

Some semantic investigations on the French VN construction*

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1 Introduction

In this paper, we address some lexical semantic issues of French morphological constructs such as *presse-citron* (°*squeeze-lemon* = *lemon squeezer*), *porte-drapeau* (°*carry-flag* = *standard bearer*) or *casse-pied* (°*break-foot* = *pain in the neck*).¹ These constructs, henceforth VN, are nominals—some of which may function as adjectives—which are formed by appending a noun to a verb stem. VNs are peculiar to Romance languages² and the construction is quite productive in French, as shown by a corpus of about 1 700 attested VN forms, collected by Villoing (2002b).

As a short introduction, let us mention that a great number of VNs denote instruments, or more generally purposeful things.³ The remaining part of the French VN corpus includes:

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¹The °*forms* give a literal English translation followed by the actual translation.

²Note however that some English words seem to have a VN form, such as *pickpocket*, *cut-throat*, *killjoy*, *rotgut*, *wagtail*, *passport*, *pastime*, *fetchmail*... However these constructions seem to be much less productive than in Romance languages.

³As instruments, these VNs can refer to tools, devices, accessories, gadgets, vehicles, weapons, items of clothing, food, tricks... Examples: *tournevis* (°*turn-screw* = *screwdriver*), *vide-ordure* (°*empty-rubbish* = *rubbish chute*), *porte-clés* (°*carry-keys* = *key ring*), *vide-poche* (°*empty-pocket* = *tidy*), *porte-avion* (°*carry-plane* = *aircraft carrier*), *lance-flamme* (°*throw-flame* = *flamethrower*), *soutien-gorge* (°*support-bosom* = *bra*), *amuse-gueule* (°*amuse-mouth* = *appetizer*), *attrape-nigaud* (°*catch-silly* = *con*).

(human) agents referred to by their occupation or function⁴, salient properties or behaviours⁵, activities⁶, names of species⁷, and locations (by metonymy)⁸.

We will mainly rely on the recent work of Villoing (2002b), adopting a constructional morphology approach (Corbin, 1997), according to which compounds such as VN are not constructed by a syntactic component of the grammar, but involve a purely morphological process. The present study is part of a wider project aimed at providing a (possibly) unified semantic description of the French VN construction and its related forms. Although the surface properties of the VN construction have been studied in great detail for more than a century (e.g., Darmesteter, 1894), very little attention has been paid to their specific semantic description. Actually, previous works which addressed the subject (see e.g. Di Sciullo and Williams, 1987; Zwanenburg, 1992; Barbaud,

⁴Examples: *garde-barrière* (°*guard-gate* = *level-crossing guard*), *gratte-papier* (°*scrape-paper* = *pen-pusher*), *coupe-jarret* (°*cut-calf* = *cut-throat*).

⁵Examples: *rabat-joie* (°*fell/reduce-joy* = *spoilsport*), *trouble-fête* (°*disturb-party* = *killjoy*), *casse-pied* (°*break-foot* = *pain in the neck*), *brise-cœur* (°*break-heart* = *heartbreaker*), *traîne-savates* (°*trail-shoes* = *tramp*).

⁶Examples: *baisemain* (°*kiss-hand* = “*kissing a woman’s hand*”), *croche-pied* (°*hook-foot* = “*tripping someone up*”), *remue-ménage* (°*move-household* = *commotion*), *lèche-vitrine* (°*lick-window* = *window-shopping*).

⁷Examples: *perce-oreille* (°*pierce-ear* = *earwig*), *perce-neige* (°*pierce-snow* = *snowdrop*).

⁸Examples: *coupe-gorge* (°*cut-throat* = *dangerous back alley*), *pince-fesse* (°*pinch-buttock* = *hop place*).

