently occurring construction is Det-N (definite or indefinite article followed by noun), which expands over assertive and commissive types of shell nouns, not just those belonging to the illocutionary type under analysis (see Schmid; Vergaro; Vergaro and Schmid).<sup>30</sup>

N-that (noun followed by *that*-clause) is the second most frequent construction. However, if one looks at the distribution of this pattern, 10 out of the 12 occurrences are found with *declaration*.

The specificational copular construction Pro-BE-N (anaphoric pronoun as subject followed by copula BE followed by noun) is more equally distributed in that 6 out of 14 nouns rely on this pattern. N-to inf (noun followed by *to*-infinitive) occurs only with the noun *blessing*.

In Table 4, for each noun, we report absolute and relative scores – Reliance – for constructions, as well as absolute scores for shell-noun use.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Data show that Det-N is the most recurrent construction. Example (3) exemplifies it.

- (3) In 1982 John Paul II had addressed the same condemnation to non-therapeutic experimentation on the human embryo: “I condemn, in the most explicit and formal way, experimental manipulations of the human embryo, since the human being, from conception to death, cannot be exploited for any purpose whatsoever.” Given this absolute Catholic **veto** on any non-therapeutic experimentation on the human embryo that puts a major moral barrier in the way of embryo research, it could appear that there is little point in exploring any further implications of the doctrine of creation for the field of genetic medicine.

The shell content is represented by a direct quotation here, which has to be considered as a semantic or conceptual complement, not a grammatical one. Det-N is *semantically* very unspecific, compared

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Schmid, English Abstract Nouns as Conceptual Shells; Vergaro, “Ways of Asserting”; Vergaro and Schmid.

to constructions such as N-that or N-to inf. However, in the case of declarative shell nouns, some results are worthy of attention. Direct reported speech is used in 28 out of the 85 occurrences of Det-N (32.9%). The nouns belonging to the “Church” group, where formulaicity is also dependent upon the fact that liturgical reciting requires that minimal modifications are made to the language used, are characterised by the extensive use of direct reported speech. Indeed, the shell content reported using Det-N (and, to a lesser degree by the other constructions)<sup>31</sup> is in 69.2% of the cases (18 out of 26 occurrences) in direct reported speech. Direct reported speech occurs with *absolution*, *benediction*, *blessing*, *christening* and *consecration*. *Benediction* is however the best example of this behaviour: in 12 out of the 13 cases in which *benediction* occurs with Det-N, the construction is linked to a shell content that reports the formula that brings about the benediction, as shown in example (4).

- (4) Danny chants the entire prayer, and the moment it ends, and the rabbi begins the **benediction**.... RABBI’S VOICE (AMPLIFIED) May the Lord bless you and keep you ...

The N-that construction mainly occurs with the noun *declaration* (10 out of the 12 occurrences in the corpus), and twice with *blessing*. In the case of *declaration*, only one example (example 5) can be analysed as reporting a declarative speech act. The context of the excerpts in example (5) – an academic paper titled “The Antidiscrimination Eighth Amendment” – makes it clear that the direct reported speech refers to a declarative speech act, an act that creates facts.

- (5) Thirteenth among the recommendations was the Virginia **declaration** “That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.”

In all the other cases, the act reported corresponds to Searle’s definition of “Representative declarations”,<sup>32</sup> i.e., a hybrid assertive-declarative speech act that requires an institutional, official and public context to be successfully performed like declaratives, and shares with assertives the sincerity condition of Belief. Hence, the degree of commitment to the truth of the proposition asserted is rather strong: such acts are performed to create not facts, but “a new situation in people’s mind”.<sup>33</sup> These features explain the compatibility with the semantics of the *that*-clause.

*That*-clauses have been the focus of attention of numerous studies, theoretical and empirical, alone or compared to other complement clauses, within the tradition of grammar or linguistic studies (see Kiparsky and Kiparsky; Quirk et al.; Wierzbicka; Frajzyngier and Jasperson).<sup>34</sup> The definitions of *that*-clauses given in these studies share the association of *that*-clause with truth, knowledge and objectivity. Moreover, in general, this semantics is analysed in contrast with the semantics of the *to*-infinitive (see, for example, Rudanko; Granath; Acuña Fariña; Hudson-Ettle; Noël; Bowen)<sup>35</sup> that has a future orientation, and thus expresses potentiality more than factuality. In particular, from a cognitive linguistics point of view, Langacker states that, compared to the ungrounding character of *to*-infinitives, and *-ing* clauses, *that*-clauses are characterized as expressing grounding predication, i.e., a type of predication “[that] situates a profiled thing or process with reference to the ground, which of course is centred on the speech-act participants”.<sup>36</sup> He also observes that the complementiser *that* used in *that*-clauses imposes an atemporal construal on the clause it combines with and, in so doing, serves to objectify the proposition expressed. Moreover, the presence of the

<sup>31</sup> N-that 16.7%, Pro-BE-N 30%.

