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The Semantics of Grammar

THE SEMANTICS OF GRAMMAR

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9. What's in a noun?

(or: How do nouns differ in meaning from adjectives?)

1. Introduction

What's the difference in meaning between a noun and an adjective? The traditional answer to this question says that nouns designate 'substances', whereas adjectives designate 'qualities'. Needless to say, this is the kind of answer that most contemporary linguists find exasperating and dismiss as totally unhelpful. Since, however, they find it hard to replace the traditional formula with anything more satisfactory, they often dismiss at the same time the idea that the distinction between nouns and adjectives has any semantic basis whatsoever.

This seems a rather foolish thing to do. As Jespersen (1924:74) pointed out more than half a century ago:

“(...) though the formal distinction between substantive and adjective is not marked with equal clearness in all the languages considered, there is still a tendency to make such a distinction. It is also easy to show that where the two classes are distinguished, the distribution of the words is always essentially the same: words denoting such ideas as *stone*, *tree*, *knife*, *woman* are everywhere substantives, and words for *big*, *old*, *bright*, *grey* are everywhere adjectives. This agreement makes it highly probable that the distinction cannot be purely accidental: it must have some intrinsic reason, some logical or psychological ('notional') foundation (...)”

Jespersen himself found the distinction between 'substance' and 'quality' of little value, but being convinced that the distinction between the two classes must have a semantic basis, he proposed a different answer (1924:75):

“(...) I find the solution of our problem in the view that on the whole substantives are more special than adjectives, they are applicable to fewer

objects than adjectives, in the parlance of logicians, the extension of a substantive is less, and its intension is greater than that of an adjective. The adjective indicates and singles out one quality, one distinguishing mark, but each substantive suggests, to whoever understands it, many distinguishing features by which he recognizes the person or thing in question. What these features are, is not as a rule indicated in the name itself; even in the case of a descriptive name one or two salient features only are selected, and the others are understood: a botanist easily recognizes a *bluebell* or a *blackberry* bush even at the season when the one has no blue flowers and the others no black berries."

But the solution offered by Jespersen is not without difficulties either. After all, similar meanings may be encoded in one language in a noun, but in another language, in an adjective. It is more than easy to come up with examples such as these:

English:	Russian:
male (ADJ)	<i>samec</i> (N)
female (ADJ)	<i>samka</i> (N)

What is more, within one language one can often find synonyms one of which is a noun and the other an adjective. For example:

round / circle
stupid / fool
holy / saint
It is round./*It is a round.
It is a circle./*It is circle.
He is stupid./*He is a stupid.
He is a fool./*He is fool.
He is holy./*He is a holy.
He is a saint./*He is saint.

And in addition to synonyms, it is of course often the case that two words of strictly comparable meanings (perhaps two antonyms, or two co-hyponyms) would differ in their part-of-speech status, one being an adjective, and the other a noun. For example:

grown-up / child
sick / cripple
blind, deaf / hunchback
She is grown up./*She is child.

She is sick./*She is cripple.

She is a cripple./*She is a sick.

It might seem that facts of this kind provide sufficient evidence to show that nouns don't have to differ in meaning from adjectives.

Lyons (1977) offers an answer along the following lines: Yes, indeed, the boundary between the two classes is arbitrary. One cannot distinguish a noun from an adjective on purely semantic grounds. Nonetheless once the two classes have been separated in a given language on formal grounds, one might say that each class has a semantic core. Classes of adjectives, and classes of nouns, can be identified cross-linguistically on the basis of the common semantic core.

In Lyons' view the common core of the class of adjectives can be distinguished from the common core of the class of nouns more or less in the way outlined by Jespersen:

"We will assume that, within the framework of naive realism, it is possible to draw a distinction, at the extremes at least, between the relatively simple perceptual properties which are distributed among individuals and the more complex conjunctions and disjunctions of properties in terms of which individuals are categorized as members of particular classes." (Lyons 1977, 2:447).

In principle, Lyons' approach seems to me very reasonable (see Wierzbicka 1979). Nonetheless, I think it leaves some important questions unanswered.

From Lyons' discussion it would seem to follow that the difference in part-of-speech status between *man* and *red*, or between *stone* and *red*, reflects a semantic difference; but the difference in part-of-speech status between *cripple* and *sick* or between *round* and *circle* is semantically arbitrary. I do not think that this is right. It would be hard to disagree that *man* and *stone* are more 'focal' nouns than *beauty*, and one might add, more 'focal' than *cripple* or *circle*. But I would be very reluctant to conclude from this that there is no semantic rationale for giving some 'quality concepts' a nominal, rather than an adjectival, designation. On the contrary — it seems to me that if some 'quality concepts' acquire a nominal designation, instead of an adjectival one, there must be a good SEMANTIC reason for it. And if one 'quality concept' acquires two designations, one nominal and one adjectival, it is not because the part-of-speech status doesn't matter, semantically, but because the concept in question splits into two, related, but not identical concepts, one of which is semantically more suited to being desig-

nated by a noun than by an adjective.

This is, then, the main thesis of this chapter: despite the appearances to the contrary, nouns do differ in meaning from adjectives, not just core nouns from core adjectives, but, probably, all nouns from all adjectives, and the two classes differ in a systematic, largely predictable manner. In suggesting that nouns differ from adjectives on semantic grounds I don't mean that nouns designate, primarily, concrete things that can be seen and touched. After all, core adjectives such as *black*, *white*, *big*, *small*, *long* or *new*, too, designate things that can be seen and touched. The real semantic difference between nouns and adjectives lies not in the range, or kind, of referents, but in the kind of semantic structure.

To simplify the discussion, I shall limit it to concrete nouns and adjectives, i.e. to nouns and adjectives which can be applied to people, animals and material things.

2. Description versus categorization

Let's consider a pair such as *sick* and *cripple*. One important difference between the two meanings is that *sick* refers to a temporary state, whereas *cripple* indicates a permanent condition.

It is true that *sick* differs in a similar way from *blind* and *deaf*, which are nonetheless adjectives, too:

He is chronically ill.

* He is chronically blind/deaf.

One can be temporarily deaf or blind, but there is no expectation of temporariness built into these words, as there is in the case of *sick*. One can cancel this expectation adding a modifier such as *chronically* to *sick*, but there is no need to do so with *blind* or *deaf*. On the other hand one would be more likely to say:

She was temporarily deaf.

than

? She was temporarily sick.

But if so, then why are *blind* and *deaf* adjectives, whereas *cripple* is a noun? I think the reason why a meaning like *cripple* is more likely to be encoded in a noun than meanings such as 'blind' or 'deaf' are, is that the condition in question (being a cripple) is not only (seen as) permanent, but

also that it is highly visible, noticeable. One can't tell looking at a person whether he or she is deaf or not, and often one can't even tell whether or not he or she is blind. But a cripple is more easily identified as such.

For the same reason, it is not surprising that *hunchback* is a noun, not an adjective. Of course there are many kinds of human characteristics which are highly visible and which are nonetheless designated in English by adjectives, not by nouns, e.g. *cross-eyed* or *freckled*. But these conditions are relatively minor and relatively trivial. Nor is it surprising that many other languages parallel English on this point, to a greater or lesser extent. For example, in Russian the word for 'cripple' (*kaleka*) is also a noun, there is a noun for 'hunchback' (*gorbun*), the words for 'blind' and 'deaf' are adjectives (*slepoj*, *gluxoj*), and there are no nouns designating a cross-eyed or a freckled person.

In Japanese, the words for 'blind' (*mekura*), 'deaf' (*tsunbo*) and 'mute' (*oshi*) are adjectives, but the words for 'cripple' (*izari*) and 'hunchback' (*semushi*) are basically nouns. Thus, one can say in Japanese:

Asoko ni mekura (tsunbo, oshi) no hito ga iru.

'There are blind (deaf, mute) people over there.'

but hardly:

? *Asoko ni izari (semushi) no hito ga iru.*

'There are cripple (hunchback) people over there.'

