

CP complements of *er*-nominalisations in English

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1 Introduction

English has *er*-nominalisations, a.k.a. agent nominalisations:

- (1) a. talker
- b. can-opener
- c. breaker of chains

Some *er*-nominalisations can take CP complements:

- (2) a. I'm a big **hoper** [that the Universe believes in equality].¹
- b. I am a firm **believer** [that every person, young or old, has at least one good story to tell].²
- c. The police are frequent **complainers** [that they have better things to do than answer requests under the Freedom of Information Act].³

These are **CoPTers**:

CP-Taking Er-nominalisations

1. <https://www.cinemablend.com/television/So-You-Think-You-Can-Dance-Watch-Top-Three-Final-Performance-Show-26305.html>

2. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9665961-i-am-a-firm-believer-that-every-person-young-or>.

3. <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/12461068.opening-new-doors-thanks-to-the-publics-right-to-know/>

1.1 A tension

CoPTers sit at a point of tension:

- *Er*-nominalisations are **Argument Structure Nominals** (Alexiadou & Schäfer 2010, Roy & Soare 2014): they ‘inherit’ argument structure from their parent verb.
 - If the parent verb (e.g. *believe*) can take a CP argument, the derived *er*-nominalisation (e.g. *believer*) should be able to take a CP argument too.
- *Er*-nominalisations are nouns, and nouns cannot take CP arguments (Stowell 1981, Elliott 2020, a.o.).
 - CP complements to nouns like *belief* are **adjuncts**.

1.2 Resolving the tension

Observation: CoPTERs fare best as **predicate nominals**.

- (3) a. I am a big hoper that ...
b. She is a firm believer that ...

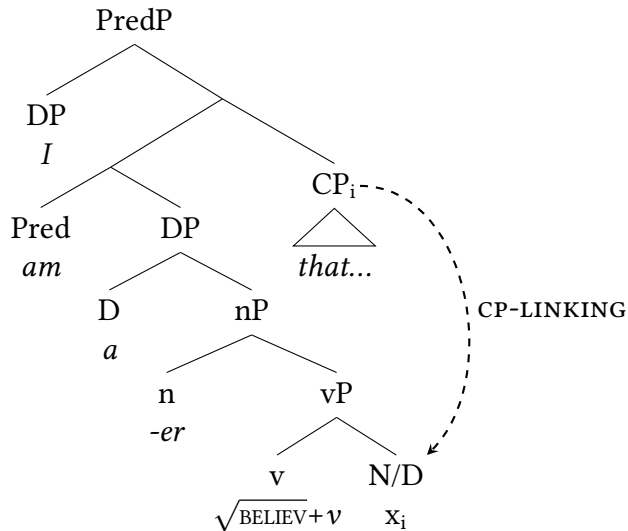
They are worse in argument positions:

- (4) a. ??I met a big hoper that ...
b. ??She encountered a firm believer that ...

Analysis:

- CoPTERs do not take CPs as arguments.
- The CP is an **adjunct to the predication** (Bowers's 1993 PredP).
- The CP is linked to a (category-N/D) variable in argument position inside the CoPTER.

(5) *I am a believer that ...*



Roadmap:

§2 Background #1: *er*-nominalisations are Argument Structure Nominals

§3 Background #2: nouns don't take CP arguments

§4 The CP is not a *syntactic* argument of the CoPTEr

§5 The CP is *interpreted* as an argument of the CoPTEr

§6 Resolving the tension in predicative position.

§7 Conclusion

N.B. Terminology:

- ‘**Complement**’, here, is neutral between argument and adjunct.

2 Background #1:

***Er*-nominalisations are Argument Structure Nominals**

Most nominalisations can have two broad kinds of interpretation (Grimshaw 1990):⁴

- Argument Structure Nominals (ASNs)
Take arguments
Contain a modifiable representation of an event
- Non-Argument Structure Nominals (non-ASNs)
Cannot take arguments
Lack a modifiable representation of an event

(6) Syntactic argument → ASN

- a. The transmission of the sensitive documents happened yesterday.
- b. The (deliberate) transmission of the sensitive documents (for two minutes) happened yesterday.

(7) No syntactic argument → non-ASN

- a. The transmission happened yesterday.
- b. the (*deliberate) transmission (*for two minutes) happened yesterday.