<sup>32</sup> Searle, “A Classification of Illocutionary Acts,” 15.

<sup>33</sup> Wierzbicka, *English Speech Act Verbs*, 349.

<sup>34</sup> Kiparsky and Kiparsky; Quirk et al.; Wierzbicka, *The Semantics of Grammar*; Frajzyngier and Jasperson.

<sup>35</sup> Rudanko; Granath; Acuña Fariña, “That-Clauses”; Id. “The Functional Motivation of That-Clauses”; Hudson-Ettle; Noël; Bowen.

<sup>36</sup> Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. 2*, 440–1.

complementizer that produces a distancing effect between the matrix and the subordinate clause. Example (6) reports the occurrence of the shell noun *declaration* in the N-that construction.

- (6) The last time the commission auctioned off major swaths of airwaves, its **declaration** that the auctions brought more than \$9 billion into the Federal Treasury dissolved as bidder after bidder delayed payment.

The construction Pro-BE-N is not used at all with the nouns belonging to the “Profession” subgroup. It is, instead, used especially with nouns belonging to the “Law” subgroup and, in the “Church” subgroup, it is used only with *benediction* and *blessing*.

Pro-BE-N is a specificational copular clause. More precisely, the specificational semantics of the construction entails that subjects introduce a variable, a “semantic gap”,<sup>37</sup> whose value is provided by another constituent in the sentence. The specificational copula “equates propositions or equates an individual with the value of an individual concept applied to the world of evaluation”.<sup>38</sup> Lastly, there is a strong tendency for the value of a specificational sentence to be in focus position, conveying new information and being prosodically prominent.

The specification is mediated, syntactically and semantically, by a pronoun – generally a demonstrative that precedes the copula, which has a non-focal status signalling that the shell content is activated content in the hearer’s mind. The shell-noun phrase that occupies the post-copular position represents the variable. The shell content, via the pronoun, provides the value that fits that variable. The pronoun is the anaphoric, non-contrastive value, and the shell noun represents the variable that, rather than the value, carries a marked information focus. The pre-copular pronominal plays a role in that it is a topic expression that names a reference, i.e., the proposition expressed in the utterance. This information is recoverable. In the case of the Pro-BE-N pattern, the shell-noun phrase occupying the post-copular position makes up the marked focus of the clause and contains the actual piece of new information. Hence, the variable represented by the shell noun is put into focus and marked for special attention. The pattern can thus serve the pragmatic function of permitting to put into focus, and thus to give salience to the speaker’s emotional or evaluative reaction to a propositional content. However, in the case of declarative nouns, if an evaluation is present, it is expressed in premodifiers, with the copula in the present tense, as in example (7).

- (7) “When this crowd drops a case, that’s better than a jury decision that says you’re not guilty....” he says. “That’s the best **exoneration** possible.”

More commonly, what is put into focus is simply the state of affairs expressed in the propositional content of the reported act, so as to give salience to it. More precisely, the shell noun reports the *effect* of the declarative speech act, achieved through a verbal procedure. The past tense is used. Example (8) reports a common pattern of occurrence of Pro-BE-N in the corpus.

- (8) It set a legal precedent that a ruling by the supreme leader can help reduce the harsh discriminatory impact of religious law on the legal status of recognized non-Muslims, though nothing can replace secular law. This was not the **abrogation** of fiqh.

Lastly, in both the occurrences of Pro-BE-N with *benediction*, the pattern is used to refer cataphorically, not anaphorically, to the shell content.

- (9) And this is our **benediction**: “Lord, help me to be a good sport in this little game of life. I don’t ask for a special place in the lineup, play me where you need me. I only ask for what it

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<sup>37</sup> Akmajian, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Mikkelsen, 1814.

takes to give you 100 percent of what I've got. If all the hard drives come my way, I thank you for the compliment."