1994) mostly focused on the semantic types or classes of the whole constructs disregarding the possible systematic relationship between the meaning of the components (V and N) and the meaning of the compound (VN). In this paper, our main purpose is to lay the basis for a compositional semantics of French VNs, and then to propose a critical reflexion on how a lexical rule can properly account for the peculiar features of the construction. We will couch our analysis in the framework of the Generative Lexicon (Pustejovsky, 1995) because, as will be shown, “standard VNs” are instances of agentive nominals and some of their properties can be fruitfully accounted for along the lines of Busa (1996).

2 Some semantic properties of French VNs

At first sight, VNs are understood in such a way that the nominal component N corresponds to the direct object of the verbal component V. Hence VNs can normally be constructed only from transitive verbs. However Villoing (2002b) has shown that VNs are genuine morphological constructs and that a syntactic characterisation such as transitivity is inaccurate to account for the VN construction. For instance, it is not the case that any transitive verb can yield a VN. First the verb cannot be stative (at least in contemporary French), see examples in (1a). More generally Villoing (2002b) argues that the verbal component of VN must bear at least two arguments and that among these arguments, one should fall under the characterisation of proto-agenthood (following the terminology of Dowty (1991)), and another argument should preferably fall under proto-patienthood. Moreover, the proto-agent argument eventually corresponds to the referent of the VN, and the proto-patient argument is instantiated by the N. These observations may explain why the putative examples in (1b) sound rather odd, since there the N does not clearly behave as a proto-patient (however, we will show below that although it may seem quite strange, these VNs are not fundamentally deviant with respect to the general semantic rule).

- (1) a. ?*sait-latin* = °*know-latin*; ?*aime-caviar* = °*love-caviar*;
 b. ?*entend-voix* (°*hear-voice*),
 ?*regarde-photos*
 (°*look_at-photographs*),
 ?*atteint-sommet* (°*reach-top*),
 ?*quitte-orbite* (°*leave-orbit*),
 ?*traverse-siècle* (°*cross-century*).

A first characterisation that can be made at present is that VNs are somehow related to *actions*. And it turns out that some French VNs denote actions or activities, as for instance *baisemain* (°*kiss-hand*). However such event VNs (henceforth EVNs) represent only a small portion of the attested French VNs corpus. Actually most of the VNs are *agentive nominals*, i.e. deverbal nouns denoting (physical as well as abstract) individuals, and carrying an underlying reference to an event (which we will call e_{VN}), which can be, at least partially, described from the semantics of V and N.

The relation between e_{VN} and the denoted individual is fairly transparent for any French speaker, as a part of the intuitive core semantics of the construction. As a first step, it can be *roughly* formulated as follows: “un VN est quelque chose (ou quelqu’un) qui V des N, i.e. qui accomplit e_{VN} ” (a VN is something or somebody which Vs Ns, i.e. which performs e_{VN}). For instance, an *ouvre-boîte* (°*open-tin* = *tin-opener*) is something which opens tins. Moreover, like other agentive nouns (Rappaport Hovav and Levin, 1992; Busa, 1996), the reference to e_{VN} may be either virtual (or modal) or actual (in which case the VN denotes an individual in action). This is shown in the contrast (2a) vs. (2b).

- (2) a. Quand je suis entré dans le salon, j’ai vu un garde-barrière/lance-flamme/soutien-gorge sur le canapé.
 When I went into living room, I saw a level-crossing keeper / flamethrower / bra on the couch.
 b. ? Quand je suis entré dans le salon, j’ai vu un casse-pied/trouble-fête/brise-cœur qui dormait sur le canapé.
 When I went into the living room, I

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{v} \\ \text{ARGSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{ARG2} = y \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{EVENSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{E1} = e \\ \dots \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{QUALIA} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{Q}_i = \mathbf{v}(e, x, y) \\ \dots \end{bmatrix} \end{array} \right] + \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{n} \\ \text{ARGSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{ARG1} = z \\ \dots \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{EVENSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \dots \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{QUALIA} = \begin{bmatrix} \dots \end{bmatrix} \end{array} \right] \Rightarrow \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{v-n} \\ \text{ARGSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{SH-ARG1} = z : \mathbf{n} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{EVENSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{D-E1} = e_{\text{VN}} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{QUALIA} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{FORMAL} = x \\ \text{TELIC} = \mathbf{v}(e_{\text{VN}}, x, z) \end{bmatrix} \end{array} \right]$$

Figure 1: The ILVN rule

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{v} \\ \text{ARGSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{ARG2} = y \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{EVENSTR} = \boxed{1} \begin{bmatrix} \text{E1} = e \\ \dots \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{QUALIA} = \boxed{2} \begin{bmatrix} \text{Q}_i = \mathbf{v}(e, x, y) \\ \dots \end{bmatrix} \end{array} \right] + \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{n} \\ \text{ARGSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{ARG1} = z \\ \dots \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{EVENSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \dots \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{QUALIA} = \begin{bmatrix} \dots \end{bmatrix} \end{array} \right] \Rightarrow \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{v-n} \\ \text{ARGSTR} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{D-ARG1} = x \\ \text{SH-ARG1} = z : \mathbf{n} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{EVENSTR} = \boxed{1} \begin{bmatrix} \text{E1} = e_{\text{VN}} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{QUALIA} = \boxed{2} \begin{bmatrix} \text{Q}_i = \mathbf{v}(e_{\text{VN}}, x, z) \end{bmatrix} \end{array} \right]$$

Figure 2: The EVN rule

saw a pain in the neck / killjoy / heart-breaker sleeping on the couch.

Hence we make the working hypothesis that the lexical semantics of (standard) French VNs, as agentive nominals, can be analysed along the lines of the general account proposed by Busa (1996); Johnston and Busa (1999)⁹. Thus we assume that VNs can be divided into *Individual Level VNs*, henceforth ILVNs, (2a), and *Stage Level VNs*, henceforth SLVNs, (2b); and that the relationship between a VN and its underlying e_{VN} is encoded in the QUALIA structure of the VN entry. Therefore Figure 1 illustrates the compositional lexical rule from which one can retrieve the semantics of an ILVN from the semantics of its verbal and nominal components.

And still according to Busa (1996), the rule for SLVNs mainly differs in that $\mathbf{v}(e_{\text{VN}}, x, z)$ will fill the AGENTIVE quale instead of the TELIC one. As for EVNs, the rule can be formulated as in Figure 2.

3 Difficulties and peculiarities of VNs

We will now examine in more detail some peculiar properties of VNs, focussing henceforth

⁹In fact, (Busa, 1996, p. 116) mentions a couple of Italian VNs, *apriscatole* (*tin opener*) and *apribottiglie* (*bottle opener*), to illustrate her study.

on ILVNs and paying special attention to those ILVNs which hardly match the above model. A small number of VNs are based on intransitive verbs. The examples are: *trotte-bébé* (*°toddle_along-baby = baby walker*); *pense-bête* (*°think_of-silly = reminder*). Although they are not very productive, they seem fully understandable by French speakers. Here the N is the only argument of the V, and the VN denote something that allows N to V or makes N V. Hence a *trotte-bébé* is a device by means of which a baby can toddle along or walk. Here an important observation has to be made. While in “*le bébé trotte*” (*the baby is toddling along*) *bébé* is fairly proto-agent, the involvement is quite different in the actual underlying event description in *trotte-bébé*. This description is that “something (viz. the *trotte-bébé*) enables a baby to toddle around”. In such a formulation, the N (the baby) happens to be involved as a proto-patient, and conversely the VN has some proto-agenthood features (e.g. it causes the N to be in a certain situation). Thus it turns out that such seemingly “intransitive VNs” actually satisfy the criteria posited by Villoing (2002b,a) (see §2 above). Besides, from a formal point of view, “intransitive VNs” are problematic with respect to the standard rule in Figure 1 because the aforementioned enabling flavour is not rendered. For instance, if one applies the rule to *trotte* and *bébé*, the resulting TELIC quale would be instantiated by:

walk(e, z), with z being the “baby” argument. Hence the argument corresponding to the VN, i.e. x in Figure 1, is *not involved* in the TELIC role of the entry. Then, in other words, how could the telic description properly account for the typical function of an entity x if this description doesn’t say anything about x ?

