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Some Grammatical Peculiarities of Modern English Adjectives

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Abstract

This article gives information about grammatical features of adjectives in modern English language. In addition, it provides several instances concerning issue from prominent linguists.

Key Words: *suffixes, adjective, substance, qualitative adjectives, concept.*

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As far as grammar is concerned, it should be noted that there isn't much to say about the English adjective. In contemporary English, as is widely known, an adjective lacks case, number, and gender characteristics. Nevertheless, certain adjectives have varying degrees of variation, which are a component of a language's morphological structure. Hence, the English adjective is very different from languages like Russian that have a lot of inflectional patterns. Even Modern French, which has retained number and gender distinctions to this day (cf. male singular *grand*, masculine plural *grands*, feminine singular *grande*, feminine plural *grandes* 'big'), has retained its somewhat complex system of forms for adjectives. Latin and German exhibit similar difficulties.

In modern English, by what means do we identify an adjective as such? Semantic and syntactic phenomena may often be taken into consideration to do this alone. However, derivative suffixes are also important in particular situations, i.e., for specific adjectives. The suffixes *less* (as in *useless*), *like* (as in *ghostlike*), and a few more are among them. Occasionally, though, even when a suffix is frequently found in adjectives, this does not always mean that the word is an adjective—the suffix may alternatively be a component of a word that belongs to another part of speech. Thus, the suffix *-full* would seem to be typically adjectival, as is its antonym *-less*. In fact we find the suffix *-full* in adjectives often enough, as in *beautiful*, *useful*, *purposeful*, *meaningful*, etc. But alongside of these we also find

spoonful, *mouthful*, *handful*, etc., which are nouns.

Overall, the quantity of adjectives that are identifiable by their suffix appears to be negligible when compared to the overall number of adjectives in the English language. Traditionally, adjectives are separated into two major subclasses: relative and qualitative.

Adjectives that are relative describe characteristics of a substance that are based on its direct relationship to another material.

E.g.: *wood* – a wooden hut;
mathematics – mathematical precision;
history – a historical event;

The nature of this «relationship» in adjectives is best revealed by definitional correlations.

Ex.: a wooden hut – a hut made of wood;
a historical event – an event referring to a certain period of history;
etc.

Qualitative adjectives, as different from relative ones, denote various qualities of substances which admit of a quantitative estimation, i.e. of establishing their correlative quantitative measure. The measure of a quality can be estimated as high or low, adequate or inadequate, sufficient or insufficient, optimal or excessive.

Ex.: an awkward situation – a very awkward situation;
a difficult task – too difficult a task.

In this connection, the ability of an adjective to form degrees of comparison is usually taken as a formal sign of its qualitative character, in opposition to a relative adjective which is understood as incapable of forming degrees of comparison by definition.

Ex.: a pretty girl – a prettier girl; a quick look – a quicker look; a hearty welcome – the heartiest of welcomes.

But as the grammar treatises themselves point out, the specified principle of differentiation is not at all rigidly maintained in real speech. Here are two common examples of contradiction that should be noted.

First of all, substances may have characteristics that are incongruous with the concept of degrees of comparison. As a result, although though they are part of the qualitative subclass, adjectives that indicate these attributes are not often able to establish degrees of comparison. Adjectives such as extinct, immovable, deaf, final, fixed, etc. should be used here.

In the second place, many adjectives considered under the heading of relative still can form degrees of comparison, thereby, as it were, transforming the denoted relative property of a substance into such as can be graded quantitatively. Ex.: a mediaeval approach – rather a mediaeval approach – a far more mediaeval approach; of a military design – of a less military design – of a more military design.

To address the established lack of precision in the aforementioned definitions, we may perhaps add a linguistic distinction that is more flexible to the likelihood of usage. Adjectives serve an evaluative purpose, which is the basis of the proposed differentiation. The adjective functions can be classified as either "evaluative" or "specificative" linguistically depending on whether they genuinely offer a qualitative assessment of the

substance referent or only highlight its matching native attribute. In particular, one and the same adjective, irrespective of its being basically (i.e. in the sense of the fundamental semantic property of its root constituent) «relative» or «qualitative», can be used either in the evaluative function or in the specificative function.

The adjective "good," for example, is essentially qualitative. However, it acquires the said specificative value when used as a grading term in teaching, that is, when it is included in the marking scale alongside the grading terms bad, satisfactory, and excellent. In other words, it becomes a specificative rather than an evaluative unit in the sense of grammar, even though dialectically it does indicate a lexical assessment of the student's progress in this instance. Conversely, the adjective wooden is basically relative, but when used in the broader meaning «expressionless» or «awkward» it acquires an evaluative force and, consequently, can presuppose a greater or lesser degree («amount») of the denoted property in the corresponding referent.

E.g.: Bundle found herself looking into the expressionless, wooden face of Superintendent Battle (A. Christie). The superintendent was sitting behind a table and looking more wooden than ever.

Any adjective employed in a higher comparison degree (comparative, superlative), even if just for the nonce, is therefore transformed into an evaluative adjective because the degrees of comparison are fundamentally evaluative formulae (see the examples above).

In the long term, then, the contrast that has been suggested between the evaluative and specificative uses of adjectives highlights the fact that the morphological category of comparison (comparison degrees) is constitutive for and possibly reflected in the entire class of adjectives.

A lexemic set that claims to be recognized as a distinct component of speech, that is, as a class of words distinct from the adjectives in its class-forming qualities, exists among the words denoting attributes of a neurological referent. These are words that indicate various states, most of which are transient, and are constructed with the prefix a-. Lexemes like "afraid," "agog," "adrift," and "ablaze" fit here. Since these words are most often used as predicatives in sentences and are only rarely used as pre-positional attributes to nouns, they were traditionally classified as «predicative adjectives» in traditional grammar (some of them also falling under the category of adverbs).

Because of this, the sole morphological issue with adjectives is the degree of comparison. The first question that comes to mind is: To what extent is the English adjective (as

well as the adjectives in other languages like German, Russian, and Latin) comparable to one another? Shall we claim that there are three degrees of comparison, for instance, between the three forms of the English adjective large, larger, and (the) largest? If so, we should refer to them as superlative, comparative, and positive. Or should we argue that the first degree of comparison—large—does not represent any sense of comparison and is thus not a degree of comparison at all, and that only the latter two—comparative and superlative—are degrees of comparison? The field of grammatical theory has supported both points of view. Given that a degree of variation is a form that expresses the difference between an item or objects with regard to a certain feature, the first form (big) among the three should not seem to be included as it does not convey any variation. Then, there should be just two greater degrees of comparison—the largest—and a form that stands aside and corresponds with the stem that gives rise to the degrees of comparison—the fundamental form, if you will.

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