

Nominal modification at the Syntax-Semantics Interface: comparing attributive adjectives in Italian and English

In his seminal work, Bolinger (1967) discusses an asymmetry between two functions that adjectives can perform, namely attributive and predicative modification; furthermore, he points out that the syntactic asymmetry between the pre- and the post-nominal position of a number of adjectives in English is related to a semantic difference between reference- and referent-modification, respectively. In later works, it has often been argued that a similar interpretive asymmetry can be found in many typologically unrelated languages and that it can be connected with different morpho-syntactic properties of the adjectives themselves.

As far as Italian (as well as other Romance languages) is concerned, it has been observed that the position of an adjective w.r.t. the head-noun usually induces a specific interpretation. Consider, for example, Bernstein's (1993) account of the asymmetry between pre-nominal (non-restrictive) and post-nominal (restrictive) modification, and the large number of semantic properties discussed in Cinque (2007), distinguishing "functional" (i.e., non-predicative) and "lexical" (i.e., predicative) adjectives (cf. (1) and (2), respectively):

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| <p>(1) <i>Un vecchio amico</i>
 a old friend
 'An old (= long-standing) friend'</p> | <p>(2) <i>Un amico vecchio</i>
 a friend old
 'An old (= aged) friend'
 (cf. <i>L'amico è vecchio</i> 'The friend is old (= aged)')</p> |
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This work aims at providing a comparative analysis of adjectival modification in Italian (as a representative of Romance) and English within the Minimalist framework. Assuming the above-mentioned dichotomy between functional and lexical adjectives, I propose that their semantic asymmetry is correlated to a specific difference in their syntactic structure. In particular, I argue that the Merge position of a modifier is determined by the semantic relation it establishes with the head-noun. In the spirit of Bouchard (2002), I take the semantics of a common noun to be a network of interacting features, and I propose that each of them is encoded in a dedicated functional head within the nominal structure. With this in mind, I claim that functional adjectives are merged as Specifiers within the extended projection of the NP (cf. Cinque 1994): in particular, every adjective of this kind establishes a local (i.e., Spec-Head) configuration with the functional head encoding the specific semantic feature related to the adjectival class to which it belongs; this kind of structure is interpreted as the intersection between the denotation of the adjective and the single semantic property encoded in its corresponding functional head, thus deriving its intensional semantics. For instance, assuming that X° in (3) encodes the specification of the time interval in which the function 'president' holds, my proposal is that the AP *futuro* 'future' (merged in Spec,XP) only modifies the X° head (*not* its complement NP): as a consequence, the relevant DP is interpreted as denoting an individual characterized as a president at an interval of time in the future.

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| <p>(3) <i>Il futuro presidente</i>
 'The future president'</p> | <p>$[_{DP} il [_{XP} [_{AP} futuro] X^\circ [_{NP} presidente]]]$</p> |
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On the other hand, as far as lexical adjectives are concerned, I propose that they are merged as DP-internal predicates: following Rebuschi (2005), I assume the existence of a predicative ConjP projection encoding an intersective relation between the denotation of the adjective and that of its subject (corresponding to the NP in (4)); this structure therefore derives the extensional semantics of this kind of adjectives:

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| <p>(4) <i>Il libro rosso</i>
 the book red
 'The red book'</p> | <p>$[_{DP} il [_{ConjP} [_{NP} libro] Conj^\circ [_{AP} rosso]]]$</p> |
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On the basis of this proposal concerning the Merge structure of the two kinds of adjectives, I will then concentrate on the different position in which they are realized in Italian and English. While in Italian it nearly always coincides with their Merge position (functional APs appearing pre-nominally – with the exception of relational and thematic adjectives, for which a specific derivation will be suggested – and lexical APs being post-nominal), English requires most of its lexical adjectives to be preposed to a pre-nominal position:

(6) *The red book* (cf. (4))

(7) *The red book*

[_{DP} *the* [_{AgrP} [_{AP} *red*] [_{Agr°} [_{ConjP} [_{NP} *book*] [_{Conj°} t_{AP}]]]

└─ Spec-Head ─┘

As for the derivation of lexical adjectives in Italian, I will propose that the realization of Number on the determiner in this language (e.g., *il* ‘the-SING’ vs. *i* ‘the-PLUR’) allows them to check the relevant feature *in situ* (i.e., in their post-nominal Compl, ConjP position) under an *Agree* relation with D°:

(8) *Il libro rosso*

[_{DP} [_{ConjP} [_{NP} *libro*] Conj° [_{AP} *rosso*]]]

----- Agree -----

References

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