4. In Grimshaw's original terminology, Argument Structure Nominals were *Complex Event Nominals*. Non-ASNs divided into *Referring Nominals* and *Simple Event Nominals*, both of which lacked a modifiable eventuality variable.

2.1 What about *er*-nominalisations?

A claim (Roy & Soare 2013, 2014, building on Alexiadou & Schäfer 2008, 2010):

All derived, animate *er*-nominalisations are Argument Structure Nominals.⁵

Evidence: adjectives have internal-event-related reading, regardless of presence/absence of syntactic argument:

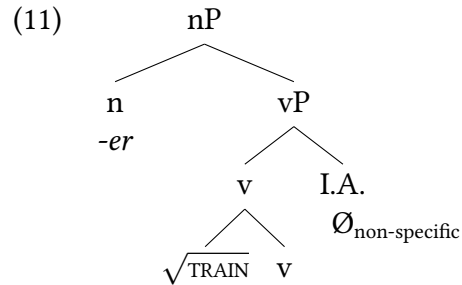
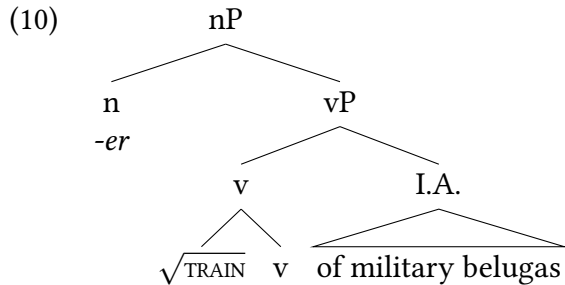
- (8) a. We were met by an **occasional** beluga-trainer. (✓ internal: the training is occasional)
 (✓ adverbial: the meeting is occasional)
- b. We were met by an **occasional** trainer of military belugas. (✓ internal: the training is occasional)
 (✓ adverbial: the meeting is occasional)
- (9) a. We were met by a **big** car-dealer. (✓ internal: the dealing is big(-time))
 (✓ intersective: the dealer is big)
- b. We were met by a **big** dealer of classic cars. (✓ internal: the dealing is big(-time))
 (✓ intersective: the dealer is big)

5. I ignore non-derived and inanimate *er*-nominalisations here. This claim also contradicts an older claim, that *er*-nominalisations can have ASN and non-ASN readings (Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1992). See Appendix A.

Conclusion:

- Derived, animate *er*-nominalisations all contain a modifiable event variable.
 - This is true regardless of presence/absence of syntactic object.
- All derived, animate *er*-nominalisations are Argument Structure Nominals.

2.2 Syntax of *er*-nominalisations



- Different authors have more or less elaborated structures.⁶
- What's important: there is v(P) structure inside the *er*-nominalisation, which can select an internal argument just like the verb does.

6. See Appendix D.

3 Background #2: Nouns don't take CP arguments

There's a variety of CP-taking nouns (other than CoPTers) out there:

(12) Non-derived nouns

- a. I like your **idea** [that Barry is a vampire].
- b. I don't believe the **rumour** [that Barry is a vampire].

(13) Nominalisations

- a. I don't understand the **belief** [that Barry is a vampire].
- b. I heard her **suspicion** [that Barry is a vampire].

Moulton's (2009, 2015) observation:

- **A noun with a CP complement cannot be an Argument Structure Nominal.**

Evidence: CP-taking nouns uniformly reject Aktionsart modifiers (Moulton 2009, 2015):

- (14) John's **idea** (*for years) [that Barry was a vampire]
- (15) a. John believed for years [that Barry was a vampire].
 b. John's **belief** (*for years) [that Barry was a vampire]
- (16) a. I decided [that he was a fraud] in five minutes.
 b. my **decision** [that he was a fraud] (*in five minutes)
- (17) a. They observed [that the butler was likely the killer] for several weeks.
 b. their **observation** [that the butler was likely the killer] (*for several weeks)

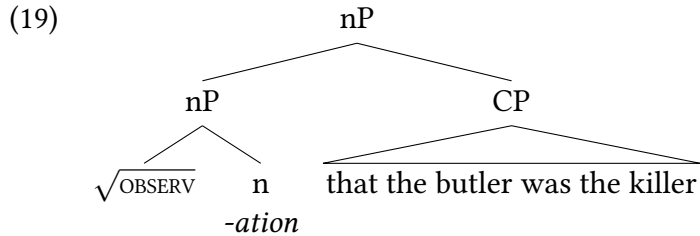
Compare with true ASNs, with non-CP complements (Grimshaw 1990, cf. (6)):

- (18) a. the destruction [of the city] (in three hours)
 b. Their observation [of the butler] (for several weeks) led to a conviction.

