

Action Nominalizations in Business English: A Corpus Study

Camelia Bejan

“Ovidius” University of Constanța, Faculty of Letters, Romania
cameliabejan@yahoo.com

Abstract

Action nominalizations are employed in business English to attain a higher degree of condensation, abstraction, and accuracy. This paper reports on a corpus-based study of the actual usage patterns of -tion nominals in business news. In contrast to previous corpus-based studies of nominalizations, we adopt a syntactic approach and focus on the realization of the argument structure of -tion nominals. The primary aim of the paper is to shed light on the formal characteristics of the action nominalization patterns in business English, as well as to identify tendencies in the usage of -tion nominals in business writing.

Key words: action nominalization, argument structure, nominal, corpus, occurrence frequency

J.E.L. classification: A22, A23

1. Introduction

Nominalization is defined as a noun phrase which has the underlying semantic structure of a clause (Leech, 2006). An example of nominalization is *the doctor's examination of the patient* derived from the underlying clause *The doctor examined the patient*. Being derived from a verb, the noun *examination* is labelled as a deverbal nominal. It corresponds to the main verb of the sentence and *the patient* is its object. The subject of the underlying clause can be expressed by a genitive *the doctor's*. Adverbs can be represented in the noun phrase by adjectives: *The doctor's quick examination of the patient* = ‘The doctor quickly examined the patient’. *The doctor* and *the patient* are analyzed as obligatory constituents, or arguments, in the structure of the underlying clause and they are preserved in the structure of the nominalization.

In this paper we attempt to bring quantitative corpus evidence in favor of the inheritance of the verbal argument structure. The examination of the actual usage patterns of deverbal nominals in business English relies on the data selected from two BYU corpora: COCA and iWeb. Our research is descriptive in nature and it attempts to examine the syntactic configurations in which nominalizations occur in business English.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we give a brief account of the theoretical background. Section 3 comprises an overview the relevant research on the syntactic configurations of action nominalizations in business English. Section 4 is a short review of related work concerning corpus-based studies of nominalizations. In section 5 we introduce the methodology used for the analysis of the corpus data. Section 6 will present the quantitative findings, followed by their analysis and prospects for future work. Finally, the paper concludes with relevance remarks.

2. Theoretical background

The inheritance of argument structure has been thoroughly investigated in relation to derived nominals. The general question is whether derived nominals exhibit any systematic relationship with their corresponding verb in their ability to take arguments or whether their behavior is unpredictable.

Word order facts in nominalizations of transitive verbs have been accounted for by Valois (1991) who has shown that the projection of arguments in the Noun Phrase is similar to that in the Verb Phrase. Subjects in nominals are associated with the external arguments of the base verbs, while Objects in nominal configurations correspond to the internal arguments of the base verbs. Thus, a simple sentence with a transitive verb, such as *examine* that assigns the thematic roles of Agent and Patient to its arguments is the source of the derivation of the following patterns of nominalizations:

- (1)
- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| The doctor examined the patient. | |
| Agent | Patient |
| | |
| a. the doctor's examination of the patient | SN(<i>of</i>)O |
| b. the examination of the patient by the doctor | N(<i>of</i>)O(<i>by</i>)S |
| c. the examination of the patient | N(<i>of</i>)O |
| d. the patient's examination | ON |
| e. *the examination of the doctor | *N(<i>of</i>)S |
| f. *the doctor's examination | *SN |

The Subject of the basic sentence, *doctor*, appears in a prenominal genitive position in (1a) or in an adjunct *by*-phrase in (1b). The underlying Object, with the thematic role of Patient, can appear as an Object *of*-phrase (1a, b, c) in the nominalization, or in the prenominal genitive position in (1d). Thus, the prenominal genitive position can be occupied either by the Agent or by the Patient (1 a, d).

The ungrammatical examples in (1e) and (1f) indicate restrictions in the occurrence of the Agent argument. The Agent cannot normally occur in an *of*-phrase as in (1e). The presence of the Object *of*-phrase is obligatory for an Agent to appear in prenominal position (1f).

Closely tied to the topic of the inheritance of the verbal argument structure is the debate over the so-called 'event' nouns (Grimshaw 1990, Alexiadou 2001), which are at the root of the contrast between the event vs. result interpretation of nominals. They claim that there are two types of nominals: event and result nominals. Event nouns obligatorily have an argument structure as part of their lexical representation: they assign specific thematic roles, just like verbs. Result nouns do not take real arguments, which bear specific thematic roles, but rather a kind of semantic participants that are more loosely associated with them.

3. Action nominalizations in business English

3.1. An inventory of *-tion* nominals in business English

In this paper we focus on action nominals that are commonly used in business English. The selection of these nominals is dictionary-based: Friedman (2012), Combley (2011). To distinguish between deverbal and non-deverbal nominals, we will consider their etymology and the word formation processes involved in the production of these nominals.

Thus, *-tion* nominals in business English can be grouped as follows:

- a. deverbal nominals, derived from verbal stems by suffixation in *-tion* in English:
amortization, authorization, capitalization, centralization, commercialization, customization, contribution, differentiation, distribution, diversification, globalization, implementation, industrialization, mechanization, modernization, optimization, recapitalization, reindustrialization, relocation, securitization, simulation, etc.
- b. nominals originally borrowed into English directly from Middle Latin or Late Latin or via Old or Middle French, derived from verbs in the source language (cf. Partridge, 2006):
administration (L), allocation (ML), acquisition (OF), certification (ML), compensation (L), consumption (OF) consolidation (LL), deduction (OF), liquidation (LL), mediation (ML), negotiation (OF), organization (ML), partition (OF), presentation (OF), production

(OF), *promotion* (OF), *rehabilitation* (F), *repatriation* (LL), *resolution* (OF), *restitution* (OF), *subscription* (OF), *substitution* (OF), *transaction* (OF), *valuation* (F), etc.

- c. nouns, native or borrowed, that are not derived from verbs, but are the source of verbs in English by back-formation, i.e., by clipping *-tion*:
manipulation (F) (> *to manipulate*), *privatization* (> *to privatize*), *remuneration* (OF) (> *to remunerate*), *reduction* (OF) (> *to reduce*), *reevaluation* (> *to reevaluate*), *simulation* (OF) (> *to simulate*), *subscription* (OF) (> *to subscribe*), etc.

The following section examines the syntactic behavior of several nominals included in this preliminary inventory of *-tion* nominals used in business English. The analysis will show that whether nominals are derived from verbs or vice versa, there is a close correlation between the participants (e.g., Agent, Patient, Beneficiary, etc.) involved in the action expressed by the verb and those occurring with nominals.

3.2. The argument structure in nominalizations

Generally speaking, all deverbal nominals can either appear without or with arguments inherited from the corresponding verbs. To illustrate this property, consider the deverbal nominals typical of the business vocabulary: *globalization* and *commercialization*, derived from the verbs *to globalize* and *to commercialize*. They are used as argumentless nominals in (2) and as argument-taking nominals in (3):

(2)

Globalization and commercialization could have significant benefits for all countries.

Globalization enables the fast movement of money between countries.

(3)

Globalization of business is resulting in decreased local diversity.

The commercialization of football has turned it from a sport into a business.

Taking as a point of departure word order in action nominalizations of transitive verbs in general English, as shown in (1), we will examine the various possible linear orderings of the nominal, the subject and the object in nominalizations in business English, illustrating each with representative examples:

Table no. 1. Nominalization patterns

Word order	Nominalization patterns	The underlying clause
SNofO	the company's internal valuation of assets the provider's administration of energy	The company valued the assets. The provider administered energy.
NofObyS	the valuation of assets by the company the administration of energy by the provider	The assets were valued by the company. Energy was administered by the provider.
NofO	the valuation of assets the administration of energy	It valued the assets. It administered energy.
NofO IO/PO	the valuation of assets for the owners the distribution of energy to the consumers	It valued the assets for the owners. It distributed energy to the consumers.
NPO	the negotiation on/ over pensions.	They negotiated on/ over pensions.
ON	*the assets' valuation the employee's relocation	It valued the assets. They relocated the employee.

Source: Author's contribution

The observation that we can now make is that there are three syntactic configurations SN(*of*)O, N(*of*)O(*by*)S and N(*of*)O for action nominalizations corresponding to clauses with transitive verbs (*to value sth.*, *to administer sth.*). Additionally, if a Recipient or Beneficiary is mentioned in the argument structure of the verb (*to distribute sth. to sb.*, *to value sth. for sb.*), the structure N(*of*)O IO/PO is available for the related nominalizations. The structure NPO occurs with nominals derived from prepositional verbs (*to negotiate over/ on sth.*).

A closer examination of the argument structure in nominalizations reveals that a [+human] noun denoting an individual almost never occupies the subject position in the SN(*of*)O structure, but rather nouns denoting institutions, organizations, or enterprises viewed as groups of individuals, as in (4a), or a country name, as in (4b). These nouns have a collective meaning and indicate the Agent of the action:

- (4)
- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| a. Investec's administration of a hugely complex offshore trust | SN(<i>of</i>)O |
| | (COCA: 461: The Guardian 14-04-06 GB) |
| Allied's valuation of Business Loan Express | SN(<i>of</i>)O |
| | (COCA: 362: NEWS: 2005: WashPost) |
| successful example of the Bush administration's promotion of private contractors | |
| | (COCA: 43: NEWS: 2008: NYTimes) |
| the architect behind the Wynne government's privatization of Hydro One | |
| | (iWeb: 360: nupge.ca) |
| the state's 2009 privatization of medical transportation services | |
| | (iWeb: 385: www.dallasnews.com) |
| b. Japan's administration of these islands | SN(<i>of</i>)O |
| | (COCA: 464: CTV News 14-04-23) |

The nominalization with the N(*of*)O(*by*)S structure has a passive reading with the Agent of the action occurring in a passive *by*-phrase. Such nominal configurations are uncommon, most likely because agentless passives are typically employed in scientific or professional discourse:

- (5)
- | | |
|---|---|
| procurement of military supplies by a government | N(<i>of</i>)O(<i>by</i>)S |
| the allocation of resources by government to compensate for these failures | |
| | (iWeb: 432: economicsonline.co.uk) |
| continuous administration of the TTD by the government for more than 80 years | |
| | (COCA: 836: The New Indian Express, 18-10-03) |

Since reporting an action or an event does not necessarily require the human agent to be mentioned in professional language, the N(*of*)O structure is the most frequently occurring one:

- (6)
- procurement of medicine/ goods/ services
 - consolidation of state control/ the industry/ commerce/ power
 - privatization of state industries/ businesses/ enterprises
 - allocation of resources/ payments/ funds

The N(*of*)O IO/PO structure can be encountered with nominals derived from ditransitive verbs, that involve the presence of a Recipient or Beneficiary of the action (*to assign sth. to sb.*, *to distribute sth. to sb.*, *to remit sth. to sb.*, *to administer sth. for sb.*, *to procure sth. for sb.*, *to value sth. for sb.*, etc.):

- (7)
- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| through the allocation of resources to specific activities | NO IO |
| | (iWeb: 438: referenceforbusiness.co) |
| to increase their clients' allocations to U.S. stocks this year | SN IO |
| | (iWeb: 708: www.businessinsider.com) |

Table 1 points to a gap in the nominal area: there are no nominalizations of the type in (1d) with the structure ON in business English, i.e., the Object phrase cannot appear in genitive position due to the fact that the Object is realized by a [+abstract] or [+concrete] NP. However, when the Object is [+human] the prenominal genitive position is available, as below:

- (8)
- | | |
|---|---|
| They relocate the employees. | the employees’ relocation |
| They repatriate/ protect the employees. | the expatriate’s repatriation/ protection |
| S V DO | [+human] O N |

Besides the ON structure of nominalizations, the compounds made up of Noun + Noun are also available in the language, as illustrated in (9), but the semantic difference is that between a specific and a non-specific, general meaning, as shown in (10):

- (9)
- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| the employees’ relocation | employee relocation |
| the expatriate’s repatriation/ protection | expat repatriation |
| O N | noun nominal |

- (10)
- This requirement gives rise to a termination of an individual employee’s employment on the basis of redundancy...
- Employee relocation is defined as the process of moving a new or existing employee...

The compound structure, widely used in journalistic writing, allows for multiple premodification that leads to conciseness and compression of style in newspaper headlines:

- (11)
- Mobility Feature: Secret to Profitable, Human-Centered Employee Relocation*
(<https://impactgrouphr.com/businesspost/an-expats-journey-home-nickys-repatriation-story/>)

The NPO structure occurs with nominals derived from verbs with obligatory preposition, such as: *negotiate on sth.*, *to compensate for sth.*, *to contribute to sth.*, *to mediate between*, etc.:

- (12)
- Industrialized countries forced international negotiations on global warming NPO
(COCA: 30; ACAD: 94; Environment)

In this section, we have shown that, as expected, business English nominals occur in the same syntactic configurations as action nominals in general English.

4. Previous corpus studies on nominalizations

Though most previous research of nominalization is theoretical, there are few corpus-based studies that can connect theory to practice. These studies share a word-based approach and a reliance on suffixes for identification of nominals in corpora. All focus on how nominals vary in different registers.

Biber (1986) investigated nominalizations in *-tion*, *-ment*, *-ness*, and *-ity* and showed that nominalizations occur more often in written texts than in spoken texts. Biber et al. (1998) have shown that academic prose has a frequency of nominalizations almost four times larger than fiction and speech. Biber et al. (1999) investigated nominalizations in four registers (i.e. conversation, fiction, newspaper, and academic prose) and argued that the frequency of nominalization increases from conversation to fiction, newspaper language, and academic prose.

In contrast to previous corpus-based studies of nominalizations, Liu et al (2014) use a syntactic approach and an innovative methodology, applied to two media corpora, to show that there are significant differences in the use of nominalizations across two English varieties: China English and British English. With regard to suffixed nominalizations, they argue that Chinese Media

English uses significantly more nominalizations than British Media English and that the preference for the nominal style has been increasingly evident with serious topics such as business.

Compared to previous corpus research, our study is not about variation in nominalization usage across registers, genres or varieties, but it examines the structure of nominalizations used in professional language, particularly in business news reports and business-related web content. This research may be viewed as a follow-up to the corpus-based study of agent nominalizations (Bejan, 2020), which focused on the analysis of *-er* nominals in business students’ written assignments.

5. Research methodology

For the analysis of the argument structure of nominals used in business English, we rely on the data collected from two corpora: COCA corpus and the iWeb corpus that belong to a collection of 17 corpora, called English corpora, formerly known as BYU-Corpora (Brigham Youth University).

The COCA corpus (The Corpus of Contemporary American English) comprises more than one billion words from eight genres: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV /movies subtitles, for the period 1990-2019 and, as of 2021, words from blogs, and other web pages/ sites.

The iWeb corpus, released in 2018, includes 14 billion words, 22 million web pages, 95,000 websites and it provides wide information on the top 60,000 words in the corpus, including frequency information, definitions, synonyms, WordNet entries, related topics, concordances, clusters, websites that have the word as a “keyword”, and KWIC/concordance lines. Both iWeb and COCA are designed specifically for language learners, teachers, and researchers.

6. Findings

A simple search of action nominals in business reports or business-related texts in the two corpora has shown that, as expected, nominals can appear in various syntactic contexts, either as heads or as complements of NPs, as in (13a, b), or as heads of simple or multiple compounds, as shown in (14a) and (14b) respectively, with or without adjectival modification, as in (15) and (14):

(13)

- a. allocation of resources (iWeb: 212: referenceforbusiness.com)
- privatization of public housing (iWeb: 441: globalpropertyguide.com)

- b. concerned with the allocation of resources (iWeb: 213: ineteconomics.org)
- the scope of privatization (iWeb: 812: referenceforbusiness.com)

(14)

- a. budget allocation for defense equipment (iWeb: 81: www. marketwatch.com)
- b. air traffic control privatization (iWeb: 990: businessstravelnews.org)

(15)

- a. global tactical asset allocation
- b. basic education funding allocation

Moreover, nominals frequently occur without an argument structure and fulfill various syntactic functions at clause level: subject (15a), direct object (15b) or prepositional object (15c):

(15)

- a. Privatization promotes instability in the delivery of these services.
(COCA: 63: NEWS 2001. Denver)
- b. The World Bank have required privatization of unprofitable government-owned businesses.
(iWeb: 568: referenceforbusiness.com)
- c. Bank water officials believe in privatization.
(iWeb: 889: corpwatch.org)

However, since the goal of this paper is to examine the structure of nominalizations in professional business English, we will examine only instances when the nominal has an argument structure, i.e., when the nominalization includes an *of*-Object and, possibly a Subject, inherited from the verbal source. With this goal in mind, we selected several nominals and looked for their occurrences in business reports in the COCA corpus, as well as in business-related websites, available in the iWeb corpus.

The criterion for the manual selection of the relevant examples has been the availability of an *of*-Object expressed by a lexical item belonging to the business vocabulary. This search has been greatly aided by the existence of word pages, made available by the two corpora, i.e., pages dedicated to a word that display, among other contextual and collocational features, lists of word clusters, made up of 3 or 4 words, as exemplified below:

- (16)
3 words strings: *allocation of funds/ estates/ millions/ credit/ benefits/ property, etc.*
 consolidation of companies/ ownership/ services/ programs, etc.
 production of goods/ food/ oil/ energy/ electricity, etc.
- (17)
4 words strings: *allocation of their assets/ the credit/ those shares/ private capital, etc.*
 consolidation of the industry/the banking/ the market/ the corporation, etc.
 production of natural gas/ crude oil/ consumer goods/ farmed salmon, etc.

All N(*of*)O occurrences have been manually counted by using a tight cluster search of three or four words strings in both corpora. An illustration is given below, in table format, for the nominal *allocation*, for which we have chosen the first six clusters with the *of*-Object realized by lexical items commonly found in the business vocabulary:

Table no. 2. The number of occurrences of the nominal ‘allocation’ in the N(*of*)O structure

COCA corpus		iWeb corpus	
Number of occurrences in the N(<i>of</i>)O structure		Number of occurrences in the N(<i>of</i>)O structure	
295	allocation of resources	3067	allocation of resources
49	allocation of funds	394	allocation of funds
36	allocation of scarce resources	319	allocation of time
34	allocation of capital	276	allocation of funding
34	allocation of time	229	allocation of scarce resources
20	allocation of power	206	allocation of costs

Source: Author’s contribution based on data selected from the COCA and the iWeb corpora

As it can be noticed, two N(*of*)O structures rank highest in both corpora: *allocation of resources* and *allocation of funds*. Thus, though the number of occurrences for each cluster varies, depending on the size of the corpora (with the iWeb being significantly larger than COCA), there is a clear prevalence of certain patterns. Besides *resources* and *funds*, the nominal *allocation* frequently takes other nouns in Object position, such as: *time, capital, costs, power, etc.*

The next step in the analysis of each nominal has been to put together all available realizations of the *of*-Object by a lexical item belonging to the vocabulary of business. We have examined all 1000 instances of nominals in context that both corpora have made accessible for each nominal. The collected data is displayed in the following two tables, which indicate the number of occurrences of the selected nominals, as argument-taking nominals in the N(*of*)O and SN(*of*)O configurations in the two corpora:

Table no. 3. The number of occurrences of -tion nominals in business news reports

Action nominal in N(of)O structure	Occurrences of N(of)O structure	Action nominal in SN(of)O structure	Occurrences of SN(of)O structure
allocation of	543	x's allocation of	2
consolidation of	172	x's consolidation of	0
implementation of	1144	x's implementation of	0
liquidation of	55	x's liquidation of	0
privatization of	274	x's privatization of	0
production of	748	x's production of	0
promotion of	44	x's promotion of	0
remuneration of	9	x's remuneration of	0
valuation of	78	x's valuation of	2

Source: Author's contribution based on data selected from the COCA corpus

Table no. 4. The number of occurrences of -tion nominals in business-related web content

Action nominal in N(of)O structure	Occurrences of N(of)O structure	Action nominal in SN(of)O structure	Occurrences of SN(of)O structure
allocation of	6583	x's allocation of	1
consolidation of	491	x's consolidation of	0
implementation of	14087	x's implementation of	0
liquidation of	793	x's liquidation of	0
privatization of	907	x's privatization of	3
production of	9667	x's production of	0
promotion of	489	x's promotion of	0
remuneration of	357	x's remuneration of	0
valuation of	3458	x's valuation of	2

Source: Author's contribution based on data selected from the iWeb corpus

The data in the two tables allow for a tentative ranking within the group of 9 action nominals selected. Thus, the most frequently occurring nominals, *implementation*, *production*, *allocation*, occupy the top three positions, both in the COCA corpus and in the iWeb corpus, while the lowest frequency is encountered with the nominals *liquidation*, *promotion*, *remuneration* in the data from the COCA corpus, and *consolidation*, *promotion*, *remuneration* in the data from iWeb.

Overall, the N(of)O structures are better represented in the iWeb corpus, where their number of occurrences is much higher. Obviously, such differences in the results are due to the difference in size and in the amount of business-related content made available in the two corpora. On the other hand, the SN(of)O structures are non-existent with some nominals or only occasionally encountered with others (*allocation*, *valuation*, *privatization*).

These findings show that writers of business newspaper reports or of business-related web content usually choose action nominalization with the structure N(of)O to achieve conciseness and abstraction in style and avoid the SN(of)O structure to maintain a professional objective tone.

Apart from argument-taking occurrences, -tion nominals can also be employed as argumentless nominals in a variety of syntactic contexts, such as the example below, in which four deverbal nominals are in coordination:

(18)

Companies involved in prospective mergers, consolidations, liquidations, reorganizations and other situations that leave their prices ... (COCA: 76 NEWS: 1996: WashPost)

This example also points to two other issues of interest for the analysis of deverbal nominals, namely that they can be modified by certain types of adjectives (*prospective*) and that nominals in the plural form denote the result rather than the action. Therefore, future research work will also consider adjectival modification in action nominalizations, as well as the distinction between the event and result reading of deverbal nominals used in business English.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the usage patterns of action nominalizations in business English. Using the data selected from two corpora, COCA and iWeb, we have shown that in business news reports and in business-related web content, the prevalent nominalization pattern is the N(*of*)O. Besides this pattern, *-tion* nominals often occur as Noun+Noun compounds or as single, argumentless nominals. On the other hand, professional language does not put emphasis on the human Agent of an action, and as a result, the subject of the corresponding clause is almost non-existent in the structure of the nominalization.

The findings of this research reveal the structural features of nominalizations in business English and are relevant for professionals, journalists, as well as students and teachers, who aim to attain conciseness and accuracy in business writing.

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