The noun-adjective boundary

Recent change and category theory

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Plan

- brief intro on categories
- abrupt category change
- ambiguous vs. equivocal in syntax
- "syntactic" tests and what they show
- N ~ A overlap in English
- English case studies
- stepwise category change
- German examples
- some possible conclusions

Categories: what are they?

Categories are basic to language

- Noun, Verb, Adjective, etc.
  - (but how big is 'etc.'?)
- Familiar in schools: probably the first grammatical information given.
- Axiomatic in most linguistic models: stipulated to exist, and every word in every grammatical sentence belongs to one (and only one) category.
- Corpus linguists tag words with category labels.

Categories: what are they?

- School-level definitions are often notional:
  - 'A noun is a naming word'
  - 'A verb is a doing word'
  - 'An adjective is a describing word'
- Students taught that this doesn't actually work:

the <u>demolition</u> of the temple	**N** but doing word
She <u>dreams</u> every night	**V** but not doing word
a <u>boy</u> band	**N** but describing word

Formal (structural, distributional) criteria

- N can be preceded by *the*.
- (Most) N can be marked for possessive and/or plural.
- N can be head of NP (noun phrase).
- NP can function as subject, direct object, indirect object, complement, complement of preposition.
- etc.

What's the point of categories?

- Categories belong to our pattern-recognition abilities.
- Language users (unconsciously) economise by using or recognising the same structural patterns for many words of a single category.
- Linguists (consciously) use categories to capture generalisations.

- So what is status of category **change**?

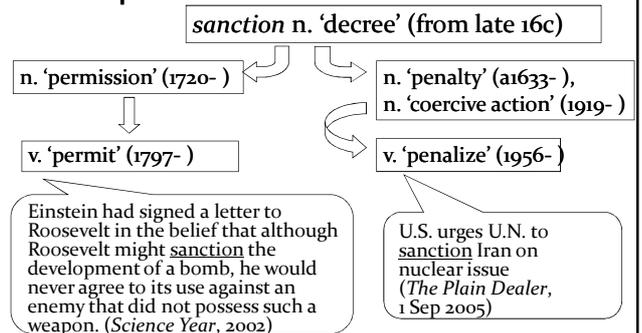## Category change as sudden, 'catastrophic'

Category change: no problem

- Words may change category by the addition of an affix – usually a suffix:

pedestrian n. (?1770-) → *pedestrianise* v. (1811-)

- Category change can also occur by process of **conversion** (or zero derivation):

pedestrian a. (1716-) → *pedestrian* n. (?1770-)

invite v. (1553-) → *invite* n. (1659-)

- Such changes are clearcut and instantaneous and simply produce a new word.

Example: N > V

sanction n. 'decree' (from late 16c)

n. 'permission' (1720-)

n. 'penalty' (a1633-),
n. 'coercive action' (1919-)

v. 'permit' (1797-)

v. 'penalize' (1956-)

Einstein had signed a letter to Roosevelt in the belief that although Roosevelt might <u>sanction</u> the development of a bomb, he would never agree to its use against an enemy that did not possess such a weapon. (*Science Year*, 2002)

U.S. urges U.N. to <u>sanction</u> Iran on nuclear issue (*The Plain Dealer*, 1 Sep 2005)

Problems with categorisation

Morphology

- In morphology (the form and structure of words), normal to accept that members of a category may vary in their **typicality**. Thus
  - *heavy* is a very 'good' adjective
  - *alive* is an adjective, but less good, less typical

The cases are heavy.   The hills are alive.
the heavy cases   *the alive hills

Syntax

- In syntax (form and structure of sentences), normal to treat category membership as Aristotelian: clearcut, an either-or matter.
- Linguists appear to be saying that even a not-very-good category member behaves syntactically *as if* it were a fully typical member of that category.
- Cf. computer desktops. Objects can either be dragged smoothly (morphology) or they 'snap to grid' (syntax).
- But why should syntax differ from morphology?