N-to inf is only used with *blessing*. However, the noun is used to report speech acts that are not declarative, in that they do not require any extra-linguistic convention or the speaker's authority for the successful performance of the act, and the occurrence in the N-to inf construction is justified by the future-oriented meaning the noun can have. Indeed, research on the semantics of the *to*-infinitive is characterised by the general agreement that one of the central semantic components of the *to*-infinitive is that of *futurity* paired with the expression of *volition*<sup>39</sup> and *potentiality*.<sup>40</sup> Example (10) refers to such a case.

- (10) When asked what they talked about, Sosa said Bonds gave him his *blessing* to break the record of 73 home runs.

In this example, the shell noun *blessing* does not report a declarative speech act, but a desiderative assertion, having at the same time a future orientation, a volitional and a potential character.

#### 4.2.2. Exploratory statistics: Visualisation of similarities in grammatical distribution

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1 shows the results of the agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis. The analyses were performed with the software R (version 3.4.1). Since the choice of distance measure and the amalgamation/linkage algorithm – the two basic metrics on which clusters are based – may influence the clustering results, we ran ten possible combinations of two distance measures (Manhattan and Euclidean), and five types of linkage (average, single, complete, ward.D and ward.D2). The combination of Euclidean distance and ward.D linkage was selected for reporting because it boasted the highest AC score (Agglomerative Coefficient), which is an indicator of the clustering structure of the dataset. Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that cluster analysis is an exploratory technique. It is helpful for discovering and visualising structure or lack thereof – which is meaningful, as well – in datasets, but also subject to subjective decisions and should therefore only be interpreted with some caution.

The distribution of the noun clusters consists of two main groups: the leftmost cluster that includes *veto*, *nomination*, *excommunication*, *designation*, *consecration*, *christening*, *absolution*, *appointment*, and the rightmost cluster that includes *repudiation*, *exoneration*, *abrogation*, *benediction*, *declaration* and *blessing*.

Starting with the leftmost cluster, if one looks at the height at which these nouns are clustered, this corresponds more or less to 0. They are the first to be clustered together, but the cluster is flat. The reasons of this are grammatical – the only construction in which they occur is Det-N and with the same reliance scores – and the semantic similarity is to a large extent matched by similarities regarding the complementation behaviour only for nouns belonging to the “Profession” and, mostly, for those belonging to the “Church” group.

The rightmost cluster contains two sub-clusters. In the rightmost sub-cluster, *exoneration* and *repudiation* are first clustered together and then they amalgamate with *abrogation* and *benediction*. The grammatical reasons for this distribution are the following: *exoneration* and *repudiation* have identical reliance scores in Det-N and Pro-BE-N. They also have the same frequency in shell-noun

<sup>39</sup> Quirk et al.; Wierzbicka, *The Semantics of Grammar*; Mair; Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. 2*; Duffley; Smith; Ungerer.

<sup>40</sup> Egan.

use. *Abrogation* still occurs in the same two patterns, but with different scores, and is slightly more frequent in shell-noun-usage. *Benediction* is the last to be amalgamated with the nouns in this group. Like the other nouns, it only occurs in the two patterns Det-N and Pro-BE-N, showing the highest reliance score of the group in the first construction and the lowest in the second.

The semantic reasons that may explain the clustering in the case of *repudiation*, *exoneration* and *abrogation* refer to the fact that these nouns belong to the “Law” group and are all anairetic acts, i.e., they refer to speech acts that immediately produce legal effects by the very fact of being uttered and have a binding force in that they create legal obligations. The same explanation cannot be applied to the later amalgamation of *benediction* that, however, is clustered here because, like the other nouns in the sub-cluster and differently from *blessing* and *declaration*, cannot report a hybrid speech act.

The last shell nouns that are paired are *blessing* and *declaration*. This final clustering step and the height at which *blessing* and *declaration* are amalgamated with the other nouns of this group suggest that these two nouns are the most dissimilar in the group. From the grammatical point of view, the variable that drives the pairing of *declaration* with *blessing* is the reliance scores on the N-that pattern. *Blessing* is also the only noun that occurs in the N-to inf construction. The semantic reasons that may explain the clustering are to be found in the hybrid assertive-declarative meaning that the nouns can have, especially *declaration*. Moreover, *blessing* can report a desiderative assertion characterised by future orientation and volition. These components are reflected in the fact that it occurs in the N-to inf, and, indeed, it stands out in being the only declarative noun that relies on this construction.

