

Classifying adjectives in European languages

Prototypical (general) names are morphologically simple lexical words that arbitrarily denote whatever they are conventionally taken to denote. Prototypical (general) descriptions in contrast essentially rely on compositional semantics in specifying their denotation and are thus as a rule syntactically complex. However, as complexity is a matter of degree so is compositionality, and thus it appears that in terms of form and meaning some descriptions are closer to names than others. Among syntactically complex head-attribute phrases adjective-noun syntagms involving a so-called classifying adjective (alias relational adjective, cf. Bally 1965, Dornseiff 1964) are of particular interest (e.g. ENG *solar energy*, FRN *énergie solaire*, POL *energia słoneczna*, HUN *politikai befolyás* 'political influence', GER *politischer Einfluss* 'ibid.'). First they are arguably – with the possible exception of N+N juxtapositions – that type of head-attribute phrases that involves the least degree of formal complexity. Second, they are close, if not identical, to regular compounds in terms of meaning composition. – In our talk we will discuss this type of construction adopting a comparative perspective on European languages and focussing in particular on English, German, French, Polish and Hungarian. Both German and Hungarian also make extensive use of N+N compounds and these are regularly found in competition with structures involving classifying adjectives (e.g. GER *Apfelbaum* 'apple tree', HUN *almafa* 'ibid.'). In contrast, possessive constructions involving a NP or PP hardly figure as classifying modifiers in these languages and can safely be treated as marginal cases (cf. Zifonun 2007). For French and Polish the converse holds true. In Polish we find possessive genitives (*kierowca samochodu* 'car driver'), in French *de/à*-PPs as classifying modifiers (*taches de soleil* 'sunspots'), while N+N compounds are extremely rare (*mode-homme* 'men's fashion'). English, in addition to a rich inventory of classifying adjectives, avails itself of both compounds and possessive PPs to express classifying modification (cf. Klinge 2007).

As regards meaning composition we argue that classifying adjectives are distinguished from qualifying adjectives in that they are not interpreted as ascribing some property to an entity denoted by the head noun. Rather, the overall meaning of an A+N syntagm involving a classifying adjective can more adequately be paraphrased as 'an N that is somehow related to whatever is denoted by "A"'. Thus, what compositional semantics contributes to the meaning of such a phrase is just that type of abstract relation (in addition to the lexical meaning of the noun and the adjective), and it is up to the speaker to consult his encyclopedic knowledge to figure out any more precise interpretation. Compositionality therefore plays a lesser role in determining the meaning of an A+N syntagm involving a classifying adjective than in determining that of a corresponding phrase involving a qualifying adjective, where the scope of possible interpretations is significantly tighter. On the other hand, as with compounds, if only to lesser degree, particular interpretations may become semantically dominant due to usualization, a process that ultimately leads to lexicalization. In both ways, classifying adjectives give rise to more "namelike" expressions than qualifying adjectives.

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