"Uncertainty" of analysis

- *Cambridge Grammar (*Huddleston & Pullum 2002)
  - a relatively lean structuralist account without empty categories or functional projections
- **Ambiguous** context occurs where
  - two categories share many features and differ largely by having different values for one parameter
  - either category can fill same functional slot.
- Moment of transition, direction of change?
- I suggest **ambiguous** should be contrasted with **equivocal** [= underdetermined] and **uncertain**.
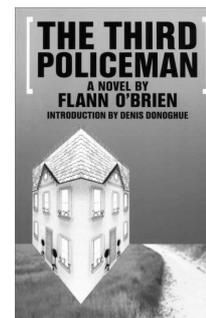
A test of category status

- In my dialect, *so brilliant* is OK, *so genius is not.
- Modification by *so, very, too* is test of Adjective-hood?
  - This is <u>so Woody Allen</u>. Neurotic as ever and so on top of his game. I could hear his voice every time Branagh opened his mouth. (2000)
  - It's very silly, it's very odd, it's <u>very Woody Allen</u>. Love it. (2008)
  - Sleeper
  Nice Woody Allen movie made better by not being <u>too Woody Allen</u> (2005)
- Not obliged to recategorise NP *Woody Allen* as AP.

What does the test show?

- Degree modifier in part semantically conditioned: certain nouns and NPs are semantically gradable.
- Not just NP which is distorted out of its prototypical behaviour but also the degree adverbs *so/very/too*.
- Coercion, construction grammar.

N vs. A: distinctively A functions

- Post-modification of NP head:
  - something clever
  - an idea surprisingly clever
  - an idea clever but irresponsible
- Degree modification and comparison:
  - very clever
  - how clever
  - cleverer, cleverest
- *Clever* is unequivocally an adjective.

N vs. A: distinctively N functions

- Inflection for number and genitive case:
  - lotteries
  - lottery's

- Potential to be head of NP
  - with particularly wide distribution of NP

- *Lottery* is unequivocally a noun.
- See e.g. Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 536-8) on demarcation.

N vs. A: neutralised functions

- Pre-modifying phrase within NP:
  - the recent launch
  - the lottery launch
  - the recent <u>lottery launch</u>
- Predicative complement:

  NB. A-modifier before N-modifier

  - The launch was recent.
  - !The launch was a lottery.
  - *The launch was lottery.

Noun ~ Adjective: transitions

Overlap between N and A

- Pre-modifying phrase within NP
- $[... \underline{\quad} N_{head} ...]_{NP}$

  ⇧

- Single modifiers more common than multiple.
- N as modifier usually in bare stem form:
  - the lottery launch(es)
  - *the lotteries launch(es)

- Both factors are conducive to overlap.

Overlap between N and A

- Predicative complement
- $[... V_{intensive} \underline{\quad}]_{VP}$

  ⇧

- (or better here: **overlap between NP and AP**)
- NP can consist of bare N if uncountable or proper or plural [?]:
  - The holiday was awful. $[A]_{AP}$
  - The holiday was torture / paradise / $[N]_{NP}$
    (sheer) luck / [??]nuts.

Why should N change to A?

- Concept expressed by N is subjective and gradable, as e.g. *success, beauty.*
- In $[... \underline{\quad} N_{head} ...]_{NP}$ A is more of norm than N.
- in $[... V_{intensive} \underline{\quad}]_{VP}$ NP > AP is more likely if
  - property-ascribing rather than referring
  - abstract rather than concrete
  - invariable rather than variable for number
    (Leech & Li 1995: 200)
- Lexical gap. [perhaps not necessary]
- So N > A is result (possible, but not necessary) of combining syntactic *how* with semantic *why*.

Case studies

Fun

- Uncertain:
  - Majorca is packed with fun things to do (BNC)
  - For Barbara it was fun, but only for a while. (BNC)
- More likely A:
  - so that the hobby, which often proved fatal, would be <u>safe as well as fun</u>. (1966)
  - [...] to a place <u>as fun and earthy as</u> a mud fight [...] (1990)
  - It was <u>so fun</u>. (1991)
  - Don't be too worried if the software seems <u>too fun </u>to be educational. (1993)

Fun

- Almost certainly A:
  - It was the last trip which was <u>the most fun</u>. (1941)
  - We have the Osborns, the Beals, the Hartungs, the Falmers, and us. Now let's think of <u>someone fun</u>. (1971)
  - <u>The most fun thing</u> to do [...] (BNC)
  - ... and have <u>a really fun time</u> with [...](BNC)
  - Walking and looking is boring. Touching is <u>funner</u>. (1990)
  - It used to be buying clothes was one of <u>the funnest things</u> in the world; – now it's more a necessity. (1990)

Fun

- Uncertain?
  - Majorca is packed with fun things to do
  - For Barbara it was fun, but only for a while.