(See, however, section 5 below.) It is true that the words for 'blind', 'deaf' and 'mute' can be substantivized:

Asoko ni mekura (tsunbo, oshi) ga iru.

'There are blind (deaf, mute) over there.'

but the adjectival construction (*mekura no hito*, etc.) is also available. By contrast, the words for 'cripple' and 'hunchback' are normally, or at least preferably, used as nouns, as in English:

Asoko ni izari (semushi) ga iru.

'There are cripples (hunchbacks) over there.'

Similarly, the contrast between *clever* (an adjective) and *genius* (a noun) is repeated in many other languages: for example, in Japanese *riko-na* 'clever' is an adjective, whereas *tensai* 'genius' is a noun; in Russian, *umnyj* 'clever' is an adjective, whereas *genij* 'genius' is a noun; and so on. Evidently, cleverness tends to be thought of as just one property among

many; but 'genius' is so conspicuous that it tends not to be treated on a par with other properties, but rather, to be taken as a basis for a separate category of human beings.

What I am suggesting, then, is that human characteristics tend to be designated by nouns rather than adjectives if they are seen as permanent and/or conspicuous and/or important. The common denominator is, I think, this: a noun indicates a categorization; an adjective, on the other hand, indicates a mere description.

In fact this is why ordinary speakers are so often afraid and resentful of nouns as means of characterization. How often does one hear sentences such as these:

I am NOT an alcoholic! I simply drink!

The pattern can be represented as follows:

I am not an X! I may be X-y, but I am not an X!

I am not an X! I may do X, but I am not an X!

Their linguistic sense tells people that being called an X is not the same thing as being described by means of the cognate adjective or verb, not even one that a linguist might call 'synonymous' with the noun X. (Cf. Korzybski 1933 and Hayakawa 1974.)

A description implies the presence of a number of characteristics, all on the same level of importance. Thus, one might describe a person as tall, thin, blond, freckled, and so on. But if one categorizes a person as a hunchback, a cripple, a leper, a virgin, or a teenager, one is not mentioning one characteristic among many; rather, one is putting that person into a certain category, seen at the moment as 'unique'. One is putting a label on that person, as one might put a label on a jar of preserves. One might say that a noun is comparable to an identifying construction: 'that's the kind of person that this person is'. An adjective, on the other hand, is comparable to a simple predicate compatible with many other such predicates: 'this person is X, Y, Z'.

To take some other examples, consider ways of referring to the colour of a person's hair. The hair may be black, brown, blond, grey or red, and from a physical point of view these colours are on a par. But from a psychological, social and cultural point of view they are not, and the differences in accessibility to nounhood reflect these psycho/socio-cultural differences. Thus, a person (whether a man or a woman) can be called a *redhead*, but not a **blackhead*, a **blondhead* or a **greyhead* (but, a

greybeard). Furthermore, a woman can be called a *blonde*, (*Max married a voluptuous blonde*), but a man can hardly be referred to as a ?*blond* (?*Jane married a tall blond*). Clearly, for a woman, being a blonde can be seen as important enough to serve as a 'label', i.e., as a basis for categorization ('that's the kind of woman Max has married: a voluptuous blonde'). But for a man, being blond is not seen as a feature important enough to serve as a label, as a basis for categorization.

It is true that the adjective *blond* differs from the other adjectives which can be used to describe the colour of hair in being able to be applied to a person, as well as to a person's hair:

Michelle is blonde/*black/*brown/*red.

But first, *grey* can also be applied to a person:

Rosemary is only 35, and she is already grey.

and yet one can't say:

* Rosemary is a grey.

and second, innumerable adjectives which are commonly used to describe people can't be used as a noun:

* Maxine is a fat/a tall/a slender.

I think that, generally speaking, an adjective can be used as a noun if, for cultural reasons, the property described by this adjective is seen as constituting 'a type'. For example, the word *brunette* evokes an image of a woman who has not only dark hair, but also 'the kind of temperament and personality style that women with dark hair are expected to have'. (Presumably, vivacious, passionate, sophisticated, smart etc.).

What this suggests is that a noun designates 'a kind of (person, thing, or whatever)', rather than merely a single property. An adjective applied to a person, or a thing, doesn't imply that this person or this thing is seen by the speaker in terms of a category, defined by this adjective. For example, if I say:

Max is fat.

I don't wish to imply that Max is the kind of person, or the kind of man who is fat. I merely mention fatness as one of many things that can be said about Max — not as something which 'defines' Max for me, not even from the point of view of appearance. On the other hand, if I say:

Suzie is a fattie.

I do put a label on Suzie — I do categorize her, at least from the point of view of appearance, in terms of her fatness; I present her as belonging to a certain type, defined by fatness.

Even a phrase such as “a (bright) six-year-old” means, it seems to me, more than ‘someone who is six years old’. If it didn’t mean more than that, then why wouldn’t one say:

A (bright) fifty-four-year old asked me that question?

In fact, the phrase “a *n*-year-old” conveys the idea that people (usually, children) of a specified age form a recognizable category, with respect to which one can have certain expectations. Six-year-olds, or three-year-olds, can be thought of as forming an imaginable KIND. But “fifty-four-year-olds” can hardly be thought of in this way.

From a logical point of view, any property shared by some members of a set can be used as a basis for classification; for example, we can classify people on the basis of their sex, their age, their religion, the colour of their hair or their eyes, and so on. But natural language differs in this respect from logic: it usually provides a quantity of words designating properties which are not ‘meant’ to be used for categorizing (adjectives). A linguist studying natural language should find out the inherent function of different kinds of words by studying these words, and their use, not by engaging in *a priori* logical considerations.

3. The notion of ‘kind’

I submit that what most nouns (prototypical nouns) do is to identify a certain kind of person, a kind of thing, a kind of animal. These kinds are identified in language in positive terms, not in terms of their mutual differences. For example, the words *man*, *woman* and *child* identify certain kinds of people, each of them with a certain positive image. I think that popular descriptions which suggest that the word *man* means HUMAN +MALE +ADULT or that *child* means -ADULT +HUMAN (cf. e.g. Bierwisch 1970), miss a crucial point about the semantics of human categorization, embodied in natural language. The meaning of a noun cannot be represented as a set of ‘features’, because the basic function of a noun is to single out a certain KIND, a kind which may be partly described in terms of features but which cannot be reduced to a set of features.²

As Putnam (1975) has argued, the word *lemon* cannot be defined as ‘anything that is roundish, yellow, sour, comes from a tree, and so on’, because it is always possible to imagine something that meets all the required characteristics, and which, nonetheless, people will refuse to categorize as a lemon. To be a lemon, a thing must come from a lemon tree. If it does come from a lemon tree we will agree to call it a lemon even if it contradicts some of our expectations. It is conceivable that somebody will grow sweet ‘lemons’, or orange ‘lemons’, and that these ‘lemons’ will be called, if not *lemons*, then at least *sweet lemons* or *orange lemons*.

Returning to human beings, I would suggest that concepts such as *human*, *adult*, *female* or *male* are of an entirely different order from concepts such as *man*, *woman* and *child*. In particular, *male* and *female* are pure ‘distinguishers’, which are used to distinguish members of two abstract sub-classes from one another rather than to identify certain positive, imaginable kinds.

It is true that even these words (*male* and *female*) can be sometimes used as nouns, but their use as nouns is severely limited. They are mostly used as nouns in generic sentences, when a stereotype statement is made. For example:

In any institution, males will have better-paid jobs
than females.

One would hardly use the word *male*, however, for purposes of continuous reference to an individual (human) person (see section 4 below):³

??The male kept shouting and screaming.

?The female begged him to stop, but this had no effect on him.

The word *youth* can be used easily in continued reference, but of course *youth* doesn’t stand for ‘anybody young’, and not even for ‘anybody young and male’ (a young man is not necessarily describable as a *youth*). Rather, it stands for a certain category of people, namely people in a transitional stage between boyhood and manhood.

To recapitulate, nouns embody concepts which cannot be reduced to any combination of features. They stand for categories which can be identified by means of a certain positive image, or a certain positive stereotype, but an image which transcends all enumerable features.