3.1 Syntax of CP-taking nouns

Whatever the CP is, it *cannot* be an argument of the noun.

- An established claim: CPs can only be *adjuncts* to nouns, never arguments (Stowell 1981, Pesetsky & Torrego 2004, Moulton 2009, 2015, Elliott 2020. a.o.).



Interim summary

§2 *Er*-nominalisations are uniformly ASNs, so *should* inherit argument structure of their parent verb.

§3 Nouns cannot take CP arguments.

→ Where does this leave CP-taking *er*-nominalisations (CoPTers)?

Up next:

§4 CoPTers are like any other CP-taking noun: **their CP is syntactically not an argument.**

§5 CoPTers are *unlike* other CP-taking nouns: **their CP is *interpreted* like an argument.**

§6 How predicate position resolves this tension.

4 The CP is not a syntactic argument of the CoPTer

Four pieces of evidence for the non-argumenthood of the CP.

§4.1 CoPTers don't license *so*.

§4.2 CoPTers don't license NCA.

§4.3 The CP doesn't reconstruct for Condition C.

§4.4 Complementizer *that* must be overt.

4.1 Arg #1: Like CP-taking nouns, CoPTers don't license *so*

So is a CP pro-form (Moulton 2015):

- (20) a. I believe [that Barry is a vampire].
 b. I believe so.
- (21) a. She admitted [that she committed the crime].
 b. She would not admit so to DYFS because she feared the consequences.⁷

So is incompatible with CP-taking nouns:

- (22) a. my belief [that Barry is a vampire]
 b. *my belief so
- (23) a. her admission [that she had committed the crime]
 b. *her admission so

Moulton's explanation:

- While full CPs combine with nouns as modifiers (not arguments), *so* **needs** to saturate a CP argument slot.
- Nouns do not provide a CP argument slot.

7. Found online by Moulton (2015:308).

Like other CP-taking nouns, CoPTERs reject *so*:

- (24) a. *I am a firm believer *so*.
b. *I am a one-time admitter *so*.
c. *I am a consistent claimer *so*.

Explanation:

→ Like other CP-taking nouns, CoPTERs fail to provide a CP argument slot for *so* to saturate.

4.2 Arg #2: CoPTers don't license Null Complement Anaphora

Null Complement Anaphora:

- (25) a. I told them to take out the trash, but they refused \emptyset_{NCA} .
 b. I didn't tell her that I was going to leave, but she found out \emptyset_{NCA} .

CoPTers do not license Null Complement Anaphora:⁸

- (26) a. Sarcasm doesn't translate well? Yes, I frequently forget \emptyset_{NCA} .
 b. Yes, I'm a frequent **forgetter** * \emptyset_{NCA} .
- (27) a. We'll go see a film tomorrow? Yes, I promise \emptyset_{NCA} .
 b. Yes, I am a chronic **promiser** * \emptyset_{NCA} .
- (28) a. We should rejoin the EU? Yes, I agree \emptyset_{NCA} .
 b. Yes, I've been a consistent **agreer** * \emptyset_{NCA} for half a decade.
- (29) Mary says *she's* the one who burned down the old house?
 a. Yeah, she confessed \emptyset_{NCA} .
 b. Yeah, she's an occasional **confessor** * \emptyset_{NCA} , in her more candid moments.

8. The (b) sentences have an infelicitous reading, where the null object is non-specific—i.e. *not* interpreted anaphorically.

Why don't CoPTers license NCA?

- NCA involves a null pro-form ' \emptyset_{NCA} ' (Hankamer & Sag 1976, Depiante 2000).
- \emptyset_{NCA} is a **CP** pro-form (Haynie 2010).