- No. In any dialect which has clear examples of fun_A beside fun_N, these examples would be **equivocal**.

- Ideally would track changes sequentially over time in a single variety. Unlikely that all arrive simultaneously.

Key

- Abstract 'explanatory' meaning:
  - It was <u>the key</u> to his success (1883, latest in *OED*)
- Abstract 'crucial' meaning:
  - When chance or effort puts one in possession of <u>the key-fact</u> in any system of baffling circumstances, one's ideas seem to rush to group themselves anew in relation to that fact. (1913, earliest in *OED*)
- *OED* rather too neatly conflates advent of 'crucial' sense with passage towards adjectival status.

Key

- Uncertain:
  - Progress at Charleston—The Key Position of the Opening Campaign (1860)
  - But the key man of the mystery was missing, Patrick Eugene McDermott, ex-convict, member of a family of mine-laborers in Nanty Glo, Pa. (1926)
- And later without definite article:
  - Spray-dried flavors are <u>key ingredients</u> of a new tableted carbonated drink concentrate. (1958 OED)
  - In addition to illness, homelessness is <u>a key issue</u>. (BNC)

Key

- Almost certainly A:
  - Two ideas were <u>key</u> in the discovery of the kinoform. (1970 OED)
  - Groove is <u>key</u>, but it's not the whole enchilada (1993 [OED draft additions June 2008])
  - I think this is <u>so key</u>. I mean, it's what every study has ACTUALLY found (ANC2)
  - Ongoing education may be <u>just as key</u> as more stringent certification requirements. (1998)
  - it was <u>too key a nation</u> to us to take a very strong stand on (1999)

Key

- Must be A:
  - and it's <u>something key and crucial</u> that I have learned in my life. (1996)
  - So therefore that was <u>more key</u> to you than [...] the police planting evidence or not planting evidence, et cetera? That was more important to you? (1995)
  - Organizational services are moving from the realm of being discretionary to being <u>more key</u>, more critical to an improved quality of life (1995)
  - It's <u>the most key part</u> of this business. If you don't make the right decisions, you can lose a considerable amount of money [...] (1998)

Key

- Must be A:
  - Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's <u>the keyest</u> of them all... (2001)
  - I think my key point is going to be this: girls are not wired to do that kind of stuff ... And <u>an even keyer point</u> is the definition of 'stuff' (2005)
  - <u>Keyest paragraph</u> in the papers ... (2005)
- So such examples as these can become equivocal in a suitable dialect:
  - The Key Position of the Opening Campaign
  - But the key man of the mystery was missing

Other ongoing N > A transitions

- Huddleston & Pullum and other authorities claim they are very rare.
- Not so.
- One useful starting-point for possible examples – not all of which turn out to qualify – is to search for phrase *passing into* in *OED* definitions (as in '*attrib.,* passing into *adj.*', s.v. *front* n. (and a.) 13).
- *advance, bush, capacity, courtesy, crash, custom, dream, everyday, family, front, fun, futurist, giant, hack, jazz, lightning, premium, pretend, priority, quality, record, slapstick, sophomore, token, welcome*

Rubbish

- Has made transition twice:
  - To stand all his whole life sifting and winnowing dry rubbish chaffe. [1594 OED]
  - They refine His Rubbish Nature to a Golden Mine. [1675 OED]
  - Those [coins], too, poor, brass, rubbish Stuff. [1722 OED]
  - The verie excrements of the rubbishest wits that are. [1596 OED]
- Then *rubbish*$_A$ seems to disappear from late 18C, with *rubbishy* coming to be used instead.