This doesn’t mean, however, that the semantics of individual nouns should be, or could be, described without reference to any ‘features’. Far from it. As I have tried to show in a number of concrete semantic

analyses (see Wierzbicka 1985c) even the names of everyday objects such as *jar*, *bottle*, *bicycle* or *skirt* require a large number of features (referring to shape, size, proportions, function, and so on). But the point is that although these different features have to be enumerated in an empirically adequate definition, in the semantic formula they have to be subordinated to a general taxonomic statement referring to KIND. (For an illustration, see the definitions of *tiger*, *radish* and *jumper* at the end of this chapter; for discussion and justification see Wierzbicka 1985c.)

I suggest, then, that there are at least two crucial and interrelated semantic differences between nouns and adjectives. First, nouns tend to designate 'kinds of things' endowed with certain properties; whereas adjectives designate properties as such. Second, as Jespersen pointed out, a noun tends to suggest a rather large number of properties (even though its meaning cannot be reduced to those properties); an adjective, on the other hand, designates (what is seen as) a single property. Of the two differences between nouns and adjectives (a cluster of properties vs. a single property; kind vs. property) the first is perhaps less important than the second, because while it seems clear that any adjective used as a noun acquires immediately the force of a 'label' ('a kind of'), it is less clear that any such adjective starts immediately to suggest more than a single property. Nonetheless the latter effect is certainly very common, too. For example, the adjective *blond* suggests a single property (blond colour of the hair), but the noun *blonde* suggests, as we have seen, at least two (blond hair + womanhood), and probably more (sexy, glamorous, etc.) The adjective *young* suggests a single property (young age); but the noun *youth* suggests at least two (young age + male sex).

The tendency for the 'intension' of adjectives to increase and for their 'extension' to decrease under substantivization is indubitable, and, apparently, universal. For example, in English, colour adjectives can be applied to all visible entities, but expressions such as *the blacks* or *the Reds* can only apply to people, and, moreover, to well specified categories of people (Negroes, communists). Similarly, in Russian, the adjectives *slepoj* 'blind' or *gluxoj* 'deaf' can be applied to animals as well as to people; but when substantivized, they can only apply to people:

staryj slepoj kot

'(an) old blind cat'

Slepoj ulybnulsja.

'(The) blind (person) smiled.'

**Slepoj pokačal xvostom.*

'(The) blind (one) wagged (his) tail.'

The same seems true of Japanese:⁴

mekura no hito

'(a) blind person'

mekura no inu

'(a) blind dog'

Mekura ga waratta.

'(The) blind (person) smiled.'

**Mekura ga shippo o futta.*

'(The) blind (one) wagged (his) tail.'

One may well wonder if there are any nouns which contain in their meaning nothing but a reference to KIND plus a single property. At first sight, the existence of words such as *fattie*, *fool*, *cripple*, *hunchback* or *teenager* may seem to suggest that the answer should be in the affirmative. On further inspection, however, it becomes clear that words of this kind tend to develop at least one additional feature: 'human' or 'personal'. Furthermore, if we compare de-adjectival nouns such as *ślepiec* 'blind (man)' in Polish with the nearest adjectival noun phrases such as *ślepy człowiek* 'blind man', we will notice significant difference in, so to speak, the syntax of the semantic components. In *ślepiec*, the blindness is semantically superordinate; in *ślepy człowiek* it is semantically subordinate.

As a parallel, of a sort, one might mention here French expressions such as *un bijou d'enfant* (literally, 'a jewel of a child') or *un monstre de femme* (literally, 'a monster of a woman'), where the syntactic reversal between the head and the modifier serves the purpose of giving the property a special semantic prominence. The triads:

un enfant charmant – un enfant bijou – un bijou d'enfant

une femme horrible – une femme monstre – un monstre de femme

reflect an increasing semantic prominence given to the property in question. (Cf. Bally 1920.)

It is understandable, therefore, that changes in social sensibilities, and in the prevailing outlook, have caused many shifts from nouns to adjectives, in many European (and not only European) languages. Thus, *nomina personae* based on human disabilities, such as *leper* in English or *ślepiec* 'blind (man)' in Polish, have tended to decrease in use in modern times,

giving way to adjectives or to descriptive phrases (e.g. *a mongol - a mongoloid (child) - a child with Down's syndrome*), which de-emphasize the importance of the disability as a defining characteristic of the person.

It is also important to note that a semantic derivation of a noun from an adjective whereby nothing seems to be added to the meaning of the adjective (other than the idea of categorization) tends to be accompanied by the emergence of expressive components. For example, both *fattie* and *fatso* add expressive components to 'fat'. *Fool* adds an expressive component to *stupid*. *Liar*, derived from a verb, and apparently referring to a single property (that of lying), adds an expressive component to the meaning of the verb. And so on. (Cf. Bally 1909.)

4. Semantic nouniness and syntactic nouniness

The fact that nouns derived from names of other predicates (adjectives or verbs) tend to develop an expressive component makes them less than fully nounlike in their syntactic possibilities. In particular, it restricts their usability in referring expressions in general, and in definite descriptions in particular. For example, while one can easily say:

She is a liar/fool/fatso.

You liar!/You fool!/You fatso!

it is hard to say, seriously:

The liar/fool/fatso sat down.

One could say, of course:

The fool deleted all my files.

but here the word *fool* would not be used in a referring or categorizing function (the court fool); rather, it would be used as a predicate, and would imply that the person referred to has already been identified (and is now called 'a fool' because of his foolish action).

As I have argued in detail elsewhere (see Wierzbicka 1970), nouns or noun phrases which contain an expressive component are not suitable for use in definite descriptions (because the speaker's feeling can't help the addressee to identify the object referred to). Expressive nouns such as *liar*, *fool* or *fatso* are useful for expressive speech acts, such as, for example, abuse, and also for use in emotion-charged evaluative speech acts such as accusations or enthusiastic praise:

You are a liar! You are a darling!

You fool! You angel!

One might also say:

I am married to a liar!

You are married to a fool!

meaning that the person I am married to is a liar and that the person the addressee is married to is a fool, and therefore using these words as predicates. But it would be hard to use nouns such as *liar* or *fool* in referring, even in indefinite descriptions:

?A liar called here today asking about you.

?A fool proposed to Mary yesterday.

It is possible to say, of course:

Some fool proposed to Mary yesterday.

but again, this sentence would imply that the person referred to must be a fool BECAUSE he proposed to Mary, not that he was categorized as a fool regardless of this particular action.

It is not an accident that nouns which are semantically atypical in designating a single property rather than a cluster of properties are also syntactically atypical, in being unsuitable for use in definite descriptions, and indeed in referring expressions of any kind. The point is that a single property is seen as not very suitable as an exclusive basis for categorization: if a person is rather stupid, if he or she tends to lie, if he or she is fat, all these properties coexist, objectively speaking, with many other properties.

In natural language, the world tends to be categorized into a number of kinds, each kind characterized by, but not reducible to, a cluster of properties. (Cf. Rosch 1978.) If a speaker goes against this tendency and categorizes a person in terms of a single property, using a noun such as *fool*, *fatso*, or *liar*, he does it, so to speak, on purpose: he wants to stress, hyperbolically, the property in question, and his own emotional reaction to it; he wants to exaggerate that property, and to show that in his eyes it looms so large that it determines his way of seeing the referent, to the exclusion of other properties. In other words, to convey an adjectival meaning such as 'fat' or 'stupid' in a noun, is a kind of expressive device, suitable for enacting more or less expressive speech acts, but not very suitable for fulfilling the two prototypical functions of a noun, i.e. referring and categorizing. (Pure referring is the main function of a pronoun; nouns

refer and categorize at the same time.)

Adjectives are much easier to use as nouns (i.e. in referring expressions) in the plural than they are in the singular. They are also easier to use in indefinite noun phrases than they are in definite noun phrases. For example, one can easily talk about the relationships between blacks and whites, but it is harder to talk about a particular person using the word *black* or *white* as a noun.