Some other VNs appear to hardly fit in with the standard model, because they cannot be actually construed as things that V Ns. We will call them “indirect VNs”, and the examples are: *vide-poche* (°empty-pocket = *tidy*), *appui-tête* (°rest-head = *head-rest*), *fume-cigarette* (°smoke-cigarette = *cigarette holder*).¹⁰ They belong to the category of instruments, but, as opposed to standard ILVNs such as *coupe-papier*, they display a peculiar behaviour, as shown in the contrasts (3)–(5). In the case of indirect VNs, the individual denoted by VN is somehow indirectly involved in its TELIC event description. For instance, a *vide-poche* is not a device which would perform the action of removing the contents of a pocket (although it might have been the case, cf. *vide-pomme* = °empty-apple = *apple-corer*), it is a recipient *into which* one puts the things that have been removed from one’s pocket. Here the VN has a very low score on the scale of proto-agenthood, contrary to Villoing’s predictions. In terms of formal lexical representation, the consequence is that the telic description should not be of the form $v(e_{VN}, x, z)$ as in Figure 1, but, at the very most, something like $v(e_{VN}, w, z, x)$ where w is the user of the VN (and the genuine proto-agent of e_{VN}).

- (3) a. ? Le vide-poche a vidé la poche. (*The tidy emptied the pocket.*)
 b. Fred s’est servi d’un vide-poche pour vider sa poche. (*Fred used a tidy to empty his pocket.*)
- (4) a. ? Le fume-cigarette a fumé la cigarette. (*The cigarette holder smoked the cigarette.*)

¹⁰Other examples: *remonte-pente* (°climb_back_up-slope = *ski-tow*), *rince-doigts* (°rinse-fingers = *finger-bowl*), *brûle-encens* (°burn-incense = *incense stand*), *tape-tapis* (°beat-carpet = “*something on which one can beat a carpet*”), *accroche-tasse* (°hook-cup = *cup hook*), *passe-plat* (°pass-dish = *serving hatch*) ...

- b. Fred s’est servi d’un fume-cigarette pour fumer sa cigarette. (*Fred used a cigarette holder to smoke his cigarette.*)

- (5) a. Le coupe-papier a coupé la feuille. (*The paper knife cut the sheet.*)
 b. Fred s’est servi d’un coupe-papier pour couper la feuille. (*Fred used a paper knife to cut the sheet.*)

4 Towards a refined account

Now in order to account for these data and to save the coverage of our semantic description of ILVNs, we propose to refine the rule in Figure 1. The idea is that there is a constraint on the semantic structure of ILVNs such that the event description in the TELIC quale must be somehow agentive (or causative). We rely on Pustejovsky’s (1995) rendering of lexical causation according to which the QUALIA structure of a causative predicate features a causing event (AGENTIVE) and a resulting eventuality (FORMAL). But here we will adopt a somewhat broader view of causation so that it corresponds to *causing or enabling one to V Ns* or *causing or enabling Ns to be Ved*. By doing so, we don’t aim at overriding Pustejovsky’s account, we only propose another causative mode which is specific to agentive nominals. The new ILVNs schema is given in Figure 3 and we will now consider it as a “mould” into which V and N have to fit so as to yield the proper semantics of VN.