Rubbish

  - <u>A totally horrible and rubbish gig</u> [...]
  - Because i like to take a lot of photos when i go out but the light on my V975 seems <u>very rubbish</u>. (2006)
- Must be A:
  - i know its [sic] rubbish but i need it to win the manufacturer's race to win <u>an older, rubbisher version</u>
  - And today was rubbish. [...] It started off alright, [...] [b]ut after that it started to get <u>rubbisher</u>. (2006)
  - And the prize for <u>rubbishest blogger</u> in the world goes to... Me! (2008)
  - and I can't imagine Harry Hall's selling <u>anything rubbish</u>. (2008)

Rubbish

- Acceptability judgements in a group of students on scale 1 (unacceptable) – 5 (acceptable).
  - Equivocal contexts averaged 4.70-4.75.
  - More obviously adjectival settings (comparative and superlative forms, modification by *very*) averaged 1.95-2.55 out of 5
- Not unexpected for recent innovation. But ...
  - Postmodification scored 4.6 – almost wholly acceptable –
  - yet impossible for *rubbish*$_N$.

Gradience

- [...] the passage from noun to adjective is not an abrupt, all-or-nothing process but a stepwise progress. Noun and adjective share many distributional properties, and for some speakers *rubbish* acquires more and more of the properties of adjectives. This is gradience: micro-steps rather than abrupt saltation from N to A.

(Denison 2010)

Pants

- Ellipsis from longer NP:
  - After all these years of trying to publicise Hodges' model, in practice, on paper, through the website. I've realised it really is <u>a load of pants</u>. Absolutely, definitely, no counter argument it is:
    <u>Utter pants</u>.
  - **pile of pants**, noun, slang, official term of rejection. Relatively new non-swearing slang term, meaning **a load of rubbish** or, indeed, **knickers**. Pants in this sense (NB not trousers as in the US; in the UK pants means underwear) only became slang in the 1990s (according to slang lexicographer Jonathon Green). Became official term of rejection even more recently (see below). Popular with students and DJs.

Pants

- Uncertain (or equivocal):
  - I was here in the days when there was no subbing process and it was <u>pants</u>. Things get better every day! (1999)
  - Not going to let that spoil the night though, NAE DANGER of it being <u>a pants gig</u>. (2008)
- Probably/certainly A:
  - Oh , and TV shows about cutting age technology are <u>really pants</u> usually (2000)
  - This is also <u>very pants indeed</u>. (2004)
  - Currently feel like <u>the pantsest teacher</u> in the world – is this normal or am I really just rubbish? (2006)

Powerhouse

> At first *powerhouse* comes as last modifier

- Equivocal/uncertain:
  - Few fans, however, were prepared for <u>the powerhouse offensive</u> that Michigan uncorked. (1938)
  - George Auld's <u>new powerhouse band</u> (1942 [OED])
- More A-like (precedes other adjective):
  - a powerhouse Republican candidate (1966)
  - The powerhouse new bestseller (1996)
  - a powerhouse big man (2005)
  - A whole album of powerhouse loud assed Rock & absolutely no shrill sounds at all..... (2006)
  - a powerhouse spiritual diva. (2009)

Powerhouse

- Probably or certainly A:
  - "It's a very powerhouse sound." (2003)
  - I have worn it [sc. a perfume] on occasion out to work. Just lightly since it's <u>so powerhouse</u>, LOL (2007)
  - and frankly most of the expected titles don't look <u>too powerhouse</u>. (2008)
  - We knew Hillary was powerhouse; now we know she'll be accountable (1993)
  - You can hear her voice switch to a lighter, tamer tone rather than reach for <u>anything powerhouse</u> whenever she switches to the high range. (2004)
  - one of the most powerhouse vocal performances (2001)

Draft, genius, niche

- Already moving towards A:
  - as part of a draft new party platform (BNC)
  - This is really quite draft at the moment. (2006)
  - Very draft mission statement for the GIS SC (2005)
  - It's extremely draft (2006)
  - Absolutely genius review. (2006)
  - this song has some very genius and touching lines.(2002)
  - How niche is niche? [...] This is borne out by the US market, where cable channels are becoming increasingly niche. (2002)