?A white sat in the black section of the bus.

And one could hardly ever refer to a woman or a child as *the black*. This means that *black* or *white* never becomes a one-hundred-percent noun; it can only be used semi-predicatively. But *black* and *white* are a good deal more ‘nouny’ than words such as *illegal*, which can be used only in the plural, and in the generic sense (cf. Hewson 1972):

The illegals tend to take jobs that nobody else would accept.

*The illegal, caught by the police, started to cry.

Referring noun phrases, which are meant to identify, can fulfil this function only by placing the referent within a certain KIND — not just within a certain class, but within a recognizable, imaginable KIND (e.g. a woman, a man, a child; a tiger; a bird; a flower; a tree). An adjective defines, perhaps, an abstract class but it does not define any recognizable kind. I think the reason why an adjective can’t serve as a basis for identification is that an adjective doesn’t delimit its intended referent, whereas nouns typically do. If we were asked to count everything red in a room we might be in trouble, because we wouldn’t know how to delimit one red thing from another. For example, if there is a red tracksuit there, i.e. a pair of red pants and a red top, should one count the tracksuit as one red thing or as two red things?

A noun can place the intended referent within a certain imaginable kind (e.g. tracksuit; or: pants), and so it can make delimitation, identification and counting possible. An adjective may restrict the domain to which the intended referent belongs, and help to identify this referent within that domain, but it can’t replace that initial placement within an imaginable domain (i.e. a KIND).

5. Core adjectival concepts

Although individual properties can be regarded as ‘adjectival meanings’ rather than ‘nominal meanings’, the accessibility to nounhood depends also on the nature of the property. It seems that, generally speaking, shapes are more likely to be described by nouns than colours and sizes. For example, in English one can say:

I can see a square/circle/triangle.

even though one can’t say:

*I can see a red/blue/big/small/wide/long.

Similarly, Russian has nouns for ‘circle’ (*krug*), ‘square’ (*kvadrat*), and ‘triangle’ (*treugol’nik*), but not for ‘something red’, ‘something small’ or ‘something wide’. And Japanese has nouns such as *maru* ‘circle’, *shikaku* ‘square’ or *sankaku* ‘triangle’, but it doesn’t have nouns for things of a specified colour, or size. For example, one can say in Japanese, as one can say in Russian or in English:

Shikaku (maru) o kaite kudasai.

Narisuj kvadrat (krug).

Draw a square (circle).

but one can’t say:

**Akai (*ookii) o kaite kudasai.*

**Narisuj krasnoe (*bol’soe).*

*Draw a red (*big).

The reason is not that shapes, unlike sizes, are inherent qualities (rather than relative ones), because so are colours: *big* means, roughly, ‘bigger than average (of this kind)’, but *red* doesn’t mean ‘redder than average’, just as *circle* doesn’t mean ‘rounder than average’ (see Wierzbicka 1971 and 1972).

I think the reason why shapes are more ‘nouny’ than either sizes or colours is that shapes DELIMIT certain portions of reality and make them into countable entities, whereas neither sizes nor colours do that.

It is interesting to note, in this connection, that in languages with classifiers, classifiers are often based on shape, but hardly ever on colour. (Cf. for example Friedrich 1970, Denny 1976, Dixon 1982a.) This suggests that it is common for people to think of things of different shapes as different

KINDS of things, whereas differences in colour are normally not thought of in these terms. Thus, in many languages a red piece of fruit and a yellow piece of fruit will be treated as belonging to the same KIND if they are both roundish (for example, an apple and a lemon), but two yellow pieces of fruit will be treated as belonging to different kinds, if one of them is round and the other, oblong (for example, a lemon and a banana).

It is also relevant to note that in languages with small, closed classes of adjectives, size and colour occupy a prominent place among properties which are deemed worthy of being designated by adjectives (see Dixon 1977), whereas adjectives of shape, such as 'round', are not. In fact, Dixon's list of adjectival concepts which tend to recur among the adjectives in languages with minimal adjectival classes is so revealing that it is worth citing here *in extenso*. Dixon (1977:23) writes:

"A survey of 17 languages with small adjective classes, together with the morphologically-determined subsets in Rotuman, Yurok and Acooli, yielded the following result:

'large' occurred in all 20 languages	'good' in 13
'small' in 19	'bad' in 14
'long' in 14	'black' in 13
'short' in 15	'white' in 14
'new' in 15	'red' in 8
'old' in 14	'raw, green, unripe' in 7"

In addition to the contrast between colour and size, conspicuously present in the list, and shape, conspicuously absent from it, three other features of this list seem to me particularly noteworthy.

First, there is a striking contrast between the prominent place of the pair 'old' and 'new' in the list, and the absence of the pair 'old' and 'young'. Dixon (1977:56) suggests that "the AGE, DIMENSION, VALUE and COLOUR type are likely to belong to the adjectival class, however small it is". It would seem, however, that it is not so much 'age' as 'newness' which tends to be treated, universally, as one of the core adjectival concepts. Presumably, a new spear, or a new pot, will tend to be distinguished from an old one, within the same 'cultural kind' of spears or of pots. But for human beings age tends to be treated as a crucial determinant of KIND, rather than as one feature among many. For this reason, even languages with large adjectival classes often possess nouns for an old person, or for an old man and for an old woman, for example:

French:

vieillard 'old man'

Russian:

starik 'old man'

starec 'old man' (connotations of dignity and respect)

staruxa 'old woman' (slightly negative)

staruška 'old woman' (slightly positive)

Japanese:

toshiyori 'old person'

Ewe:

ablèwá 'old woman' (connotations of wisdom)

nyágá (qèqì) 'old woman' (Felix Ameka, p.c.)

Similar nouns appear to exist in languages with small adjectival classes, or with no adjectival classes at all. For example, in Thai, where adjectives can hardly be distinguished from verbs, there is an adjective (verb?) which means 'old' and which can be applied to people as well as to inanimate objects, but there is also a noun meaning simply 'old person': *phú-thâo* (*phú*: means 'person' but *thâo* occurs only in this compound; Tony Diller, p.c.) In Australian Aboriginal languages, where adjectives behave very much like nouns (so that it is sometimes difficult to formulate entirely grammatical criteria to distinguish the two classes, cf. Dixon 1980), the words for human age categories, such as 'young (initiated) man' or 'old person' tend to be, nonetheless, more 'nouny' in their grammatical behaviour than words for 'unripe', 'fresh', 'new' or 'old' applied to plants or artefacts. (Cf. for example Donaldson 1980.)

Second, while words for 'new' (as well as for 'unripe') often appear even on the shortest lists of adjectives, words for 'child' are conspicuously absent from such lists. In fact, even languages with large and open adjectival classes tend to possess nouns, and not to possess adjectives, for 'child', for example:

Russian: *rebenok*

French: *enfant*

Japanese: *kodomo*

From a social and cultural as well as biological point of view, children constitute a special category of human beings, and this category is so important that it normally can't be treated as one arbitrary class among others (as fat

people, or red-haired people, or sick people can be treated). By contrast, 'adults' are normally not treated as a 'kind' of human beings, i.e. as a complex natural category. Rather, they are treated as an artificial, arbitrary class based on a single, negative feature of 'not being a child any longer'. For this reason, in language after language, 'adults' are designated by an adjective, or a substantivized adjective, not by a noun:

English:

adults, 'grown-ups'	children
adult persons	*child persons
grown-up people	*child people
She is grown up.	*She is child.