→ CoPTers fail to provide a CP argument slot for \emptyset_{NCA} to saturate.⁹

9. See Appendix E for some complications surrounding NCA with nouns.

4.3 Arg #3: Like with CP-taking nouns, complements to CoPTERs need not reconstruct for Condition C

When a noun with a CP complement (e.g. *view*) is fronted, the CP doesn't need to reconstruct for Condition C (Kuno 2004, Moulton 2013):¹⁰

(30) *He₁ tried to get [one psychiatrist's **view** that John₁ was schizophrenic] expunged from the trial records.
(Condition C violation)

(31) [Which psychiatrist's **view** that John₁ was schizophrenic]_i did he₁ try to get *t*_i expunged from the trial records?
(wh-mvt obviates Condition C violation)

Similarly, CP complements to CoPTERs need not reconstruct:

(32) *She₁ was constantly having to contradict [a firm **believer** that Mary₁ wasn't telling the truth].
(Condition C violation)

(33) [Which firm **believer** that Mary₁ wasn't telling the truth]_i was she₁ constantly having to contradict *t*_i?
(wh-mvt obviates Condition C violation)

10. Kuno and Moulton's claim contradicts an older claim that CP complements to nouns *do* necessarily reconstruct—see Freidin & Lust (1986), Lebeaux (1988).

Another example:

- (34) a. *He₁ eventually assassinated [a frequent **complainer** that the police chief₁ was corrupt].
(Condition C violation)
- b. [Which frequent **complainer** that the police chief₁ was corrupt]_i did he₁ eventually assassinate *t*_i?
(wh-mvt obviates Condition C violation)

Moulton's (2013) explanation for why CP complements to nouns don't reconstruct:

- The CP is a non-argument.
- Non-arguments can *Late Merge* (Lebeaux 1988, Fox 2002)—i.e. they merge with the head of the movement chain.

The same logic applies to CoPTers:

→ The CP is a non-argument, and so can Late Merge.¹¹

11. Some complications with the reconstruction argument are discussed in Appendix C.

4.4 Arg #4: As with CP-taking nouns, complements to CoPTErs require overt C *that*

Complements to nouns require overt C *that* (Stowell 1981, Pesetsky & Torrego 2004):¹²

- (35) a. I distrust the claim [(**that*) Suzie had left the party].
 b. John’s belief [(**that*) he would win the race was misguided]. (Stowell 1981:398)

CP complements to CoPTErs similarly require *that*:

- (36) a. Sorry, I’m a frequent forgetter [(**that*) sarcasm doesn’t translate well].
 b. David Brooks, a one-time believer [(**that*) red and blue America demonstrated “no fundamental conflict”...]

→ CP complements to CoPTErs behave like CP complements to other nouns, i.e. non-argument CPs.

12. The empirical picture is not so clear-cut, and examples of CP complements to nouns, introduced by a null complementiser, are googlable (Moulton 2015:318):

- (i) a. ...in the belief he was buying a kilo of skunk cannabis. (Moulton 2015:318)
 b. Tis the season to be jolly (careful)With the announcement we ‘should’ be able to open next week on Thursday 3rd December. (<https://www.facebook.com/181899598489294/posts/tis-the-season-to-be-jolly-careful-with-the-announcement-we-should-be-able-to-3753675814644970/>)

Interim summary

Arguments that the CP complement to a CoPTer is *not* a syntactic argument:

§4.1 Can't be replaced with *so* (CP argument pro-form).

§4.2 Can't be replaced with \emptyset_{NCA} (CP argument pro-form).

§4.3 Does not reconstruct for Condition C (because it can late merge).

§4.1 Cannot begin with null C (like other non-argument CPs).

5 The CP is interpreted as an argument of the CoPTer

In this section:

§5.1 The CP cannot be predicated of the CoPTer.

§5.2 The CP can be replaced with a propositional DP.

5.1 Arg #1: The CP cannot be predicated of the CoPTer

CP-taking nouns can generally be predicated of their CP complement (Higgins 1973, Stowell 1981):

- (37) a. the idea [that Barry is a vampire]
 b. The idea **is** [that Barry is a vampire].

- (38) a. the belief [that Barry is a vampire]
 b. The belief **was** [that Barry is a vampire].

CoPTers *cannot* be predicated of their CP complement:

- (39) a. a firm believer [that Barry is a vampire]
 b. *A firm believer **is** [that Barry is a vampire].