In the following section, we discuss the results, making a comparison with those obtained on the complementation of assertive<sup>41</sup> and commissive<sup>42</sup> shell nouns.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of noun behavioural profiles shows that there is no semantically specific pattern that exerts strong lexico-grammatical constraints on declarative shell nouns. In fact, N-that, which is the second most frequent construction after Det-N, has a very restricted distribution, occurring only with *declaration* and *blessing*. However, more than reporting declarative speech acts, the two shell nouns report hybrid assertive-declarative speech acts.

The specificational copular construction Pro-BE-N is more equally distributed. In the case of declarative shell nouns, the pattern is used to give prominence to the state of affairs reported in the content, not to ascribe an evaluation to such a content. In some cases, the reported shell content is a direct-speech quotation. When it is not, it seems that the shell content refers to the effects of the uttering of the act. Lastly, N-to inf is only used with *blessing*, with which the semantic association is possible because of the future-oriented, volitional reading the act reported by the shell noun can have.

Results also show that these nouns have a different behaviour compared to assertive and commissive shell nouns, and that the data reflect their conceptual structure, for example in the specific way in which the shell content is reported. We are referring to the use of direct reported speech, especially in the case of the pattern Det-N.

Let us explain these results comparing them with results obtained by Vergaro on assertive and Vergaro and Schmid on commissive shell nouns.

Vergaro<sup>43</sup> focuses on assertive shell nouns and shows that N-that qualifies as the default construction for assertive shell nouns, while other constructions add extra-semantic content, depending on the integration between the noun meaning and the meaning of the specific

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<sup>41</sup> Vergaro, “Ways of Asserting.”

<sup>42</sup> Vergaro and Schmid.

<sup>43</sup> Vergaro, “Ways of Asserting.”

construction. More precisely, these results show that, the stronger the assertoric commitment of the act reported by the shell noun, the more the shell noun occurs in the N-that construction. The integration between the lexical units represented by the nouns and the grammatical unit represented by the *that*-clause is maximal in the prototypical shell noun *assertion* and in *contention* that both report speech acts that conceptualise the highest commitment to the truth of the proposition. It is minimal in the case of *guess* that reports a speech act in which the assertoric commitment is low. Example (11) refers to an assertive shell noun.

- (11) Hirschhorn is well known for his **assertion** that he does not make political art, but he makes art politically.

Vergaro and Schmid<sup>44</sup> on commissive shell nouns show that N-to inf is the most frequent construction for prototypical commissives. So, like in the case of assertives, it is especially frequent with *promise* and more prototypical commissive nouns, and less frequent with more peripheral commissive nouns like *assurance*. Indeed, what defines the class of commissive nouns is the social commitment and thus the binding strength of the obligation, and the ensuing expectations expressed in the act named by the noun. Considering the meaning codified by *to*-infinitive, N-to inf in commissives is justified by these semantic components. Example (12) refers to a commissive shell noun.

- (12) Koresh has indicated he will keep his **promise** to come out when he receives further instructions by God.

Let us now look at the distribution of the various constructions among the classes under scrutiny, considering the bundles of specifications that describe the conceptual structure of nouns.

We described the type of conceptual knowledge lexicalised by illocutionary nouns following Proost's<sup>45</sup> descriptive formalism. Thus, we identified the "Attributes" that are salient for each "Categorical Aspect", and their corresponding "Values".

Of course, all the "Categorical Aspects" of the conceptual structure are relevant to describe the noun, but some of them have more weight than others because they correspond to the criteria for membership in the category to which the noun belongs. Thus, although it is not straightforward to map the conditions underlying the production and comprehension of speech acts onto the conceptual structure of the noun, in the descriptive model used, the "Propositional attitude" of speaker corresponds to the psychological state expressed in the sincerity condition; "Intention" to the illocutionary point which is expressed in the essential condition; "Presupposition of S" to the preparatory condition; and "Propositional content" to the propositional content condition determined by the direction of fit. The illocutionary point, the psychological state, and direction of fit that distinguish the five Searlean classes of illocutionary types is described in the attributes of the categorial aspects "Intention", "Propositional attitude" and in their corresponding values. They determine the attributes and values of the "Propositional content" and of the "Presupposition of S". The illocutionary point is the most important criterion to distinguish the five classes in Searle's classification. However, the crucial role that the speaker's attitude plays in the identification of the illocutionary force of an utterance has been widely demonstrated in speech act literature.