French:

<i>les adultes</i>	<i>les enfants</i>
<i>les personnes adultes</i>	* <i>les personnes enfants</i>

Japanese:

<i>otona</i>	<i>kodomo</i>
<i>otona no hito</i>	* <i>kodomo no hito</i>

Russian:

<i>vzroslye</i>	<i>deti</i>
<i>vzrozlye ljudi</i>	* <i>deti ljudi</i>

German:

<i>die Erwachsene</i>	<i>Kinder</i>
<i>die erwachsene Leute</i>	* <i>Kind(er) Leute</i>

Thirdly, in language after language we can find nouns for such important and conceptually rich categories of human beings as 'men' and 'women', or 'boys' and 'girls', or 'babies'; whereas adjectives for 'babies' seem to be non-existent, and adjectives for 'boys' and 'girls', and especially for 'men' and 'women', seem rare and euphemistic. For example, in Japanese the use of the phrases *onna no hito* 'female person' and *otoko no hito* 'male person' for 'woman' and 'man' seems to be motivated by a cultural need to emphasize a person's personal dignity and right to respect over and above their sex, and to avoid 'personal remarks' of any kind.

The cultural attitude which codifies 'euphemistic' expressions such as *onna no hito*, *otoko no hito*, *onna no ko* 'female child', and *otoko no ko* 'male child' for women, men, girls and boys, can be compared to the attitude of some Australians whose highly sensitive conscience on the sub-

ject of race makes them use the term *Aboriginal person* in preference to *Aborigine*. Similarly, the modern term *disabled person* seeks to de-emphasize the significance of a person's handicap or disability *vis à vis* their basic status as 'person' (seen in terms of human dignity and human rights). It is interesting to note, in this connection, that while the Japanese word for 'cripple', *izari*, is basically a noun, so that many native speakers of Japanese find the phrase *izari no hito* 'cripple people' awkward, as the phrase *cripple people* is awkward in English, nonetheless some Japanese informants say that personally they prefer to use the word *izari* as an adjective rather than as a noun, because that way it sounds more 'polite'. In other words, of two sentences such as:

- a. *Asoko ni izari ga iru.*

'There are cripples over there.'

- b. *Asoko ni izari no hito ga iru.*

'There are "cripple persons" over there.'

(a) is more acceptable linguistically (see section 2 above), but (b) is more acceptable socially and culturally.

I conjecture that the curious absence of colloquial nouns for 'man' and 'woman' in Japanese is related to the general 'indirect' and 'impersonal' style of social interaction, to the avoidance of the use of personal pronouns, to the avoidance of physical contact between the interlocutors, even during greetings and leave-taking (cf. Barnlund 1975; see also Wierzbicka 1985b), and to numerous other linguistic and non-linguistic devices aimed at respecting each person's 'personal sphere' and preserving interpersonal distance.

6. Where do nouns 'come from'?

The whole issue of the semantic differences between nouns and adjectives (or indeed verbs) is closely linked with the problem raised some years ago by generative semanticists (see Bach 1968 and McCawley 1970) of 'where do noun phrases come from'. It was claimed at that time that a noun phrase such as *an anthropologist* 'came from' something like 'an X who is an anthropologist'. Since it was suggested that all nouns (or at least all 'concrete' nouns) have the same kind of semantic structure, the implication was that, for example, *a woman* 'came from', roughly, 'an X who is a woman', which in turn 'came from', roughly, 'an X who is human, female and adult'.

I think that the speculations in question did contain an important insight, but that paradoxically, what was claimed as true of all nouns was the least valid for the most 'nouny' nouns, i.e. for the very core of the category 'noun'. Even if words such as *fool*, *liar*, *fattie*, *redhead*, or *hunchback* could be derived, in some sense, from predicates, I don't think that words such as *woman*, *man*, *child*, *flower*, or *bird* could possibly be so derived. What the account proposed by Bach and McCawley overlooked was the crucial notion of KIND embodied in the meaning of nouns, and especially in the meaning of prototypical nouns, a notion absent from the meaning of adjectives or verbs. Bach (1968:121) summarizes his argument as follows:

"To summarize, I have argued on the basis of many pieces of evidence that it is reasonable to suppose that all nouns come from relative clauses based on the predicate nominal constituent. Further I have proposed that the referential indices assumed to occur with nouns in current theory be replaced by a system of operators and variables much like those used in logic but clearly different in detail, and that these elements rather than actual pronouns or the like be used to tie together the sentences underlying a single complex utterance. I have tried to show that the distinctions between such parts of speech as nouns, adjectives, and verbs have no direct representation as such in the base, but are the results of transformational developments in one or another language. Finally, I have suggested that the current theory of grammar be modified so that the role of the lexicon is to map into phonological shape structures derived via the major transformations. The base component suggested here looks in some ways very much like the logical systems familiar from the work of modern logicians like Rudolf Carnap, Hans Reichenbach, and others. In particular, such systems do not have any subdivision of 'lexical items' into nouns, verbs, and adjectives."

Presumably, the author himself would no longer agree with the letter of his own remarks, but I disagree with their spirit as well. The structure of natural language is fundamentally different from that of logical systems. The distinction between nouns, adjectives, and verbs is a good case in point. Nouns, at least prototypical nouns, differ from adjectives in incorporating the notion of 'kind'. Furthermore, they differ from adjectives in incorporating 'substantival' notions of 'thing' or 'person'. A 'kind' is a relational notion: a 'kind' is a kind of 'something', that is to say, a kind of thing, or a kind of person. For example, a concept such as 'flower' cannot be reduced to a combination of an indexical sign and a predicate, along the

lines of 'a flower is an X that flowers', because conceptually, a flower is a 'KIND OF THING that grows from the ground' (for a full definition of the concept 'flower' see Wierzbicka 1985c); and neither 'kind' nor 'thing' (or 'person') can be reduced to indexical signs and/or predicates. In fact, there are good reasons to think that 'thing' and 'person' are among universal semantic primitives. (See Wierzbicka 1972 and 1980a; see also Bogusławski 1966:24).

7. What are adjectives for?

Is there anything that an adjective can do that neither a verb nor a noun can? Presumably not, since there are languages which don't have a special class of 'adjectives', and which, one would assume, can convey everything that other languages can. But if so, then what is the point for a language in developing a special class of adjectives, morphologically distinct from the more fundamental classes of nouns and verbs, and usually situated, in some way, between nouns and verbs?

Adjectives can be used for predication, and they may even have special forms for doing just that, such as the so-called short form in Russian:

<i>novyj dom</i>	<i>krasivaja devočka</i>
'(a) new house'	'(a) pretty girl'
<i>Dom byl nov.</i>	<i>Devočka byla krasiva.</i>
'The house was new.'	'The girl was pretty.'

Nonetheless, predication can be performed equally well, or better, by verbs, for which it is the primary function. (Presumably, there are no verbs which can't be used as predicates, but there are many adjectives which can't; cf. Bolinger 1967.)

Adjectives can be used for categorization and for reference, and again, a language may have special forms or special constructions for just that purpose (for a referential and categorizing use of adjectives). The English generic construction, exemplified by the sentence:

The rich will never understand the poor.

can serve as an example. (Cf. Hewson 1972.) The use of neuter forms of adjectives in Latin, German or Russian, is another:

<i>Si parva</i>	<i>magnis</i>	<i>comparare licet ...</i>
if small:NEUT:PL:ACC	big:NEUT:PL:DAT	compare one can 'If one can compare small things with big things ...'

Nonetheless, categorization and reference can be achieved much better by nouns. (For example, in English the substantivization of adjectives illustrated above is a very limited process.) What is, then, the *raison d'être* of adjectives as a special word class?

The traditional answer is, of course, 'attribution', and I think that basically this answer is correct. I think, however, that it would be desirable if this answer could be made clearer and more explicit. If transformational grammarians have insisted on treating the differences between 'attribution' and 'predication' as a matter of surface structure, and if they deemed it possible to derive attribution from predication, it may well have been due to the lack of an adequate semantic analysis which would have made the differences between the two functions explicit. Consider the following sentences:

The main street was wide and lined with trees.

Your dear wife gave me that.

Poor grandma couldn't say a word.

The position of the adjectives *main*, *dear* and *poor* within the subject phrases mirrors their semantic role as elements which help establish the topic about which something is to be said, rather than as parts of the predication. The exact role of the adjective within the noun phrase depends of course on a number of factors, and especially on its restrictive or non-restrictive character. But whether the adjective helps identify the referent within the category defined by a noun, or whether it signals the speaker's attitude to the referent, or whatever, it can always be seen as adding a feature to the (normally) multi-dimensional image evoked by the noun.