- (40) a. a frequent forgetter [that sarcasm doesn't translate well]
 b. *A frequent forgetter **is** [that sarcasm doesn't translate well].

CP complements of CoPTers thus pattern like true arguments of nouns:

- (41) a. the destruction [of the city]
 b. *the destruction **was** [of the city]

5.2 Arg #2: The CP can be replaced with a propositional DP

With typical CP-taking nouns, the CP cannot be replaced with a propositional *of*-DP:

- (42) a. Eleanor—a werewolf? *I don't understand the **belief** of that.
 b. *I don't understand the **claim** of that.

- This makes sense if *of*-DPs introduce arguments of nouns, and the CP is not an argument.

But with CoPTERs, the CP *can* be replaced with a propositional DP:

- (43) a. Eleanor—a werewolf? Yes, I've long been a **believer** of that.
 b. Yes, I was once a serious **claimer** of that, and I'm not embarrassed to admit it.

→ The propositional *of*-DP is replacing a CP that's interpreted as an argument.

Interim summary

- The CP patterns *syntactically* like an adjunct (§4).
- The CP patterns *interpretatively* like an argument (§5).

6 Resolving the tension: predicative position

All attested CoPTers I have been able to find are in **predicative position**:

- (44) a. Complement of *be*
Yet Jackson is a chronic **complainer** [that his privacy is invaded].¹³
- b. Complement of *as*
And I say that as a Moore critic and **doubter** [that he can do it again].¹⁴
- c. Complement of small clause
I was never very religious but I would consider myself a **believer** [that there is something after we die].¹⁵
- d. Appositive
You are hearing, in short, a seeker of unfair privilege – a **demandor** [that the playing field be tilted against consumers' and society's broad interests and toward its own narrow interests].¹⁶

13. <https://journaltimes.com/exclusive-tabloid-editor-talks-slams-celebrities-as-media-manipulators/article-d95887b9-d262-53d1-9b97-c84f81f11061.html>

14. https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:74UhB_5ZEOJ:https://www.royalsreview.com/2017/12/8/16743252/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-royals-and-next-weeks-winter-meetings

15. https://www.reddit.com/r/ttcafterloss/comments/j566ew/anyone_else_lost_their_faith_or_spirituality/

16. <https://cafehayek.com/2016/11/quotation-of-the-day-1883.html>

CoPTers sound a bit strange in argument positions (I was also unable to find any attestations in COCA):

- (45) a. The **complaint** [that the stairs were too steep] did not receive a response.
b.?? The **complainer** [that the stairs were too steep] did not receive a response.

- (46) a. I did not respond to the **complaint** [that the stairs were too steep].
b.?? I did not respond to the **complainer** [that the stairs were too steep].

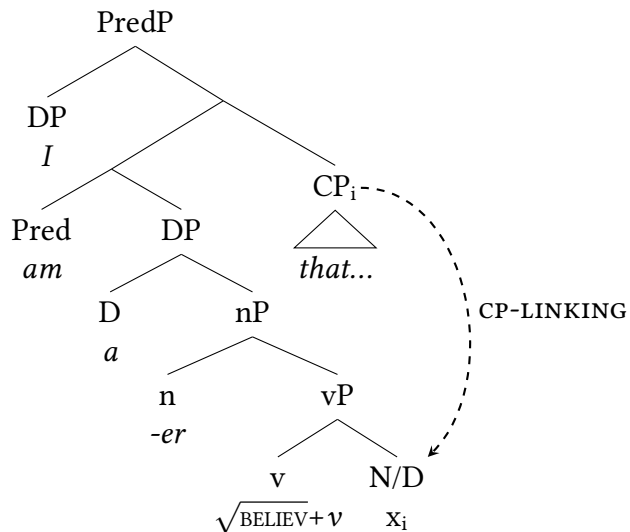
What's the significance of this restriction?

→ The predication itself hosts the CP.

6.1 Analysis

- The CP complement to a CoPTEr is *not* in an argument position.
- The CP is adjoined to the predication (Bowers 1993's PredP).
- The CP is linked to a variable of category N/D, which is in the argument position of the CoPTEr.

