Something invisible in English

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This paper addresses the relation between indefinite pronouns (henceforth IPR) and their modifiers, (1a), from a cross-linguistic perspective. IPRs in English transparently exhibit a bi-morphemic nature whereby a determiner and a nominal occur inseparably (e.g. some-thing). Modifiers follow the IPR. These facts have led authors to analyze IPRs as syntactically derived e.g. via N-raising (cf. Abney 1987, Kishimoto 2000). In such an analysis N (thing) raises around the adjective up to (or close to) D (some), (1b), thereby allegedly obscuring the distinction between underlingly pre- and postnominal adjectives.

I assume English (E), French (F) and Swiss German (SG) to be similar enough in the relevant respects for a largely uniform analysis to be desirable. Drawing therefore on evidence from the three languages, I will argue that an N-raising analysis is insufficient. I propose instead that the IPR and the AP-modifier are part of two distinct nominal projections, (1c), both headed by an empty category.

Addressing the status of IPRs, consider first the partial IPR paradigm in (2) which shows that IPRs in F (2b) and especially in SG (2c) are not regularly composed of a D and an N in a morphologically transparent fashion, unlike E (2a). While in all three languages IPRs typically are polymorphemic, an N-raising analysis cannot be extended to F and SG in any straightforward way.

Secondly, the interpretive range is restricted by properties of the IPR (-one, -thing, -place etc). Notice the curious fact that IPRs cannot refer to animals. While English one or French un are not restricted to a human interpretation when functioning as N (e.g. this one, French quelques-uns (some' plural)), someone / quelqu'un can only refer to humans. This remains unexplained in an N-raising approach. Postulating an empty category on the other hand leads us to expect a default interpretation in the absence of an overt restrictor. [+human] is a typical feature of such default interpretations (cf. Rizzi 1986, Kester 1996), as exemplified in expressions like the blind ecN.

Turning to the modifiers, IPRs can be modified by e.g. APs (3) and reduced relatives (RRC, 4). In F and SG, AP-modifiers of IPRs are introduced by an overt morpheme, de and –s respectively, (3), while RRCs are not, (4). de in F does not generally accompany adjectives, but it introduces nominal projections. In SG, the inflection (-s for NOM and ACC, and -m for DAT) which appears with AP-modifiers of IPRs is the same that shows up on adjectives modifying a bare noun, i.e. a nominal projection lacking a (overt) D. Assuming that pronouns do not correspond to bare nominals, the F and SG morphology suggest that the AP in (3) modifies an empty nominal distinct from the one morphosyntactically associated with the IPR (cf. (1c)). Furthermore, the overt presence of de/-s allows stranding of the modifier under Wh-movement (5), similar to the was für and the combien de split phenomena, again suggesting that here as well the stranded phrase is an extended nominal projection in its own right.

While it has been argued that IPR modifiers behave like postnominal adjectives in English, Larson&Marušič (to appear), the present proposal claims that they do not fall into the pre-/post-nominal partition in any simple fashion. This seems correct. Consider the contrast between English prenominal and postnominal comparatives with comparative complements (6). With a prenominal adjective the properties of the two Ns must match (6a), but not with a postnominal one, (6b), (cf. Bresnan 1973, L&M). Notice that in F and SG, AP-modifiers (introduced by de/-s) of IPRs fit the prenominal pattern (7), while RRC-modifiers (lacking de/-s) pattern with the postnominal adjectives. Another instance in which AP-modifiers of IPRs fit the prenominal pattern is that they allow both stage-level and individual-level (8a) interpretations, while postnominal adjectives are restricted to stage-level interpretations in English, (8c,d).

In other respects AP-modifiers of IPRs fit against prenominal adjectives, e.g. attributive-only adjectives like live vs. alive (cf. Bolinger 1967, L&M), or as in (9), where poor with an IPR cannot mean pitiable. Thus the restrictions on AP-modifiers of IPRs cannot be cast in pre-/post-nominal terms.

In conclusion, from a cross-linguistic perspective taking English, French and Swiss German into account, an N-raising analysis to indefinite pronouns seems highly implausible. I propose instead that IPRs lexicalize an empty headed nominal projection. Further, there is ample evidence that IPRs and their AP-modifiers are contained in distinct nominal projections, both headed by an empty category.
1. a. something beautiful
   b. some beautiful thing => some thing beautiful \(t_{\text{thing}}\) (N-raising analysis)
   c. \([\text{DP } IPR [\text{NP } ec_{N1} [\text{XP } de [\text{AP } ec_{N2} ]]]]\) (present analysis)

2. a. someone b. quelqu’un c. öper
   no one (ne) personne niämer
   something quelque chose öpis
   nothing (ne) rien nüd

3. a. Something interesting
   b. Quelque chose *(d’)intéressant
   c. Öpis interessant*(s).

4. a. Someone responsible for the production.
   b. Quelqu’un responsable pour la mise-en-scène.
   c. Öper verwantwortlich für d Inszeniärig.

5. a. * What did you buy nice? (subject to speaker variation.)
   b. Qu’est-ce que tu as acheté de beau?
   c. Was hesch schöns kauft?

6. a. a taller person than Max / # than this bookshelf
   b. a person taller than Max / than this bookshelf

7. a. Quelqu’un (#de) plus grand que cette étagère est entré.
   b. Öper grösser(#s) als das Bücherregal isch inä cho.
   ’Someone taller than this bookshelf came in.’

   b. List all the visible stars (whether we can see them or not). (cf. L&M)
   c. List all the stars visible (??whether we can see them or not). (cf. L&M)
   d. Name some stars (*in)visible.

9. a. poor girl pauvre fille arms Mäitli ‘pitiable’
   b. (’a girl poor’) une fille pauvre -------------------- ‘no money’
   c. She’s poor. Elle est pauvre. Si ich arm. ‘no money’
   d. someone poor quelqu’un de pauvre öper arms ‘no money’

Selected references: