

Adjectives in Cantonese Are Not Verbs

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Overview

1. The debate of categoriality
2. Main arguments:
 - Cantonese shows a *distinction between adjectives and verbs*.
 - *Shared distribution should not be taken as evidence for homogeneity in category.*
3. Implication:
 - *Are adjectives universal?*
 - *Methodological Question: How can we tell two elements are the same?*

Categoriality: why it matters

- Goal: Understanding how words are put together to form sentences
- The formulation of combinatory rules is therefore a fundamental issue in linguistics
 - number of rules vs. number of lexical distinction
 - how are the rules learned / acquired?
- Categoriality is important, as long as it helps us understand the behaviors of
 - the language(s) in question
 - “Language” (i.e. all human languages possible, or linguistic ability)

Baker (2003)'s claim on universal adjectives

- Generative grammar and feature-based analysis of morphemes
 - Combinations of words are constrained and governed by the features
 - Predicates have their own specification / requirements for arguments
 - Transitive verbs (e.g. “eat”) require arguments (e.g. “the pizza”, “it” or elided / understood object) to form interpretable sentences
- Adjectives are “unmarked” and lack the features of verbs or nouns

Universality of word class / categories

- If a category is universal, then the way it interacts with grammatical rules might be universal?
 - e.g. Nouns are used for referencing → arguments
 - Verbs denote events and relations between objects → predicates
- Adjectives often denote properties
 - Attributive & predicative Modification?
 - Distinction from adverbs?

(cf. Baker 2003)

Verbs in Cantonese / Sinitic?

- Sinitic languages typically do not have verbal morphology, making it hard to identify verbs
 - Imagine “He eat now”, “We eat yesterday”, “We could have eat that”
- There are aspectual markers, but they are isolated / analytic morphemes
 - Even in written form, characters are always written “together” with no space (unlike English)

(1) keoi5 sik6 { zo2 / gan2 } maan5faan1
3sg eat Perf Prog dinner
'S/he has had / is having dinner.'

Morphemes that form a phrase with Asp are verbs.

(Constituency observable via dislocation or response to questions)

Adjs in Cantonese / Sinitic?

Reference grammars (Mandarin and Cantonese) often explain the potential confusion and focus on the descriptive facts:

- “Adjectival verbs”, i.e., verbs that are equivalent to adjectives in English (Li & Thompson 1981)
- Chapter titled “Verbs (including adjectives)” (Chao 1965)
- Separate chapter, but listed similar distribution as verbs, e.g. combination with *de* (Yip & Rimmington 2016)
- Matthews & Yip (2011): Separate Adj chapter, but noted that “the distinction between adjective and verb in Cantonese is not a categorical one”, and adjectives known in European languages are often called stative verbs in Chinese linguistics.
- Cheung (2007): Predicates (incl. Adj and V)
- Tang (2015): “V and Adj”

Tests for the Verb-Adj distinction

Following the generalization above, there are several arguments for subsuming Adj under V:

1. Aspectual marking
2. Modification with *de*
3. Degree modification

1. Aspect marking with adjectives

Property-denoting words can come with Asp too

(2) a. *li1 go3 jan2 hou2 gou1*

this CL person very tall

“This person is tall.”

b. *keoi5 gou1 zo2 (hou2 do1)*

3sg tall Perf very much

“S/he has grown (much) taller.”

(1) *keoi5 sik6 { zo2 / gan2 } maan5faan1*

3sg eat Perf Prog dinner

‘S/he has had / is having dinner.’

Property terms also appear in the same slot, though they invariably introduce the “become more Adj” interpretation.

Problems with the aspect marking test

1. Interpretation

- Both event- and property-denoting morphemes co-occur with aspect markers, but:
- All the [Adj - Perf] examples mean “become Adj” or “become more Adj”
 - Invisible / implicit verbalizer?
 - [Stative verbs + Perf] can be inchoative or perfective when modified by time

(3) a. *keoi5 fan3 zo2 (hou2 noi6)*
3sg sleep Perf very long.time
“S/he fell asleep” / “S/he has been sleeping for a long time.”

b. *keoi5 co5 dai1 zo2 (hou2 noi6)*
3sg sit down Perf very long.time
“S/he sat down” / “S/he has been sitting down for a long time.”

