

Levels of analysis and adjectival typology

Luca Alfieri, Daniela Baldassarre, Diego Luinetti, Leonardo Montesi and Maria Simoniello
Università degli Studi G. Marconi, Roma

Background. It is well known that languages do not only differ in the features whereby they define their parts of speech (PoS), but also and – perhaps more importantly – in the number of PoS that they define and in the levels of language structure at which they do so. As a confirmation, quite a few studies discussed the levels at which the noun can be defined across languages (Hopper & Thompson 1984, Mithun 2000, Lazard 1999). However, barring some notes in Thompson (1988) and Alfieri (2014), a similar approach to the study of the adjective class has never been proposed (as far as I know), although adjectives are missing more often than nouns across languages (see, e.g., Dixon 1982, Bhat 1994, Hengeveld 1992, Beck 2002; Dixon & Aikhenvald 2004, Haspelmath 2012). The aim of the talk is to fill this gap and present a typology of the levels of language analysis at which adjectival constructions can be coded across languages.

Methodology and expected results. Following Croft (2001: 66ff.), the “adjective” is defined as the most typical quality modifier construction in a language. A variety sample of 30-40 languages is gathered and languages are classified on the level of language structure at which the most typical adjectival construction (i.e. quality modifier) is fixed. At present, 16 languages have already been investigated and some preliminary results were obtained. In the sample, the quality modifier construction is fixed at six main levels. In Latin, Amele, Dyirbal and Lavukaleve the typical adjective is a simple stem; simple stem adjectives are marked by agreement in gender (Latin, Amele) or classifier (Dyirbal), and they can share most of their properties with nouns (Latin, Amele, Dyirbal) or verbs (Lavukaleve). In Rig-Vedic Sanskrit, Classical Arabic and Yimas, the typical quality modifier construction is a derived stem that is different from a relative clause (that is, different affixes are used for coding participles and relative clauses); derived stem adjectives agree in gender (RV Sanskrit, Arabic) or classifiers (Yimas), and are derived from verb (noun-based derived stems are possible, though not found in the sample). In Garo and Urarina the typical quality modifier construction is a derived stem that is also a relative clause (that is, a single affix code both participles and relative clauses, as in the so-called relative-participles termed in Sino-Tibetan studies, Genetti 1992, 2005). In Tuscarora and Jamul Tiipay the typical quality modifier construction is a clause that differs from a derived stem (i.e. a relative clause or a word-sentence marked for switch-reference). In Chukchi and, partly, Nivkh, the typical quality modifier is verb stem incorporated into a noun. Finally, in Vietnamese, Lao and Quechua, the typical quality modifier construction is a phrasal constituent that is, a quality lexeme settled in the modifier slot of the phrase without overt marking, as in Hengeveld’s “flexible” strategy (see Rijkhoff & Van Lier 2013). Phrasal adjectives can share most of their properties with nouns (Quechua) or with verb (Vietnamese, Lao).

Discussion. If the preliminary results will be confirmed, the simple stem (that is, the lexicon), the derived stem, the relative-stem, the compound-stem, the phrase and the clause represent (some of) the most common layers at which adjectival constructions can be coded across languages. This being so, any discussion on the categoriality of adjectives can benefit from the study of the levels of analysis, since the properties of “adjectives” (lexicalisation, argument structure, etc.) can easily change from a level to another.

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