

THE PREDICATE STRUCTURE OF NONINHERENT ADJECTIVES

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One of the defining characteristics of the semantic structure of adjectives is their capability of defining directly and properly the head they depend upon and of which they predicate. The adjective makes up a direct predication affecting the noun completely, in which the noun, and even its referent is altered in its total meaning by the adjective. In the example *a new car* the state of things denoted by the noun receives the affection denoted by the adjective «new». This type of predication is, if we like, the most logical and most appropriate to the nature of the combination: a noun affected and particularized in its entirety by an adjective. However language provides with examples like *my old car*, or more significantly *my old friend*, or expressions so charged with emotive component as *good old John!*, which cannot be explained as the result of a direct and appropriate affection of the adjective on the noun. There is no state of advanced age in any of them; the car or the friend or John may or may not be old; the pragmatic purpose in these expressions is to denote something which adds certain aspects or circumstances of the elements involved in the predication. They yield certain information about the main predication: *my old car* is to be interpreted as «the car I had of old»; *my old friend*, either as «the friend I had of old», or as «the friend with whom I have a narrow relationship of friendship»; and *good old John!* as «(the) good and known for a long time John» or «(the) good and dear John». There is no direct predication of the adjective affecting their heads, but a predication of some aspects pointing out certain relationships, some modal circumstances affecting the noun. In cases like these we speak of noninherent adjectives.

In this paper we want to analyse the semantic contribution of noninherent adjectives. To achieve this purpose we are going to analyse the semantic and predicate structure of adjectives, the role adjectives play in context, the extensions of meaning, and, we shall propose ways of interpreting the semantic contribution of noninherent adjectives.

1. Semantic structure of noninherent adjectives

From a functional point of view adjectives can be defined in terms of the predication they establish with their heads, which with inherent adjectives consists of a direct affection on the noun.

1.1. *No direct affection of the noun*

All the functions performed by an adjective in a sentence, either as a modifier of a head, or as a head itself, or as a supplement to the main predication in a sentence, or as an independent element within the sentence forming itself a clause with its dependent modifiers, predicatively are an application, attribution or predication, of a particular quality or state of things to another element represented by the noun. The adjectival character is that of an element capable of applying itself to a noun. This is the defining character of adjectives so that there is no adjective if this function doesn't exist. The result of this semantic function is that the noun in the combination is affected directly and in its entirety by the adjective. The content of the adjective is projected on the noun. If we say *the sad boy* to the potential reference and the denotation of «boy» we add the state of things denoted by «sad» and the result is a predication denoting a state of things completely new having as base of the predication the content of the adjective, as base of the reference the noun, and as base of the denotation both the noun and the adjective.

Noninherent adjectives, however, characterize because this typical function of adjectives is performed in quite another way. There is no direct affection of the noun when we say *my old friend*. There is a predication which differs from the predication usually established by adjectives, which introduces other aspects.

1.2. *Syntactic restrictions*

The typical adjectival semantic function syntactically manifests itself in two ways, in the attributive and the predicative function: adjectives predicate attributively as in *the small house*, or predicate predicatively by means of other elements which contribute to the predication of the adjective with other clues and types of information, as in *the house is small*, or in *he considers his house small*. The relationship between the head *house* and the adjective *small* is the same in both cases: the condition of «size in a minor degree». In Spanish this problem is a bit more complicated since the attributive function can be used both before and after the noun, *la vieja máquina de vapor*, or *la máquina vieja*. But although they are two syntactic functions, they are but two different performances of the same underlying semantic function: the adjective exists only in terms of the semantic function it performs as to the noun. It is one semantic function, and two different perspectives as S. C. Dik would

say (1981: 5.1)¹. The semantic contribution of the adjective is always based on the relationship adjective-head (noun or pronoun), and this relationship semantically and predicatively is always the same.

In the case of noninherent adjectives limitations and restrictions to the use of the adjective increase greatly. They usually perform only one syntactic function. We can find noninherent adjectives used in both functions, *a group of junior army officers - the captain was junior to the other officers*; only in predicative function, *We are answerable for the actions of our children, He was asleep before I left the room, I never felt easy about Freud's Oedipus Theory*; or only in attributive function, *an old friend, old boys association*; in Spanish the following examples are used only before the noun, *el viejo profesor, viejas historias, nuestro flamante director*. Most characteristic noninherent adjectives do not perform but one syntactic function.