The pattern $\alpha_v(e_1, \dots, z, \dots)$ corresponds to a predication whose meaning is lexically related to the meaning of V (hence the notation α_v). It is intended to describe the genuine TELIC feature of the VN. We will see below how it can be instantiated and how, in some cases, it may be realised as a complex description. On the other hand, the pattern $\beta(e_2, \dots, x, \dots)$ is semantically less constrained. We think that the precise meaning of this description is not fully determined on the basis of grammatical and lexical knowledge. What matters in the mould is i) that x , i.e. the referent of the VN, must be somehow involved in the event description provided by β and ii) that e_2 , as described by β , is a mandatory *precondition*

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{v-n} \\ \text{ARGSTR} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{SH-ARG1} = z : \mathbf{n} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{EVENSTR} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{D-E1} = \boxed{1} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{QUALIA} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{FORMAL} = x \\ \text{TELIC} = \boxed{1} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{FORMAL} = \alpha_v(e_1, \dots, z, \dots) \\ \text{AGENTIVE} = \beta(e_2, \dots, x, \dots) \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

Figure 3: The ILVN mould

for e_1 to occur. For instance, in the case of instruments, and according to Busa (1996), the TELIC|AGENTIVE description, as a possible complex one, will normally incorporate the sub-description $\exists w \mathbf{use}(e_2^i, w, x)$ (thus, in order for an instrument to carry out its function, it must be used by someone). In other words, the TELIC quale of a VN is necessarily causative. Note that the mould does not make it explicit that z has to appear in both the agentive and the formal role. But we consider that this argument sharing normally occurs in VNs and that it is the result of a separate constraint, viz. the property of *argument coherence* stated in Pustejovsky (1995).

Now let us see how our various VNs fit in with the ILVN mould. When the e_{VN} denotes in itself a causative event, i.e. a transition, it directly matches the expected structure of the TELIC role of the VN. For instance, the representation of *coupe-papier* ($^\circ$ cut-paper = *paper knife*) is given in Figure 4(a), where **cut_act** and **cut_result** describe respectively the AGENTIVE and FORMAL roles of the verbe *couper* (*to cut*).

The ellipsis in the TELIC|AGENTIVE role means that additional information can be supplied here (e.g. $\exists w \mathbf{use}(e_2^i, w, x)$). The central point is that the “instrumental subject” behaviour of VNs as in (5) is allowed as long as the TELIC|AGENTIVE description specifies the required action, viz. the action expressed in the verb phrase in sentences such as (5). Compare with the entries for indirect VNs in Figure 4(b–c): in the entry for *fume-cigarette*, the TELIC|AGENTIVE role doesn’t mention a smoking act, and in the entry for *vide-poche* the emptying act doesn’t involve the *vide-poche* (x).

On the other hand, we assume that the

TELIC|FORMAL description provides the information from which one can draw normal (i.e. defeasible) entailments or implicatures in contexts such as: *Fred s’est servi d’un VN* (*Fred uses a VN*). For instance *Fred s’est servi d’un coupe-papier* entails by defaults or implicates that some paper is cut; likewise *Fred s’est servi d’un fume-cigarette* implicates that he smoked a cigarette, and *Fred s’est servi d’un vide-poche* implicates that his pocket is empty and/or that the tidy ($^\circ$ empty-pocket) contains some objects.¹¹

The analysis can be generalized to other ILVNs, like for instance those whose verb typically denotes a process, e.g. *portemanteau* ($^\circ$ carry-coat = *coat rack*), *porte-drapeau* ($^\circ$ carry-flag = *standard bearer*). We maintain the configuration in Figure 3 to account for certain linguistic properties of these items. Like *coupe-papier*, they can occur as instrumental subjects: *ce portemanteau peut porter dix manteaux* (this $^\circ$ carry-coat can bear ten coats). Furthermore, they allow for the following kind of defeasible entailments: *Fred s’est servi du portemanteau* (*Fred used the $^\circ$ carry-coat*) \rightarrow *son manteau est/a été porté par le portemanteau* (*his coat has been/was borne by—or has been/was hanging on—the $^\circ$ carry-coat*). Therefore we propose to represent these VNs as in (6). Note that it must be kept in mind that our analysis in (6) *does not* mean that we consider verbs like *porter* (*to carry*) to denote transitional predicates; they are actual pro-

¹¹Being defeasible, these entailments can always be overridden by more precise information provided by the context. In this respect, we rely on the non-monotonic theory of discourse processing elaborated in SDRT, which shows how rhetorical relations can affect (or resolve) the interpretation of a discourse (see, e.g., Asher and Lascarides, 2003; Asher and Pustejovsky, 2000).

$$\begin{array}{l}
(a) \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{coupe-papier} \\ \text{AS} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{SH-ARG1} = z : \mathbf{paper} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{ES} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{D-E1} = \boxed{1} \\ \text{FORMAL} = x \\ \text{QS} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{TELIC} = \boxed{1} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{FORM} = \mathbf{cut_result}(e_1, z) \\ \text{AG} = \mathbf{cut_act}(e_2^1, x, z), \dots \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \\
(b) \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{fume-cigarette} \\ \text{AS} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{SH-ARG1} = z : \mathbf{cigarette} \end{array} \right] \\ \dots \\ \text{QS} = \left[\text{TEL} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{FORM} = \mathbf{smoke_act}(e_1, w, z) \\ \text{AG} = \mathbf{use}(e_2, w, x) \end{array} \right] \right] \end{array} \right] \\
(c) \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{vide-poche} \\ \text{AS} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{SH-ARG1} = z : \mathbf{pocket} \end{array} \right] \\ \dots \\ \text{QS} = \left[\text{TELIC} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{FORM} = \mathbf{empty_result}(e_1, z), \mathbf{at}(e_2, y, x) \\ \text{AG} = \mathbf{empty_act}(e_3, w, z, y), \mathbf{use}(e_4, w, x) \end{array} \right] \right] \end{array} \right] \\
\mathbf{(empty_act}(e_3, w, z, y) \text{ is for } w \text{ empties out } z \text{ from } y)
\end{array}
\end{array}$$

Figure 4: Entries for *coupe-papier*, *fume-cigarette* and *vide-poche*

cess and, as we put it earlier, the somewhat causative structure here is specific to the underlying event of VNs.

$$(6) \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{porte-drapeau} \\ \text{AS} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{SH-ARG1} = z : \mathbf{flag} \end{array} \right] \\ \dots \\ \text{QS} = \left[\text{TEL} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{FORM} = \mathbf{carry_res}(e_1, x, z) \\ \text{AG} = \mathbf{carry_act}(e_2, x, z) \end{array} \right] \right] \end{array} \right]$$

Eventually, we also retrieve the expected semantics for VNs whose verb is intransitive (*trotte-bébé*). Here the event description provided by V and N is $v(e, z)$ and it has to unify with the $\alpha_v(e_1, \dots, z, \dots)$ as it predicates only on z . On the other hand, the pattern $\beta(e_2, \dots, x, \dots)$ requires a precondition, i.e. an enabling circumstance. In the case of instruments, this is typically instantiated by $\mathbf{use}(e_2, z, x)$.

$$(7) \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{trotte-bébé} \\ \text{AS} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{ARG1} = x \\ \text{SH-ARG1} = z : \mathbf{baby} \end{array} \right] \\ \dots \\ \text{QS} = \left[\text{TELIC} = \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{FORM} = \mathbf{walk}(e_1, z) \\ \text{AG} = \mathbf{use}(e_2, z, x) \end{array} \right] \right] \end{array} \right]$$

At this point, one can consider that our mould-rule is probably too powerful, to the extent that it may predict that any intransitive verb could yield a correct VN—which of course is not the case. Our position is that the ILVN mould is mainly intended to retrieve the (core) meaning that any VN (and more

precisely, any ILVN) should have, being attested or not. In particular, it reflects the common ability a French speaker brings into play when he guesses successfully the meaning of an unfamiliar VN. In this way, our account mostly deals with competence rather than performance in VN semantics.

