

The adjective paradox: From non-prototypical possessives to “prototypical adjectives”

1. While attempting to formulate the nature of the adjective category, roughly two approaches can be recognized:

(i) First, adjectives could be defined as a class specializing on adnominal modification (cf., for instance, Croft 1991). Since adnominal modifiers are normally restrictive, it might be hypothesized that prototypically adjectives should serve as restrictive adnominal modifiers.

(ii) Second, adjectives could be defined as a class which is distinct from both nouns and verbs and includes some lexical core, presumably the core determined in Dixon 1977.

In this paper, I argue that these two approaches do not harmonize with each other, and in fact, defining the adjective class via one of the two approaches can result in non-applicability of the other approach.

2. As a starting point I discuss a pattern which Malcolm Ross (1998a; 1998b) called “possessive-like attributive constructions” (PLACs) and which is widespread in Oceanic languages (but see Malchukov 2000 for similar constructions in some other languages). This pattern is characterized (at least prototypically) by the following properties:

- the word which is understood as an attribute serves as the head of a NP, while the “modified” noun is presented as its possessor;
- the construction normally involves the inalienable possessive construction;
- the “possessor” is represented as non-referential.

An example of a PLAC from Tawala is (a); cp. with the possessive construction (b):

- | | |
|---|--|
| (a) kedewa bane-na
dog big-pr:3sg
a big dog | (b) kedewa giu-na
dog tail-pr:3sg
dog’s tail |
|---|--|

Ross notes that in many Oceanic languages the words that can be used in PLACs are exactly those that constitute the core of the adjective class according to Dixon.

3. Somewhat paradoxically, the Oceanic PLAC can be compared with the well-known epithetic pattern of the form N Poss N, which is found in many Germanic and Romance languages and is usually illustrated by the English construction *that idiot of a doctor*, see Matushansky 2002 for some discussion. For English, the following relevant properties of the construction should be mentioned:

- the “semantic head” (in the sense of Zwicky 1987, but also as shown by some combinations of determiners) is the dependent;
- the possessive construction employed is one that at least prefers lexical and not contextual possessive relations (cf. Barker 1995);
- the “possessor” is represented as non-referential or at least indefinite.

Obviously, these properties almost coincide with the properties of the Oceanic PLAC provided above. Importantly, the syntactic head in the construction under discussion generally expresses the speaker’s evaluation, it demonstrates a high degree of subjectification and is not likely to be restrictive (since it cannot be of much use for establishing the reference). The same seemingly can be stated for “attributes” occurring in Oceanic PLACs. Given this, it is not surprising that more “objective” colour terms are not used in PLACs despite the fact that Dixon includes them in the core of the adjective category.

4. One conclusion that can be made is that - let alone colour terms - Dixon's core of the adjective class is related to the speaker's evaluation and non-restrictiveness, which is paradoxical in the light of the first approach to adjectives. Moreover, the prototypical function of this core should not be syntactic modification, because at least in some constructions its members look more as syntactic heads. In this perspective, an explanation can be proposed for the fact that in many languages cited by Dixon as examples of languages with a small adjective category, the "adjectives" are distinguished by nominal categories. If these categories are considered to represent properties typical for heads of NPs, the adjectives in these languages might simply show some head properties.

The last issue to be touched upon is why "core adjectives" and similar epithets display properties of NP heads. A possible answer concerns the very notion of headedness: essentially, head properties are found both in elements that are compositionally higher (e.g., determiners) and in elements that bear the most relevant information. Where the two criteria do not go together, a split in head properties can be found, and it may be that it is this phenomenon that is observed with some constructions with "core adjectives."

References

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