It would not be correct to say, therefore, that nouns categorize and adjectives subcategorize. Nouns such as *animal*, *fish* or *flower* categorize, and so do, on a different level, nouns such as *dog*, *trout* or *rose*, and even, on yet another level, nouns such as *spaniel*, *poodle* or *boxer*. Thus, subcategorization is a kind of categorization, and it is best performed by nouns, in so far as only nouns can establish multi-dimensional images, i.e. KINDS. (Cf. Rosch 1978.)

Adjectives, which stand for single features, can be freely used to enrich the image evoked by the noun. The use of nouns in such an 'attributive' or 'enriching' function is naturally limited, not only because the combination of two composite images is often threatened by incompatibilities or irrelevancies, but also because each noun suggests its own basic categoriza-

tion. Phrases such as *child-bride* or *gorod-geroj* 'city hero' (Russian) evoke two super-imposed images rather than one composite image, because each noun preserves its own basic categorization.

The semantic difference between a noun, which creates a category, and an adjective, which adds a feature without creating a new category, is of course reflected in the characteristic morphology of adjectives and nouns. In languages which have nominal gender (such as Latin, Russian, Swahili or Avar) a noun has, normally, its own inherent gender; but an adjective doesn't have an inherent gender, and in a sentence it assumes the gender of the noun it modifies. This 'gender agreement' between an adjective and a noun signals a unique categorization which is created by the noun and which the adjective leaves untouched. By contrast, a nominal modifier preserves its own gender, and thus signals a double categorization, as in the Polish phrase *dziewica-bohater* 'maiden(FEM)-hero(MASC)', used in Adam Mickiewicz's poem "Śmierć pułkownika":

*To Litwinka, dziewica-bohater,
wóz powstańców, Emilia Plater.*

'It's a Lithuanian woman, maiden-hero,
the leader of the insurgents, Emilia Plater.'

Furthermore, adjectives tend to be endowed with a morphology which conveys quantitative evaluation. This is often manifested by the so-called category of 'degree', as in the Latin triplets: *altus*, *altior*, *altissimus* 'high, higher, highest' or *celer*, *celerius*, *celerrimus* 'fast, faster, fastest'. Nouns don't have a similar category, and it is worth considering why.

According to Donaldson (1980:70), in the Australian Aboriginal language Ngiyambaa there are two kinds of nominals, reduplicating and non-reduplicating ones. "Nominals which do not reduplicate are normally translated by English nouns, and those which do undergo reduplication are normally translated by adjectives." Donaldson reports that "when rejecting a reduplicated version of a nominal which cannot be reduplicated, Eliza Kennedy [the informant] would explain 'Either it is that, or it isn't'. It was therefore nonsensical to reduplicate, which is equivalent to prefacing the form with 'more-or-less' or 'somewhat'. Thus **miri-miri* was rejected, because one cannot have a 'more-or-less dog', while *gi:dja-gi:djan* 'more-or-less green, greenish' is an acceptable form."

However, nouns, too, are subject to referential indeterminacy. The line dividing dogs from cats may be sharp, but there is no sharp line divid-

ing *boys* from *men* or *stariki* (a Russian noun for ‘old men’) from men who are not yet regarded as old. Why is it, then, that an adjective such as *young* or *staryj* (Russian ‘old’) can be inflected for degree but referentially indeterminate nouns such as *boy* or *starik* ‘old man’ can’t?

I think that one important reason lies in the multi-factor character of a typical noun. Nouns such as *boy* or *starik* can’t be readily inflected for degree because they evoke more than one feature and it would not be clear which feature is being quantitatively assessed. Atypical nouns which focus on a single feature, such as *hero* or *saint*, are more readily accessible to comparison and ‘measurement’, of a kind, than more typical ones:

X is a greater hero/saint than Y.

?X is a greater boy than Y.

Nonetheless, Eliza Kennedy’s comment is also relevant. Despite the referential indeterminacy of many nouns, the very notion of ‘kind’ embodied in them suggests a conceptualization in terms of different and normally non-overlapping categories. A deed can be viewed as more or less heroic; but if a person is labelled as a ‘hero’ this is normally viewed as a qualitative distinction, despite the lack of any rigorous criteria on which such a categorization could be based.

From this point of view, it might be argued that verbs are closer to adjectives than nouns are, in so far as verbs don’t embody the notion of ‘kind’ either, and as they normally specify one feature, not several. And indeed, the fact that in many languages which have the category of gender, verbs, too, ‘agree’ with nouns in gender (though usually on a much smaller scale than adjectives) highlights this similarity between adjectives and verbs. But verbs, unlike adjectives, tend to be inflected for tense. This suggests that the feature signalled by a verb is normally seen as transient, as a temporary state of affairs, characterizing a particular time as much as a particular entity. For this reason, verbs are particularly suited to predicative use, as natural vehicles of new information. (The question “What’s new?” refers normally to events, to changes in the surrounding world.) On the other hand, adjectives tend to refer to features which either are ‘timeless’ or which are viewed without any reference to time. For example, in the two sentences:

- a. Her red cheeks emanated youth and good health.
- b. Her cheeks were red.

the attributive (i.e. prototypically adjectival) use of the word *red* suggests a

permanent feature of the cheeks, and probably old information, whereas the predicative (i.e. prototypically verbal) use suggests new information, and can be taken as referring to a transient state.

Furthermore, even in a predicative position, a verb tends to suggest changeability, in a way that an apparently ‘synonymous’ adjective does not. For example, in the Latin pair of sentences (cf. Bally 1920):

- a. *Rosa rubra est.*
‘(The) rose is red(ADJ).’
- b. *Rosa rubet.*
‘(The) rose is-red(v).’

the adjective *rubra* suggests a permanent property of the rose, whereas the verb *rubet* suggests a momentary feature of the scenery. Exactly the same is true of the Russian pair of sentences:

- a. *Parus bel.*
‘(The) sail (is) white.
- b. *Beleet parus odinokij v tumane morja golubom.* (Lermontov)
‘(A) lonely sail “whites” (is-visible-as-white, v)
in (the) blue mist of (the) sea.’

Presumably, it is the inherent link of verbal content with time which makes the category of degree by and large inapplicable to verbs. One can say, of course:

The gap between A and B widened more than that between C and D.

as one can say:

The gap between A and B is wider than that between C and D.

but the comparison carried out by means of the verb is harder to process, since the verb implies, to begin with, a temporal scale, and so that static scale on which the comparison between the two entities is based is superimposed upon a dynamic scale referring to changes in time.

On the whole, then, nouns tend to have an inherent category of gender, related to the notion of ‘kind’ encoded in them; adjectives tend to have a category of degree, related to their static and ‘uni-dimensional’ character; and verbs tend to have the categories of tense and mood, related to their temporal orientation and predicative function.

The prototypical roles of nouns, adjectives and verbs can be rep-

resented by means of the following semantic formulae:

- (1) I am thinking of someone/something [NOUN]
- (2) I am thinking of it as [ADJ]
- (3) I want to say this about it: [VERB]

Component (1) reflects the intended ‘reference’, component (2) corresponds to ‘attribution’; and component (3) spells out the ‘predication’. The prototypical function of each of these roles could be represented as follows:

- (1') wanting to cause you to think of it
I say: imagine [NOUN]
- (2') wanting to cause you to think of it
in the way I am thinking of it
I say: imagine [ADJ NOUN]
- (3') wanting to cause you to know it
I say: [(this ADJ NOUN) VERB]

For example, in the sentence:

The old man knew he was going far out, and he left the smell of the land behind and rowed out into the clean early morning smell of the ocean.

(Hemingway, *The old man and the sea*, 1952:13)

the noun *man* enables the addressee to identify and to categorize the referent; the adjective *old* enables the addressee to think of the referent, and to visualize him, in the way the speaker is thinking of him and visualizing him; and the verb phrase *knew he was going far out* enables the addressee to know what the speaker wants to say about him.

