

ON COST ACCOUNTING IN LEXICAL STRUCTURE:

A REPLY TO FRANK HENY

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In the last issue of SAL a very stimulating article by Frank Heny [1972] appeared, in which a new suggestion for treating lexical categorization in Bantu was offered. Briefly stated, Heny suggested that the class Noun and Adjective in Bantu languages such as Shona should be considered one lexical class. The sole criterion in support of this suggestion involved some facts concerning the concord-agreement prefixes of these lexical categories. The phenomenon is traditionally known to Bantuists as the "Primary vs. Secondary concord" variation. It applies only to noun "classes" whose CV-shaped prefixes commence with a nasal consonant (here excluding class 10 which demands extra considerations). All modifier/predicate categories in Bantu must agree with the "class" (number-gender) of the head/subject noun. That is, they take the same class prefix as that noun. If the head noun has a nasal-commencing prefix, all modifiers/predicates--with the exception of adjectives--take the "secondary", V-shaped prefix. However, adjectives take the same CV-"primary" prefix as the noun itself. Thus, for example (from Swahili):

m(u)-ti u-le	'that tree'
mi-ti i-le	'those trees'
m(u)-ti u-me-vunjika	'the tree broke'
mi-ti i-me-vunjika	'the trees broke'

but, in contrast:

m(u)-ti n(u)-kubwa	'the tree is big', 'the big tree'
mi-ti mi-kubwa	'the trees are big', 'the big trees'

On the basis of this similarity between nouns and adjectives, Heny suggested that they be merged into one lexical category (which will then presumably be subdivided to account for the remaining differences between the two sub-categories).

It seems to me that there exist several strong arguments why a lexical solution of this type should be rejected.

1. Cost accounting in the lexicon

An adjective has no inherent gender features (in Bantu as well as any other language). Rather, it is an agreeing category, taking the gender-number features of the head or subject noun. Further, disregarding the use of modifiers as anaphoric pronouns (which is extensive in Bantu and involves all modifiers), the syntactic distribution of adjectives differs from that of nouns. The former may not appear as heads of NP's (unless under anaphora), while the latter do. The only syntactic position shared by the two is that of Predicate (following "be"), and this is a rather universal feature in language. Finally, in terms of semantic sub-categorization the two categories differ radically. Nouns go by some hierarchy such as concrete/abstract, animate/inanimate, human/non-human, etc. Whatever is the hierarchy for the semantic classification of adjectives, it is different, in part involving selectional restrictions which are defined upon those inherent (hierarchical) semantic features of nouns. Thus, in terms of cost-accounting (i.e. the number of exception features mentioned for a lexical category), Heny's solution would entail the following: set up a unified lexical category for both nouns and adjectives, say Noujective. Then subdivide it immediately into two sub-classes, one of which (i.e. Nouj_{Adj}) differs from "normal" noun members of the category (i.e. Nouj_{N}) in the following exception features: (a) members of this class have no inherent gender, and "agree" with the gender of nouns just like other modifier/predicate categories; (b) members of this class differ from "normal" nouns in their syntactic distribution; (c) members of this class have a semantic sub-categorization which is radically different from that of "normal" nouns, does not branch out from the same hierarchy and is rather reminiscent of that of other stative predicates. All these exceptional features will then characterize the new lexical sub-category Nouj_{Adj} in order to account

for a single, morphological feature which unites the two classes: the fact that both take the same CV- concordial prefix.

2. Variability in Bantu, synchronic and diachronic

While most Bantu languages conform to the double-concord system described above, in several this system has undergone a diachronic change, to the effect that adjectives, both modifying and predicating, have adopted the secondary (V-) concord type, and have been thus brought into line with all other modifiers/predicates. Thus in ChiBemba, for example (for further detail see Givón [1972]), this is indeed the case:

umu-ti uu-kalamba	'the tree is big', 'the big tree'
imi-ti ii-kalamba	'the trees are big', 'the big trees'

There is strong evidence that ChiBemba adjectives used to have the primary (CV-) concord but have changed it some time in the recent past. Now, here is the rub: the semantic class of adjectives in ChiBemba, Swahili, and Shona is virtually the same class. Its syntactic distribution is the same. But according to Heny's proposal there is a great difference at a rather deep level between Shona and Swahili on one hand and ChiBemba on the other: in the first two there is a class Noujective, while in ChiBemba no grounds for establishing this class exist. Further, taking Heny's suggestion, ChiBemba must have undergone a deep lexical reorganization fairly recently, moving from a one-class lexical categorization (as Shona and Swahili) to a two-class categorization, all this without changing syntactic distribution, semantic classification or the facts of the gender-features of nouns. Finally, in the ChiBemba concordial system there is one residue of the primary concord for adjectives--in Class 1 (human gender singular). For adjectives modifying this noun-class only, the concord is CV- rather than the now-normal V-:

umu-ana muu-kalamba	'the child is big'
*umu-ana uu-kalamba	

This last fact drives home the rather superficial nature of the phenomenon upon which Heny has based, entirely, his suggestion for the class Noujective.

3. Morphology in linguistic diachrony

In a number of papers (most explicitly in Givón [1971]) I have argued that the morphology of languages represents a petrified situation which reflects earlier stages in the syntax/semantics. That is, the morphology, because of its bound nature, is conservative, lagging behind the constant syntactic/semantic change in language. Now, there are good grounds for believing that the primary (CV-) concord of Bantu adjectives represents precisely this type of petrification (for more details of the data supporting this argument, see Givón [1972]). The class of non-derived adjectives in Bantu is extremely small. When you weed out stems obviously derived from synchronic nouns or verbs, the list reduces to less than ten. Most evidence suggests that even this small group was a relatively recent innovation in Proto-Bantu, and the most intelligent guess is that it originated from the gradual shift to using some noun stems (such as those for 'child', 'female', 'male') as modifiers. Some of these stems still exist as both nouns and adjectives (i.e. Bemba -kota 'female' (n.) and -kote 'female' (adj.)). Others may be only reconstructed (e.g. -pya 'new', 'young' (adj.), cf. -bi 'child' in Proto-Niger-Congo). Many Bantu languages still attest some NOUN-NOUN compounds in which the second member is a predicative modifier (on the paradigm of 'female-lion'). Now, if it is indeed true, as I have suggested here, that the class Adjective in Bantu arose from noun stems, then a most natural diachronic explanation exists for the primary concord of Bantu adjectives, namely that the erstwhile noun stems brought their noun-type prefixes with them when they changed their syntactic/semantic behavior. In other words, they behaved in full accord with what is known about linguistic change in general, so that a new syntactic/semantic class was established in the lexicon, while the bound morphology continued to reflect the pre-change situation.

heny's solution simply raises the question: should our synchronic syntactic/semantic description seek to account for the (more conservative)

morphology, or should we admit the facts of life, that the morphology will always lag behind? To me the answer to this is rather serious.

To sum up, then, in terms of Cost-Accounting, in terms of language-variability within the Bantu group (and along a temporal axis within the same language), and in terms of what is known to us about the relations between morphology and syntax, Heny's solution must be rejected.

REFERENCES

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