

On the nature of syntactic categories: how do adjectives become nouns?

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It is generally agreed upon that the nature of syntactic categories is at the very heart of grammar. Thus no theory of grammar is considered adequate unless it provides an answer to the following questions: What are the syntactic categories natural languages possess? What kind of properties do they have and how do categories relate to each other? What types of agreement relationships can they entertain? In this talk, I will approach these questions by looking at two English nominal configurations that at first sight seem to be similar. In both cases a determiner and an adjective is present, but no noun:

- (1) The rich are unwilling to share. (2) The pretty is boring. (Glass 2013)

These examples are intriguing for a variety of reasons. First, they suggest that next to nouns, natural languages exploit the option of combining a determiner with an adjective in order to refer to individuals/abstract objects. Second, although in both examples the descriptive content is contributed by the adjective, these have been shown to be conceptually and grammatically distinct (e.g. Kester 1996, Glass 2013, McNally & de Swart 2014 among others). For instance, (1) behaves like a count noun, while (2) like a mass noun. Third, while the noun phrase in (1), unlike the one in (2), triggers plural agreement on the verb in the absence of overt nominal plural morphology, it cannot trigger agreement attraction, see (3) vs. (4a-b), from den Dikken (2001). In this respect, the DP *the poor* behaves similarly to collective nouns, (4c), raising questions concerning the status of its plurality, see Bock & al. (2001) and references therein, cf. Sauerland (2003) among others.

- (3) *The identity of the rich are to remain a secret.
(4) a. The identity of the participants is to remain a secret.
 b. ! The identity of the participants are to remain a secret.
 c. *The identity of the committee are to be kept a secret.

Finally, Present Day English, unlike German and earlier English, allows a plural only interpretation for (1). The question then is what led to the present day configuration. Related to that is the observation that this is one of the very few environments where English allows plural definite generics.

The study of these patterns and the understanding of their properties contribute to the theoretical modeling of the syntactic differences between nouns and adjectives in particular and to the development of a formal grammatical theory of syntactic categories and agreement in general. I will pursue an analysis that further explores the nature of the building blocks of nominal meaning and the properties of different types of plurality in the nominal domain. This is seen as part of a larger research program that takes syntactic structure to be the core explanation for linguistic competence, redefines the ways in which syntax interacts with the lexicon and the interpretative component and contributes to the theory of structure building.

References

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