8. Final illustration

To conclude, I will introduce one final example, which provides a good illustration of the problems discussed in this chapter.

Prima facie, designations of nationality seem to demonstrate that the distinction between nouns and adjectives is semantically arbitrary. For why do we usually say:

John is an American/an Australian.

in preference to:

John is American/Australian.

whereas we don't hesitate to use the adjectives *Irish* or *English* with reference to human subjects? (Cf. Bolinger 1967.)

John is Irish/English.

It might be suggested that this difference can be explained by the existence of nouns such as *Irishman* and *Englishman*, but not **Americanman* or **Australianman*. But this explanation collapses if one considers that adjectives such as *German* or *Russian* can also be used perfectly well in predication about human subjects:

Alexander is German/Russian.

I think the real explanation is different: the point is that there is a subtle semantic difference between ‘adjectives of nationality’ such as *Irish*, *English*, *German*, or *Russian*, and ‘nouns of nationality’ such as *American* or *Australian*.

To see this difference, consider the minimal pair *Polish* and *Pole*. A sentence such as:

Adam is Polish.

may well refer to someone who has lived most of his life in Australia or in England, and who identifies with his country of residence as much as he does with Poland. The adjective *Polish* specifies his ‘ethnicity’, but it doesn't categorize him as someone ‘belonging to Poland’. By contrast, a sentence such as:

Adam is a Pole.

does just that. The adjective specifies one feature (ethnicity). The noun categorizes the person. This doesn't mean that it is impossible for someone to say:

I am an Australian, and I am a Pole.

But a person who says this emphasises, on purpose, his double categorization, and emphatically rejects the expectation that a person will belong to just one national category.⁵

It seems to me that the answer to the question posed above is that ‘adjectives of nationality’ do, and ‘nouns of nationality’ don't, identify one specific feature, ethnicity. An American can be Irish or German, at least to some extent, so being an American identifies a certain category of people, without specifying one single feature on which this categorization is based (such as ethnicity).

Why is it, then, that words such as *American*, *Australian* or *Canadian* differ in their degree of adjective-ness from words such as *Irish*, *English*, *German*, or *Russian*? Certainly, an American lives in or ‘comes from’ America, as a Pole lives in or ‘comes from’ Poland. But beyond this description in terms of place of origin, the nouns *American* or *Pole* evoke vaguely a whole lot of other characteristics, which can’t be summarized in a single feature such as ethnicity.

For the same reason, I suggest, one is more likely to say:

He is Spanish/Portuguese/Dutch/Chinese/Japanese.

than:

?He is Brazilian/Argentinian/Indonesian/Rhodesian/Zimbabwean.

Evidently, old nations, with an old history and a well-established sense of national identity, can be viewed as bearers of intangible, unique characteristics, which would have to be defined (if they could be defined at all) in qualitative rather than spatio-temporal terms. But relatively new and heterogeneous nations, such as Americans, Canadians, Australians, Brazilians or Indonesians, are viewed differently, as peoples who can be identified in spatio-temporal rather than qualitative terms.

Thus, if a Chinese couple, or a Jewish couple, settles in Australia, their children, born in Australia, can still be regarded, and regard themselves, as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Jewish’. They may well be thought of as ‘Australians’, but they can also be thought of as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Jewish’. On the other hand, if an American or a Brazilian couple settles in Australia, their children, born in Australia, can hardly be regarded as ‘Americans’ or as ‘Brazilians’. Words such as *American*, *Australian* or *Brazilian* tend to be used as adjectives only in combination with nouns which impose a certain qualitative interpretation on the adjective. For example, one can speak of the ‘American way of life’, ‘American culture’, ‘American cities’ or ‘American cigarettes’, on the assumption that the referents differ in intuitively clear (though not necessarily definable) ways from other ways of life, other cultures, other cities, and other cigarettes. But it would be odd to speak of ‘American forks’, ‘American chairs’ or ‘American leaves’, since it is hard to imagine what unique quality could be meant, in such contexts.

Neither can one speak, of course, of Irish, Polish, Greek or Chinese forks, chairs, or leaves. One can speak, however, of a person as ‘Irish’, ‘Polish’, ‘Greek’ or ‘Chinese’, on the assumption that when applied to

people these latter adjectives do evoke something that can be thought of as a unique single feature, a unique single ‘quality’.

Thus, the apparent arbitrariness of grammatical distinctions which separate words such as *American* and *Australian* from words such as *English* or *Irish* is an optical illusion: in fact, these distinctions show once more that there is more in a noun than meets the eye; there is more in a noun than there is in an adjective.

9. Concluding remarks

Generally speaking, the present discussion of the differences between adjectives and nouns lends, I hope, further support to the new emphasis on the non-arbitrariness of grammar (including ‘surface grammar’), which is becoming one of the dominant characteristic features of linguistics in the last quarter of the twentieth century. (Cf. for example Bolinger 1977, Dixon 1977, García 1975, Haiman 1985, or Wierzbicka 1980b.) It is becoming increasingly clear that differences and similarities in grammatical behaviour, provide remarkably reliable clues to differences and similarities in meaning. In particular, the ‘subdivision of lexical items into nouns, verbs and adjectives’ is not a result of meaningless transformational developments. Rather, it is a reflection of, and a guide to, subtle aspects of meaning.⁶

But if we wish to use the distinction between adjectives and nouns as evidence for the semantic motivation of grammatical distinctions in general, then one final problem has to be faced: what of languages like Warlpiri, which don’t distinguish morphologically between adjectives and nouns (see e.g. Hale 1983)? If the morphological uniformity of the broad class of ‘nominals’ (including translation equivalents of both ‘nouns’ and ‘adjectives’) is an icon of a semantic uniformity, then perhaps one would have to say that a language like Warlpiri doesn’t have ‘true nouns’, i.e. doesn’t have words encapsulating complex taxonomic meanings of the kind illustrated in the definitions appended to this chapter; or, that it doesn’t have ‘true adjectives’, i.e. words corresponding in meaning to English words such as *good*, *bad*, *big* or *small*.

To me, and I presume to many other linguists, these two conclusions (and particularly the first one), would seem intolerable. Intuitively, one would want to insist that Warlpiri words such as *maliki* (roughly, ‘dog’) or *wita* (roughly, ‘small’) correspond reasonably closely to English words such

as *dog* or *small*. I am not saying that *maliki* must mean exactly the same as *dog*, or that *wita* must mean exactly the same as *small* — far from it (see Wierzbicka 1985c). But a claim that the semantic relationship between *maliki* and *wita* is radically different from that between *dog* and *small* seems counter-intuitive. It would be hard to believe that categories such as ‘natural kinds’ (cf. Putnam 1975), ‘cultural kinds’ (cf. Lyons 1981) or ‘basic level objects’ (cf. Rosch 1978) apply to English and to some languages similar to English, but don’t apply to Warlpiri, because of its (supposedly) radically different semantics.

Alternatively, one could suggest that the morphological uniformity of nominals in a language like Warlpiri is semantically deceptive. This, however, might be taken as an argument against the thesis of iconicity, and as further evidence of the ‘arbitrariness of grammar’.

My own tentative conclusion is this. Words for ‘natural kinds’ such as *dog* or *radish* or for ‘cultural kinds’ such as *jumper* or *jug* differ profoundly in their semantic structure from words for single properties, such as *small*, *good* or *black*. Morphological differences between nouns and adjectives — wherever they exist — reflect and signal differences in the semantic structure.