Problems with the aspect marking test

2. Distribution

- In Cantonese, some bisyllabic verbs must be infixated, when they take Asp-marker:
 - i. *bat1 zo2 jip6* **bat1jip6 zo2* Citation form = *bat1jip6* 'graduate'
grad- Perf -uate
'graduated'
 - ii. *cung1 zo2 loeng4* **cung1 loeng4 zo2* Citation form = *cung1loeng4* 'take a shower'
sho- Perf -wer
'took a shower'
- Bisyllabic adjectives do not appear to allow infixation:
 - i. *sing4suk6 zo2*
mature Perf 'become more mature'
 - ii. *wan2ding6 zo2*
stable Perf 'become more stable'
 - iii. *lok6gun1 zo2*
optimistic Perf 'become more optimistic'

2. Modification with *de* 的 in Mandarin

McCawley (1992): Words dubbed adjectives are verbs, and they do not form their own natural subclass

5 criteria for Adj-V distinction, but largely based on the behaviors in morphology / word order of English

- (i) “Vs can combine directly with an object,
but Adjs normally can't and thus require a P to introduce the object NP.”
- (iii) “Adjs combine directly with Ns as modifiers,
while Vs usually require some alteration, e.g. participial form, as in a sleeping child.”

When applied to Mandarin data,
verbs and adjectives display the
same distribution.

2. Modification with *de* 的 in Mandarin

- The marker *de* is extremely versatile, it can occur between the following elements and nouns:
 - Adj
 - Relative clause
 - Possessor
 - V
- Many adjectives require/prefer *de* in attributive modification
 - This had led scholars to interpret *de* as evidence of Adjs being verbs
 - Recall “Adjs combine directly with Ns as modifiers” and “Vs usually require some alteration” in McCawley (1992)

Mandarin adjectives as a separate class

- (4) a. *yí gè pàng (de) rén* [*de* is optional]
one CL fat DE person
“a fat person”

- b. *yí gè pàng-le * (de) rén* [*de* is NOT optional]
one CL fat-Perf DE person
“a person who has put on weight”

Paul (2010), Arcodia (2014)

Adjectival

Verbal

By the same logic in
McCawley (1992),
we can after all
separate Adj and V.

Predicative (more verb-like) and non-predicative adjectives:

- (5) a. *zhè gè shì yuánlái de yìsi* (Mandarin, from Arcodia 2014, ex. 28)
this CL be original DE meaning
“This is the original meaning.” [✓ attributive use]

- b. **zhè gè yìsi shì yuánlái de*
this CL meaning COP original DE
“This meaning is original.” [✗ predicative use]

3. Degree modification

“Degree and comparative expressions combine more directly with Adjs than with Vs, both morphologically and with regard to word order”

- (6) a. John likes Mary very much.
b. John is very fond of Mary.

- (7) a. aa3ming4 hou2 zung1ji3 sik6je5 [Cantonese]
Ming very enjoy eating “very” + Verb
“Ming enjoys eating very much.”
- b. aa3ming4 hou2 gou1 “very” + Adjective
Ming very tall
“Ming is (very) tall.”

The assumption seems to lead us to claim that “enjoy” in Cantonese is just as adjectival as “tall”.

Modification of “Quite” in English

[British English]

- (8) a. I quite like making jam.
b. You never quite know, do you?
c. I can't quite agree with it.
d. I can quite believe it.

["quite VERB" from BNC]

“Quite” can be used to modify adjectives and verbs in (British) English.

- (9) quite { good / bad / tall / short }

Being in the same distribution may not always be definitive proof for the same category.

Interpretation difference of degree

- (10) a. zek₁ gaau₂zai₂ *(hou₂) dak₁ji₃
CL doggy very cute
'The doggy is (very) cute.'

Degree modification is obligatory / grammatical in adjectives.

"Very" can be dummy marker, where the speaker only means positive, but not to a high degree.

- b. zek₁ gaau₂zai₂ (hou₂) zung₁ji₃ zau₂lai₄zau₂heoi₃
CL doggy very enjoy run.around
'The doggy likes running around very much.'

Degree modification is optional.
"Very" is always lexical / literal.

Degree marking behaves differently with Adj and V.