(47) *I am a believer that ...*



7 Conclusion

(48) [_{PredP} *be* [_{DP} *a believer* x_i] [_{CP} *that...*] i]

This accounts for why:

- The CP patterns *syntactically* like an adjunct (§4).
 - because the CP *is* an adjunct.
- The CP patterns *interpretatively* like an argument (§5).
 - because the CP is linked to a variable in argument position.
- CoPTers can't (generally) sit in argument positions (§6).
 - because there's no PredP.

7.1 Further directions #1: What else is restricted to predicative position?

(49) Bare titles

- a. She was Dean of the Law School.
- b. *She irritated Dean of the law school

(50) Who free relatives (Patterson & Caponigro 2016, Stockwell & Schütze forthcoming)

- a. That was [who won the prize].
- b. *That irritated [who won the prize].

7.2 Further directions #2: Cross-linguistic CoPTers?

Cross-linguistically, CoPTers seem rare, if impossible:¹⁷

(51) Dutch

??Hij is een fervent klager/gelover dat het anders moet.
 he is a passionate complainer/believer that it different must
 ('He is a passionate complainer/believer that things must be done differently.')

(52) French

??un grand croyant que la Terre est ronde
 a big believer that the Earth is round
 ('a great believer that Earth is round')

(53) Greek

*ime poli pistos oti ola simven-un ja kapjo logho
 I.am very believer that all.N.PL happen-3.PL for some reason
 ('I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason.')

17. Thanks to Coppe van Urk and Jenneke van der Wal for help with the Dutch, to Isabelle Roy for the French, and to Maria Kouneli for the Greek.

Thanks!



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Appendix A: Diagnosing event structure inside *er*-nominalisations

An old analysis: *er*-nominalisations in English *may* (but need not) introduce the implication of an event (Rapaport Hovav & Levin 1992). This correlates with the presence/absence of a syntactic argument (example from Alexiadou & Schäfer 2010):

- (54) a. a saver of lives *can only refer to a person who has saved a life*
 b. a life-saver *has not necessarily saved lives*

BUT, Alexiadou & Schäfer (2008, 2010) have analysed the distinction in a different way, related to the **aspectual operator** that binds the eventuality variable (see Appendix D).

A methodological difficulty in diagnosing event structure is that *er*-nominalisations uniformly reject the Aktionsart modifiers that diagnose the presence/absence of event structure with *-ation*-type nominalisations (Borer 2012, Roy & Soare 2013):

- (55) a. the seller of the dogs (*in five minutes)
 b. the dog-seller (*in five minutes)
- (56) a. the trainer of the dolphins (*for years)
 b. the dolphin-trainer (*for years)

Roy & Soare argue that these modifiers are rejected for independent reasons.

Diagnosing event structure inside CoPTers

The situation with CoPTers is made even more complicated by their restriction to predicate position (§6). In predicate position, the distinction between the internal and external reading of *er*-nominalisations is removed (Roy & Soare 2014). They become truth-conditionally equivalent:

- (57) a. She's a constant denier that anything was ever her fault. (internal: denial is constant)
 (adverbial: being a denier is constant)
- b. I'm a big hoper that the issue will one day be sorted out. (internal: hoping is big-time)
 (adverbial: being a hoper is big-time)

Also note that at first glance it *appears* that CoPTers accept Aktionsart-modifying *for/in*-PPs:

- (58) a. I believed for years [that he was a fraud].
 b. As a believer for years [that he was a fraud]...
- (59) a. I complained for years [that I should have studied something easier].
 b. As a complainer for years [that I should have studied something easier]...

However, this would be quite unexpected given that *er*-nominalisations generally reject these modifiers (cf. (55-56)). I believe that in these cases, the PP is modifying the matrix predication, and the CP complement to the noun has been extraposed across the PP (*contra* Baker & Vinokurova 2009).

Appendix B: Acceptable CoPTers in argument positions

It's possible to improve the acceptability of CoPTers in argument positions, with some determiners, demonstratives and adjectives (see also §4.3):

- (60) a. ?Do you remember that one impassioned **insister** [that only she knew how to fix the bike]?
 b. ?Which particularly forceful **asserter** [that the mark scheme was wrong] were you eventually convinced by?

Very speculatively, this *could* relate to the presence of a predication-like relation between the determiner and its nominal complement. Determiners like *that* and *which* can be connected to DPs with the copula:

- (61) a. That is the right one.
 b. Which is the right one?