2. Language, speech and norm: the extended senses

The double syntactic performance of this single semantic function is the proper capability of inherent adjectives. In itself any adjective can perform this function in both syntactic ways, but it is the use of language and the extended senses of meaning, those which create restrictions and limitations to the use of adjectives. As the adjective gets farther from its original function of affecting the noun directly and cannot perform both syntactic functions the meaning of the adjective diverts from its original meaning. Noninherent adjectives are the result of the daily use of language. They have to do with speech, and are usually facts of speech as Coseriu (1978) would say. As a general rule noninherent adjectives are extensions of meaning of a previous form. It is the use of adjectives with *classemes* which are not proper to the adjective which causes them. For example, «young» is properly applied to nouns denoting persons, and as extensions of meaning, can be applied to nouns denoting [+ANIMAL] and even to nouns denoting [-ANIMAL]. We can say *a young man*, or *a young donkey*, or *a young tree*. The degree of appropriateness is not the same in every case, but we cannot say it is not proper use: the adjective conveys its proper meaning and affects its head directly. However, if we say expressions like *young manners, young room, young clothes, young books, or young criticism*, we are using the possibilities offered by the system of language freely not breaking its norm. All these uses belong to speech. It is either indeterminacy or the extension of meaning or the transfer of meaning which causes them.

Perhaps the previous examples are mere facts of speech; but the system itself has registered many of these uses born in speech and accepted in the

¹ Dik speaks of different perspectives when dealing with the differences between the syntactic functions used to denote the same semantic content. We use his words by analogy.

lexicon of language. The following examples can explain this: *She is extremely rich, the story is rich in comic and dramatic detail, the area was noted for its rich black soils, there is a touch of blue in it, a deep rich blue, the rich humour of his dialect stories, it's done in the interests of a richer life for all.* If «rich» defines the social state of humans as to money, we cannot say it conveys that meaning in those examples. However «rich» has the same denotation and conveys the same meaning. The explanation here is that the adjective conveys something else; it conveys a denotation and a predication, two different components, the latter being a structure of predication.

3. The predicate structure of adjectives

Adjectives are semantic units composed of two basic elements: a denotative component, which is a set of features, and a predicative component, which is the way how the denotative component of the adjective is combined with the noun, making up a structure of predication. The denotative component is something permanent and appears whenever the adjective appears. The predicative component is a set of possibilities which makes the adjective mean very differently depending on the noun of the combination. In both *an old man*, and *an old friend*, «old» is defined by the set of features {[+CONCRETE] + [ADJECTIVE OF AGE: proper: advanced]}. It is the same denotative component but different way of predication. In *my old car*, *an old friend*, *good old John*, *old boys association*, it is the predicative component of the adjective the element that creates new meanings, putting together the denotative component of both the adjective and the noun in different ways, establishing different grammatical relationships between them.

4. Noninherent adjectives and the context: predicational relators

The predicative component of adjectives, or predicational relator of adjectives (Aarts & Calbert, 1979), is what constitutes their strength of predication, and this is associated with the same classemes. It is the combination of adjectives with classemes different from those which are proper to them that makes up new and complex combinations. Noninherent adjectives are but the application of an adjective to classemes which are in a certain semantic relationship with the proper one, causing semantic readings different from the required one. It is proper to combine «old» with something which is [+CONCRETE], either if it is living—a human being, for example—or not living, but it not so proper to apply «old» to human beings considered as maintaining another type of relationship (social, for example), as in *an old friend*; nor is it proper to apply the adjective to classemes which are in connection with the classeme proper to the adjective, as in *juvenile clothes*,

or which are different from the one which is proper to the adjective, as in *a firm friend*.

The expression «noninherent adjectives», then, is the all-encompassing word which includes all types of predication in adjectives which divert from the most appropriate and general predication in adjectives.

5. The interpretation of noninherent adjectives

The relationships created in this way are of grammatical character. The predicative content of adjectives is similar to the predicative relationships established in a sentence. As in a verb phrase we can find causal relationships, *he made a conscious effort* (= «an effort which caused him to be conscious»); modal relationships, *he was born French but grew up in Argentina* (= «he was born as a French»), *our maths classes are pretty deadly* (= «our maths classes are developing in a deadly manner»); time relationship *We would refer to them later as the dark days of the campaign* (= «days when we felt dark»); relationship of degree, *she was only a fair cook* (= «she was a cook to a certain degree»); or specially a relative relationship, *an old friend* (= «friend performs the function old»), *the senior officer was only a captain* (= «officer performs the action senior»). These different types of predicative relationships are called predicational relators, by Aarts & Calbert (1979: 84-107).

6. Noninherent adjectives and the transfer of meaning

The farthest point in the extension of meaning is when the meaning of a lexeme is backgrounded, that is to say, when the meaning of a word is shifted from the denotative level to the connotative level, that is to say, it is in the metaphor or metonymy. In these cases the social background provides the base to the interpretation. Metaphor is perhaps the most appropriate means to express the type of predication expressed by noninherent adjectives. Examples: *a boy who is still green at his job*, *a callow youth*, *a fresh lawyer*, *a fresh attempt*, *man ripe in experience*, *this sewing machine is a real veteran*, etc. However in metaphors the affection by the adjective apparently is very much like the one in inherent adjectives.

7. Concluding remark

Noninherent adjectives, then, depend on context, are created according to the norm of language in speech, are incorporated into the system of language, and consist of applications of adjectives to classemes different from the ones which are proper to the adjective as an inherent adjective.

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