Complements of adjectives: a diachronic approach

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Can an adjective have an object? Traditional grammar says no (Huddleston & Pullum 2001: 527), and in similar vein Principles & Parameters Case Theory relies on the inability of nouns and adjectives to assign objective case to explain the distribution of English *of* (Chomsky 1981: 50-1). Compare too the theory of categories proposed by Jackendoff (1977), according to which adjectives are [–obj, –subj], thus contrasting with verbs: [+s, +o], nouns: [+s, –o] and prepositions:[–s, +o]. However, from the semantic point of view there is in fact good reason to expect that the range of complements available to adjectives is the same as for verbs, as evidenced by such near-synonymous pairs as *fear/be afraid of, love/be fond of, regret/be regretful of*. In practice grammarians have been happy to assign adjectives subcategorizations for COMP (*certain that S*), XCOMP (*keen to VP*), OBL (*similar to NP*). The question we ask in this paper therefore is whether an adjective can also take an OBJ.

Recent work in LFG (Mittendorf & Sadler 2008, Al Sharifi & Sadler 2009) argues that certain constructions in Welsh and Arabic involve an adjective taking an OBJ. These constructions have the general shape in (1), where A denotes a property of NP_1 with respect to NP_2, as in the archaic English *a girl fair of face*. Welsh does not show case on non-pronominal nouns, but in Arabic NP_2 occurs in the genitive, which might alternatively suggest that the GF in question is OBL, although this possibility is not explicitly considered.

(1) NP_1 [A NP_2]$_{AP}$.

From a different perspective, Maling (1983) and Platzack (1982a, b) note the existence of a category of so-called 'transitive adjectives' in the earlier stages of the Germanic languages. Thus in Old Swedish (examples from Platzack 1982b):

(2)   a)   Adjectives taking the dative case: *trygger* 'faithful', *hemul* 'familiar'
      b)   Adjectives taking the genitive case: *vis* 'sure', *forespar* 'farsighted', *vilder* 'stray'
      c)   Adjectives taking accusative case: *rätter* 'suitable', *godher* 'kind'

The situation in Old Swedish can be compared to that in Latin shown in (3), where partly similar patterns of case assignment are attested (examples and classification from Gildersleeve & Lodge 1895 §§359, 374, 390.3, 395):

(3)   a)   Adjectives of likeness, fitness, friendliness, nearness take the dative, e.g. *similis* 'like', *idoneus* 'suitable', *communis* 'common'
      b)   Adjectives of fullness, participation, power, knowledge, desire, etc take the genitive, e.g. *plenus* 'full', *compos* 'sound', *diligens* 'careful'
      c)   Adjectives of separation, origin and source take the ablative, e.g. *liber* 'free', *immunis* 'exempt', *natus* 'born'

On the basis of the cases assigned to the complements, we could argue that adjectives in Latin and earlier forms of Germanic are associated either with the function OBJ or with OBL. Pinkster (1990) shows that the case assigned to the adjectival complements in Latin can be considered the result of two conflicting principles, a Structural Principle, which assigns genitive case to complements of nouns and adjectives, and a Semantic Principle, namely that 'optional constituents with adjectives often have the same case that is used to express a comparable semantic relation on the sentence level' and that 'there is a certain regularity in the case marking of adjectives and semantically related verb'. Though the connection between the semantics of the predicate and the case of the complement is not so obvious in Old Swedish, it does play some role and we can assume that the semantic principles reflect a shared inheritance from the Indo-European case system. The second question then relates to historical change. Following Pinkster's distinction, we argue that those cases where the Structural Principle determine the case function as OBJ, whereas those where the Semantic Principle wins out represent OBLs. In languages which have case, both functions are represented by noun phrases. Given Maling's (1983:254) observation that 'there is something essentially correct about the idea that it is less natural for A and N to take NP complements than for V and P to do so', the issue is what happens to the case marked complements as case is lost in Romance and Germanic?

Some Germanic languages retain case and modern German for instance have adjectives with nominal complements in genitive and dative. For languages which lose case, there are essentially three options:
(i)   change the syntactic status of the complement to PP as the general exponent of OBJ of nouns and adjectives and OBL in the language;
(ii)   change the syntactic status of the head to P, a category that does accept noun phrase OBJ;
(iii)   maintain the syntactic status of head and complement, but permit adjectives to take OBJ.

The modern Romance languages have taken the path described in (i). We argue that there are two reasons for this: on the one hand, there are no transitive adjectives because Latin had no adjectival accusatives, and on

the other the development was aided by the fact that there is a single preposition, *de/di* [< Lat *de* 'down, from, about'] which serves to mark dependents right across the nominal and adjectival domains. All previous genitives are therefore replaced by this one type of PP.

To a large extent, English has also followed the path in (i) and it is not likely to be a coincidence that it behaves like the Romance languages rather than like its sister Germanic languages; we attribute this to the influence of Norman French at the time when the Old English case system was being lost. However, as Maling (1983) argues convincingly, *worth* and *like* have been recategorised as prepositions and hence naturally take nominal complements. In short, they have followed the path in (ii). The only adjective in English that can take a nominal complement is *near* and this Maling reasonably describes as a historical remnant.

Swedish, Norwegian and Dutch, we argue, have taken the path in (iii). Exemplifying from Swedish, we show that the bold elements in (4) are truly adjectives; for instance in that they show agreement (4a, b) and the phrases they head distribute like adjective phrases, in that they can occur attributively and in the pre-verbal position (4c, d).

(4) a. Verkligheten blev oss **övermäktig**.
reality.COM.DEF become.PST us overpowering.COM
'Reality defeated us.'

   b. Livet blev oss **övermäktigt**.
life.NT.DEF become.PST us overpowering.NT
'Life defeated us.'

   c. den fienden **överlägsna** armén
the enemy.DEF superior army
'the army which was superior to the enemy'

   d. Sitt samvete **kvitt** kunde han återgå till sitt brottsliga liv
POSS.REF conscious rid could he return to POSS.REFL criminal life
'Having got rid of his conscience, he could return to his criminal life.'

We argue that the OBL of the earlier stages of Swedish has developed into OBJ and that this change has been mediated by the existence of accusative OBJ in the earlier stages. The fact that Swedish has not developed one single preposition marking the complements of nouns and adjectives is also argued to have played a role in this development. It is also striking that Swedish developed novel adjective+OBJ combinations after case had been lost. Swedish (and other northern Germanic languages) then truly have nominal OBJ with adjectives.

In summary the present paper argues for the following conclusions:

   a) adjectives may subcategorise for the full range of GFs, although OBJ is less widely attested, it comes about in Swedish because of conspiring historical facts;
   b) adjectival OBJ can be realised as either the verbal structural case (accusative) or the nominal one (genitive);
   c) when prepositional marking replaces morphological case, languages continue the preferences for structural vs semantic marking attested in the morphological stage, representing OBJ and OBL, respectively.

Selected references

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