Besides, we believe that incorrect VNs are mostly ruled out in accordance with other principles which are not purely semantic or lexical ones. One of them may be related to the economy of the language. Let's take the example of the putative **meurt-mouche* ($^{\circ}$ die-fly) which seems to be an impossible French VN. According to the ILVN mould, *meurt-mouche* should then bear an agentive/causative feature: a *meurt-mouche* would be something whose typical purpose is that flies die. In other words, *meurt-mouche* would necessarily amount to *tue-mouche* ($^{\circ}$ kill-fly), which is in fact an attested VN (meaning *fly paper*) and is much more semantically transparent and construable. So why coin *meurt-mouche* when one can have *tue-mouche*? Conversely, non attested and seemingly odd VNs like *regarde-photos* (and other examples in (1b)) can always be “saved” in accordance with the mould: then if *regarde-photos* became attested, it should refer to something which enables one to look at or view photographs, like a slide viewer. Another reason for ruling out incorrect ILVNs probably relies on pragmatic considerations: if the TELIC provided by the mould for a putative

ILVN refers to a process which is hardly realistic or conceivable, the ILVN will appear as deviant by lack of actual reference. Although it may have an effect on the lexicon, such an issue does not really concern the lexical theory.

5 Conclusion

The analysis we have proposed for French ILVNs is an extension of a more general analysis of agentive nominals, intending to deal with the specific semantics of these constructs. The framework of the Generative Lexicon enabled us to provide a compositional account, as shown in the generic pattern in Figure 3. Indeed the semantics of the verbal component is retrieved within the TELIC description of the QUALIA of the VN, and the semantics of the nominal appears as a type constraint on the first shallow argument in the argument structure. We also paid much attention to the description (and formalisation) of the various semantic properties and behaviours within the corpus of ILVNs. This led us to posit that the TELIC role of ILVNs must be structured upon a causative schema; and it is worth noting that this idea is closely related to a recent analysis proposed by Fradin and Kerleroux (2002) for French *V-eur* nominals. Finally, our analysis tackles both specific and generic features of the phenomenon. Thus all ILVNs which are constructed from the same (meaning of a) verb will share a *common denominator* which is their TELIC|FORMAL description, while internal variations are encoded in TELIC|AGENTIVE.

Now to go further into the coverage of the semantic description of the French VN construction, several perspectives for future research can be suggested. We have mostly dealt with ILVNs, and, of course, further investigations have to be carried out regarding SLVNs and EVNs. As for SLVNs, we have mentioned that, according to Busa (1996), the e_{VN} description is incorporated in the AGENTIVE quale of the VN. However, it is worth noticing that the boundary between ILVNs and SLVNs (as well as between ILNs and SLNs) seems to be very fuzzy (eg. *casse-cou* = °*break-neck* = *daredevil* or *porte-bonheur* = °*carry-luck* = *lucky charm*). An explanation—drawn from Busa

(1996)—may be that some nominals have both their AGENTIVE and TELIC roles instantiated with the description of the underlying event. But this cannot be easily generalised over artifacts (at least under the standard assumptions of GL). More generally, a tricky issue concerning the VN construction is that an accurate semantic analysis involves (at least) three different compositional rules. However there is a strong intuition that, from a constructional morphological viewpoint, the VN construction is unique and probably monosemic. In other words, there are no morphological criteria for distinguishing among ILVNs, SLVNs and EVNs; and even though the distinction can be mostly predicted on the basis of non linguistic information, the fact is that all French VNs, as morphological objects, should be formalised in the same fashion. Hence we think that an interesting direction for prospective theoretical work is to investigate how the semantic descriptions which are specifically handled by morphology can formally interact with a general theory of the lexicon such as the Generative Lexicon.

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