But the absence of morphological differences between words for *dogs* and *jugs* on the one hand and words for *good*, *small* or *black* on the other, doesn’t indicate an absence of significant semantic differences. Rather, I would hypothesize that the Warlpiri word *maliki* has essentially the same kind of semantic structure as the English word *dog*; and that the Warlpiri word *wita* has essentially the same kind of semantic structure as the English word *small*. The difference in the semantic structure between ‘nouns’ and ‘adjectives’ can be expected to be reflected somewhere in the syntactic behaviour of the two hypothetical classes, so that the difference in meaning will be reflected in some aspects of the grammatical behaviour, if not in the grammatical form. (For relevant data and ideas see Austin 1981, Bavin and Shopen 1983, Dixon 1980, Goddard 1983, Wilkins 1984, and Simpson, In press.) Kaytej (another Central Australian language, Harold Koch, p.c.) shows an apparent lack of grammatical distinctions between ‘nouns’ and ‘adjectives’, so that, for example, the same word *akely* seems to correspond to both ‘child’ and ‘little’, and the same word *amarle* ‘girl, woman’ seems to correspond to both ‘girl’ and ‘female’. And yet from the available data it would appear, as Koch points out, that even in Kaytej there are at least some words, such as *arelhe* ‘woman’ or *arntwenge* ‘child’, whose use is

primarily nominal, not adjectival.

Even if most hypothetical ‘nouns’ in a language seem to behave exactly as the prototypical adjectives in this language do, and vice versa, as long as it can be established that there is at least a handful of core ‘nouns’ whose syntactic behaviour differs in some respect from that of prototypical adjectives, this may be a sufficient basis for postulating the existence of two distinct classes. The fact that the words from the adjectival class will be able to be used as arguments, just like nouns, won’t detract from the validity of this distinction. After all, phenomena of categorical ‘transposition’ (Tesnière 1959), categorical ‘translation’ (Bally 1922) or ‘syntactic derivation’ (Kuryłowicz 1936), which allow, for example, the use of bare adjectives as arguments, are widespread even in those languages where the distinction between adjectives and nouns is perfectly clear-cut (such as Latin or Russian).

In general, the possibilities of substantivization of adjectives differ from one language to another. For example, Russian allows it on a larger scale than English, and Middle English allowed it on a larger scale than Modern English (cf. Hewson 1972). Nonetheless, it seems justified to assert that in terms of semantic structure, the difference between nouns and adjectives in Russian is probably the same as it is in English, and that Modern English doesn’t differ in this respect from Middle English.

I suggest, then, that it is not only the distinction between ‘nominals’ and verbs which is universal (see e.g. Dixon 1977, Schachter 1985, Langacker 1987); but that the category of ‘noun’ as such may also be universal — and that it may be definable in terms of a *sui generis* semantic structure.

Definitions

RADISH

A KIND OF THING THAT PEOPLE EAT
IMAGINING THINGS OF THIS KIND PEOPLE COULD SAY THESE THINGS ABOUT THEM:

they grow in the ground
people cause them to grow in many places
because they want to have them for people to eat

ORIGIN

they are roundish but they can have a pointed bottom end
 they have some green leaves growing out of them above the ground
 they are red outside and white inside
 the skin is smooth

APPEARANCE

they are not too big for a person to be able to put a whole one
 into the mouth
 but as they are hard
 they may be too big for a person to be able to eat them easily putting
 them whole into the mouth

SIZE

they have a strong taste
 and people eat them, without cooking, with some other things,
 not sweet things
 to cause those other things to taste better
 or without any other things, eating no more than a few of them
 because they taste good and are pleasant to bite
 when one eats them, they make a little noise
 of the kind that hard things pleasant to eat make when one eats them
 one doesn't eat the leaves
 one doesn't have to remove the skin before eating

HOW EATEN

TIGER

A KIND OF ANIMAL

IMAGINING ANIMALS OF THIS KIND PEOPLE COULD SAY
 THESE THINGS ABOUT THEM:

HABITAT

they live in the jungle
 in places which are away from places where people live
 in parts of the Earth where they don't live people can see them in a zoo

they are similar to cats in the way they look and in the
 way they move
 but they are much bigger than cats
 being more like people in size than like cats

SIZE

they have black stripes on a yellowish body
 they have big sharp claws and big sharp teeth

APPEARANCE

they attack other animals and people and kill and eat them
 they can move quickly and without noise like cats
 and they can move easily in places where other big animals can't
 so that they can come close to people without people noticing them, and
 attack people

BEHAVIOUR

people are afraid of them, and think of them as fierce animals
 [people also think of them as animals who know what they want
 and who know how to get it, and whom one can't help admiring
 because of that]

RELATION TO PEOPLE

JUMPER (Australian and British usage)

A KIND OF THING MADE BY PEOPLE FOR PEOPLE TO WEAR
 IMAGINING THINGS OF THIS KIND PEOPLE COULD SAY THESE
 THINGS ABOUT THEM:

PURPOSE

they are made for people to wear on the upper half of the body,
 below the head
 when it is cold
 to be warm

MATERIAL

they are made of wool or of something similar to wool in
 the way it looks and in warmth
 so that they can be warm and stretchy

SHAPE

they are made in such a way that they can stretch
so that when they are on the body all their parts can be
close to the body causing the person to be warm
and so that one can put them on and take them off quickly
by pulling them over the head
and so that they are comfortable to wear and easy to handle

HOW WORN

people can wear them on top of something else put on the body
in order to cover the body
so that when one gets too warm one can take them off

Notes

1. The word *grown-ups* (usually in the plural) is often used as a noun by children. In adult language, however, *grown-up* tends to be used as an adjective. The word *adult* can be used as a noun but it can also be used as an adjective.
2. I am not claiming that all nouns have the same kind of semantic structure. In Wierzbicka (1985c), I have discussed a number of English nouns whose semantic structure differs from that assigned to nouns in this chapter, and I have tried to show that the *sui generis* semantic structure of those nouns is reflected in their *sui generis* grammatical behaviour. I think similar remarks could be made about various other types of nouns — in particular, about de-verbal nouns referring to actions, processes and events. There are many different semantic types of nouns, and the semantic differences between these types tend to be reflected in grammatical differences.
I would claim, however, that these different types of nouns are not all on the same level. There is what might be called a prototypical type, which forms the core of the entire category. Nouns which belong to this core designate discrete, concrete entities, such as people, animals or human artifacts. These nouns, I would claim, have the prototypically ‘nouny’ semantic structure, described briefly in this chapter, and studied in detail in Wierzbicka (1985c).
The existence of different semantic types of nouns, some of them closer to the core than others, may make an impression of a ‘category squish’ in the sense of Ross (1972b). I think that Ross’ writings on this subject contained valuable insights; at the same time, however, they created a false impression that the phenomena in question were fundamentally non-discrete. In fact, I believe the apparent ‘squishes’ are manifestations of underlying discrete semantic categories.
3. Substantivization of adjectives is a very complex phenomenon which cannot be discussed in any detail here. Mustanoja (1960:643) distinguishes what he calls “total conversion into a noun” (where the adjective acquires the total morphology of a noun, with the plural

ending) from what he calls “partial conversion”, as in the case of *the poor, the young*. (For an interesting discussion, see Hewson 1972.) For my part, I think that several more distinctions would have to be drawn, to capture all the generalizations in this area. For example, John Verhaar (p.c.) raises the question why one can say *He is a real male* but not *He is a real poor*. Interesting, and relevant, as such questions are, they cannot be investigated within the scope of this chapter.

4. Native speakers of Japanese are not always entirely happy about applying the adjective *mekura* to animals. However, the noun *mekura* cannot apply to animals at all, so the general point made here seems valid for Japanese, as it is for English or Russian.
5. Cf. also the following contrast from one of Primo Levi’s (1982:58) novels:
Pavel Jurevič Levinski teneva molto al suo patronimico, e meno al suo cognome troppo rivelatore: lui era un russo ebreo, non un ebreo russo.
‘Pavel Jurevič Levinski was very attached to his patronymic, and less to his too-revealing surname: he was a Jewish Russian, not a Russian Jew.’
6. In January 1967, very shortly before his death, I had a chance to discuss the relationship between meaning and form with Uriel Weinreich. Weinreich said, among other things, that in his view different parts of speech were associated with different kinds of meaning. I opposed his view, pointing to (what seemed to me to be) synonyms with different part-of-speech membership, and he didn’t insist. Twenty years later, I would like to acknowledge, belatedly, that he was right and I was wrong.