More tests for the Verb-Adj distinction

We have seen a few arguments for subsuming Adj under V:

1. Aspectual marking → *Adjs do not show the infixation pattern*
2. Modification with *de* → *Adjs & Vs do not behave the same when Asp-marked*
3. Degree modification → *Adjs & Vs work equally fine with degree modification*

More differences between Adj and V

4. Subordinated / secondary predicate
5. Meaning of reduplication (probably not available in Mandarin)

4. Subordinating / secondary predicates

The marker *dak1* 得 can introduce a complement of depiction or resultant state for a main predicate.

- (11) *ngo5 paau2 dak1 { faai3 / *cyun2saai3hei3 }*
 1sg run Res { fast / out.of.breath }
 ✓ 'I run quickly.' [V + dak1 + Adj]
 ✗ 'I run and get out of breath.' *[V + dak1 + V]

4. Subordinating / secondary predicates

In the same configuration (i.e., with a main predicate),
another marker *dou3* 到 appears to be in a complementary distribution with *dak1* 得

- (12) *ngo5 paa2 dou3 { *faai3 / cyun2saai3hei3 }*
 1sg run Res { fast / out.of.breath }
 ✘ 'I run quickly.' *[V + dou3 + Adj]
 ✓ 'I run and get out of breath.' [V + dou3 + V]

5. Reduplications in Cantonese

Cantonese allows X-one-X reduplication for both Adj and V, but they produce different meanings

- (13) a. *mong6 jat1 mong6*
look one look
“to take a look” [V in X-one-X] → brief occurrence of events
- b. *leng6 jat1 leng6*
pretty one pretty
“very pretty” [Adj in X-one-X] → intensification

5. Reduplications in Cantonese

- Cantonese allows X-one-X reduplication for both Adj and V, but they produce different meanings
 - V in X-one-X → brief occurrence of events
 - Adj in X-one-X → intensification

Stative verb?

- (14) *sik1 jat1 sik1
know one know
✗ “to know (something) very well”
✗ “to know (something) briefly”

- *The unacceptability can be naturally explained by the Adj-V distinction*

Possible Explanation

- “Know” does not provide an intensification interpretation, indicating that it is not an adjective. (wrong prediction if one assumes stative verbs = adjectives)
- The unacceptability of the brief occurrence interpretation is possibly caused the infelicitous semantics.

Implications

1. Are adjectives universal?
 - Chinese is often cited as one of the languages that do not have a distinction between Adj and V
2. Shared distribution should not be taken as evidence for homogeneity in category
3. Adj-V distinction arises from similarities between predicates?

1. Are adjectives universal?

- Benefit & descriptive adequacy
 - Different behaviors → different elements
 - Adjectives can sometimes behave like verbs, but there are also other cases (i.e., secondary predicate; degree modification; meaning of reduplication)
 - Assuming a separate Adj in Cantonese helps us explain the behaviors of the language
- Cross-linguistic validity
 - Existence of Adj in Cantonese does not necessarily suggest morphemes that carry the same meaning ***must be*** adjectives

2. Confirmation bias?

- “The predicate can occur in a verb position, it is therefore a verb”
 - “quite” in English shows Vs can be directly modified too
 - Interpretational differences should also be considered
- Are we just confirming our assumption (different Adj & V)?
 - Not in the case of Cantonese
 - The different behaviors are not trivial

This categorization is, however, rather biased towards word classes in the familiar European languages and several typological studies have suggested that the traditional set of categories mentioned above needs to be revised so as to be able to account for certain word classes attested in other, often more ‘exotic’ languages (see, for example, Kuipers 1968; Broschart 1997).

-- Rijkhoff (2007:1)

3. Similar issues in less-studied languages

- Adj-V distinction arises from similarities between predicates?
- There have also been reports on similar issues in other languages
 - Thai (Post 2012; Matsui 2007; Prasithrathsint 2000; Sookgasem 1996)
 - Lao (Enfield 2004)
 - Edo (Baker & Stewart 1997)

→ *Not all of these languages are close to Chinese!*

→ *This could be a “common problem”*

Conclusion

- There are distinctions (distribution and meaning) that can only be explained by a categorial distinction between adjectives and verbs
- Shared distribution (accidental or not) should not be taken as evidence for homogeneity in category
- Property-denoting morphemes in Cantonese cannot be subsumed by the verb category

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