See Bennis et al. (1997) for discussion and examples of of predication within noun phrases. However, to assert that there is predication in DPs like those in (60), which don't obviously join two noun phrases, goes somewhat beyond their argument.

Appendix C: Reconstruction with CoPTers

In §4.3, we saw that CP complements to CoPTers ((62)) and other CP-taking nouns ((63)) don't reconstruct for Condition C:

(62) CoPTer

- a. *She₁ was constantly having to contradict [a firm **believer** that Mary₁ wasn't telling the truth].
(Condition C violation)
- b. [Which firm **believer** that Mary₁ wasn't telling the truth]_i was she₁ constantly having to contradict t_i ?
(wh-mvt obviates Condition C violation)

(63) Other CP-taking noun

- a. *He₁ tried to get [one psychiatrist's **view** that John₁ was schizophrenic] expunged from the trial records.
(Condition C violation)
- b. [Which psychiatrist's **view** that John₁ was schizophrenic]_i did he₁ try to get t_i expunged from the trial records?
(wh-mvt obviates Condition C violation)

Moulton (2009) proposes that these contrast with CP complements to **gerunds**. Gerunds take true CP arguments (because they contain a more elaborated VP structure), and thus these CPs should be forced to reconstruct:

(64) Gerund

a. *He₁ did not hear [someone's loudly **claiming** that Bob₁ is the murderer].

(Condition C violation)

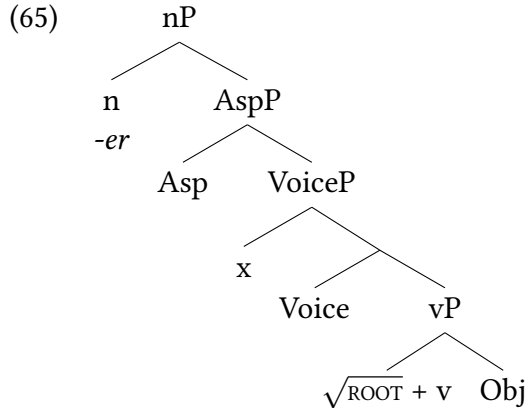
b. * [Whose loudly **claiming** that Bob₁ is the murderer]_i did he₁ not hear *t*_i ?

(wh-mvt **fails to obviate** Condition C violation)

In my judgment there *is* a contrast (63b) and (64b), but YMMV. Compared with his 2009 dissertation, Moulton (2013:278) is more equivocal about whether there is a contrast between (63b) and (64b). This should be investigated more carefully.

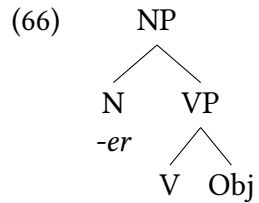
Appendix D: Structure of *er*-nominalisations

Alexiadou & Schäfer (2008, 2010) and Roy & Soare (2013, 2014):



- n^0 binds x (the ‘R argument’), here in Spec-VoiceP.
- Asp^0 introduces an operator that binds the event variable.
 - episodic operator (\rightarrow ‘eventive’ reading)
 - dispositional operator (\rightarrow ‘non-eventive’ reading)
- Obj can be ‘non-specific \emptyset ’ in dispositional contexts elsewhere in English: ‘John can’t cut \emptyset straight’.

Baker & Vinokurova (2009) (similar to Borer 2012):



- Crucially: they maintain the idea that there is verbal structure, and a selectional relation between the (root) and the internal argument it selects.

Appendix E: NCA with CoPTers and other CP-taking nouns

Some CP-taking nouns (non-CoPTers) *do* license NCA (Moulton 2013:258):

- (67) a. They are going to replace the whole product? I had no idea \emptyset_{NCA} .
 b. John's phone was being tapped? Yeah, I had a suspicion \emptyset_{NCA} .

- The licensing conditions on \emptyset_{NCA} are different from those on *so*, which is uniformly banned with all nouns (cf. §4.1).
- It could be that \emptyset_{NCA} can act like other kinds of CPs and can modify, rather than saturate, *belief/idea*-type nouns.
- However, neither *so* nor \emptyset_{NCA} can escape the ban on CP arguments.