

A formal account of adjectives and verbs in creole languages

Benjamin Braithwaite

The topic of lexical categories, and in particular the distinction between adjectives and verbs, has been the subject of considerable debate amongst linguists working on creole languages. On the one hand, there is little doubt that there is a distinction between the two: adjectives, but not verbs, can appear in attributive structures (1a). On the other hand, predicative adjectives pattern with stative verbs in a number of respects, including not taking a copula and being able to combine with tense, mood and aspect particles and suffixes (1b-c). Previous researchers have tackled this problem in a number of ways: Bickerton (1975) argues that predicative adjectives are stative verbs; Seuren (1986) argues that adjectives are adjectives, whether in predicative or attributive contexts; Alleyne (1980) argues that attributive adjectives are predicates that have been passivised. Kouwenberg (1996) and Winford (1996) both stress differences between the properties of subclasses of adjectives.

Formal accounts have been limited by the fact that generative linguistics has, until recently, paid very little attention to the nature of this distinction, treating it in terms of rather unrevealing binary N and V features. It is difficult to answer the question of whether the predicate in a sentence like (1b) is an adjective or a verb in the absence of precise definitions of what it means to be an adjective or a verb. For this reason, much of the previous debate has relied on the types of semantic distinctions familiar in functionalist accounts of lexical categories. The generativist silence has recently been broken by Baker's (2003) work on lexical categories, in which he argues that verbs and adjectives form discrete categories which are structurally distinguished.

This paper considers verbs and adjectives in creole languages in the light of the definitions proposed by Baker. According to Baker's theory, verbs project a specifier, whilst adjectives do not. On the assumption that a specifier is required for predicative functions, it follows that predicative adjectives must be complements of a specifier-projecting functional element, Pred, overtly realized in some languages, such as Edo (2a), but unpronounced in others (2b) like Arabic. In this paper, I argue that predicative adjectives in creole languages typically incorporate into a phonologically null Pred head, and that this accounts for their similarity to stative verbs. I show that the occurrence of an obligatory overt copula element in certain contexts, including reduplicated adjectives in Saramaccan (3a) and those premodified by degree adverbs in Sranan (3b), is a consequence of an intervening head which prevents the adjective raising to Pred. Taking data from a range of Caribbean creoles, the paper demonstrates how Baker's theory of lexical categories helps to explain patterns within individual languages and to account for differences and similarities between different languages. In so doing, it provides further support, from a group of languages which Baker himself does not discuss, for his approach to lexical categories.

Examples

- (1) a. He eatin the ripe mango. **TEC**
b. The mango-dem ripe.
c. The mango-dem ripin.
- (2) a. Èmèrí *(yé) mòsèmòsè. **Edo**
Mary PRED beautiful
'Mary is beautiful.'
b. Omar m̩rɪð **Arabic**
Omar sick
'Omar is sick.'
- (3) a. di womi de siki-siki **SM**
'The man is ill.'
b. a liba de so bradi **SR**
the river BE so broad
'The river is so broad.'

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