Let us also recall that the relationship of complementation is explained by Langacker<sup>46</sup> in terms of conceptual dependence: in a construction the complement elaborates, i.e., characterises in a finer-grained detail, a salient feature of the head, leaving the rest in the background.

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<sup>44</sup> Vergaro and Schmid.

<sup>45</sup> Proost.

<sup>46</sup> Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* Vol. 1; Id., *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* Vol. 2.

If one considers the bundle of specification of a prototypical assertive noun (see Table 5 below), a prototypical assertive noun reports a propositional content that is not specified as far as the event type, temporal reference and agent are concerned. A core idea of the act reported by an assertive shell noun is that of putting something forward as true.

[Insert Table 5 here]

*That*-clause prototypically allows the expression of commitment to the factual truth of the proposition to be construed. The semantics of the *that*-clause in the N-*that* pattern matches the value “take to be true (S, P)” as expressed in Att of the attribute “Epistemic attitude (H)” of the “Intention”. The value that the “Epistemic attitude” can take is gradable and allows various degrees of assertoric commitment to be lexicalised. This explains why *assertion* boasts a high reliance score in N-*that*, and *guess* a very low one. It also explains why, in the case of declarative shell nouns, N-*that* only occurs with *declaration* and *blessing*. The two nouns also have an assertoric component of meaning in their conceptual structure (“Epistemic attitude: take to be true (S, P)”), and this explains their occurrence in the N-*that* pattern. When *declaration* and *blessing* occur in the construction N-*that*, the reported content is profiled as an assertion more than as a declarative speech act. Table 6 shows the bundle of specifications of a prototypical commissive noun.

[Insert Table 6 here]

A prototypical commissive noun reports a propositional content that refers to a future action occurring under the responsibility/control of the speaker. The speaker forms this intention against a set of beliefs and the utterance creates the obligation to do the action.

The semantics of the *to*-infinitive in the pattern N-*to* inf elaborates the salient attributes and values of the noun conceptual structure, i.e., the value “want (S (recognise (H (Att (S, P))))))” of the attribute “Epistemic attitude (H)” of the categorial aspect “Intention”. This explains why the occurrence of the N-*to* inf has low reliance scores in the case of assertive and declarative shell nouns: in the conceptual structure of none of them are the attributes and attribute values that are salient in the conceptual structure of a prototypical commissive salient. In the case of *blessing*, the semantics of *to*-infinitive matches the future-oriented and volitional meaning component the noun has when used to express a desiderative assertion.

Lastly, let us now consider the distribution of Det-N. We have pointed out that this construction is semantically unspecific. It just presents the shell content anaphorically or cataphorically. Because of its semantic unspecificity, this construction does not select any attribute of the conceptual structure of the prototypical declarative noun, which, itself, as can be seen in Table 1, is rather unspecific. This explains the occurrence of Det-N with declarative shell nouns that, when *genuinely* used as such, are reports of declarative formulas uttered in contexts that are conventionally associated to their executions, i.e., what is profiled is fully identified with the speech event itself. More precisely, in the Det-N pattern, the shell noun and the shell content form a grouping in the sense that they are conceptually connected, but not in a dependent way: it seems that they map directly onto the descriptive target.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated the domain of declarative nouns and the constructions they occur with, with the aim of motivating the integration of noun and construction.

The study shows that the distribution of the constructions among declarative shell nouns is motivated by the presence or lack of specific features in the conceptual structure of the lexical items. This explanation holds both for grammatical and conceptual complementation.

In the case of grammatical complementation, the complement elaborates a feature of the conceptual structure of the noun. Thus, for example, in declaration the assertive component of the noun meaning explains the occurrence of the noun in the N-that construction, which has been shown to be the default option for assertive shell nouns.

On the other hand, the highest occurrence of conceptual complementation with Det-N in the case of declarative shell nouns, is explained by the compatibility of the rather unspecific conceptual structure of the nouns with the semantic unspecificity of the construction.

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[Insert Appendix here]