Draft, genius, niche

- Must be A:
  - This series is arguably <u>the most genius</u>, the most entertaining and the most poignant chapter in the Father Ted chronology. (2001)
  - One of <u>the most niche, artistic films</u> you'll probably see all year, [...] (2007)
- Playful?
  - The nichest of the niche (2005)
  - Geniuser than the geniusest of the geniusest, dahlink! (2005)
  - this paper is also very rough and in the most draftest of draft forms (?2009)

German

Klasse

- Uncertain. N? A?
  Spelling has lower case, but so what?
  - Das Auto ist klasse
    the car is great
- Adjectival (but without normal adjectival inflection)
  - das klasse Auto
    the great car

Scheiß

- Adjective, because inflected for comparative, though Lehmann (p.c.) says never attributive:
  - Nichts ist scheißer als Platz 2. (2006 att. C. Lehmann)
    nothing is more-shit than 2nd place
- Takes premodifiers normally found with A, not N:
  - Mir geht's voll/total scheiße (2009 cited M. Hundt)
    to-me goes it utterly shit
    'I'm feeling really crappy'
  - Ich fühl mich echt scheisse – brauche euren rat
    I feel myself really shit – need your advice

Scheiß, klasse

- Adverb
  - Herzblut geht echt scheisse schwer aus den Klamotten raus (2009)
    heart-blood goes really shit difficult out-of the gear out
    'It's really shit difficult to get heart-blood out of your clothes'
  - Die Elf hat klasse gespielt. (Eisenberg et al. 2005: 366)
    the eleven has great played
    'The team played great.'

Adkopula: A used only predicatively

- See Zifonun (1997).
  - Ich bin es leid.
    I am it fed-up-with
    'I'm fed up with it.'
  - Die Firma ist pleite.
    the company is broke
  - Du bist schuld (cf. *Du hast Schuld* 'you have blame', with clearly nominal *Schuld*)
    you are responsible
    'It's your fault'
  - Mir ist angst und bange. (cf. *Ich habe Angst* 'I have fear')
    to-me is frightened and frightened
    'I'm frightened.'

Possible conclusions

Summary

- Some kinds of category change operate step-wise.
- Evidence against the position that every single word in every grammatical sentence belongs to one and only one category.
- (Many other problems, e.g. with Multi-Word Expressions.)
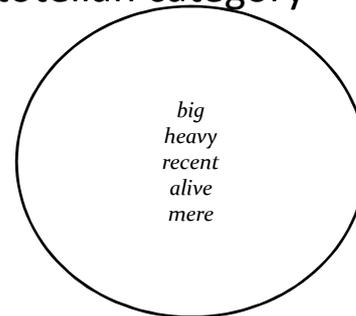
- How to deal with this?

Categories are gradient?

- N > A category change doesn't affect overall topology of syntactic tree.
- Similarly for many A > D changes.
- Some other category changes *do* affect overall tree.

- Could maintain constituent structure analysis.
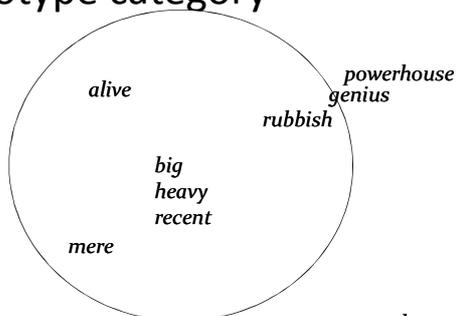- Allow categories to show prototype effects.

Aristotelian category

big
heavy
recent
alive
mere

lottery

Prototype category

alive

powerhouse
genius
rubbish

big
heavy
recent

mere

lottery

Categories as epiphenomenal?

- Constituent structure mappings only serve to *describe* instances of category change; they do not appear to offer any explanation as to timing, directionality.
- For equivocal sentences they are falsely over-determined.
- Linguistic description which takes categories as (a) fixed and (b) central to the analysis may therefore be misguided.
- This can be taken as an argument in favour of a constructional approach.

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