The noun-adjective boundary
Recent change and category theory

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 demolition of the temple
- She dreams every night
- a boy band

N but describing word
V but not doing word
N but doing 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: no problem
- Words may change category by the addition of an affix – usually a suffix:
  
  \textit{pedestrian} n. (1770-) \rightarrow \textit{pedestrianise} v. (1811-)
  
- Category change can also occur by process of conversion (or zero derivation):
  
  \textit{pedestrian} a. (1716-) \rightarrow \textit{pedestrian} n. (1770-)
  \textit{invite} v. (1553-) \rightarrow \textit{invite} n. (1659-)
  
- Such changes are clearcut and instantaneous and simply produce a new word.

Example: \textit{N} \rightarrow \textit{V}
- \textit{sanction} n. ‘decree’ (from late 16c)
  \textit{permission} (1720-)
  \textit{penalty} (1653-)
  \textit{coerce} (1919-)
  \textit{permit} (1797-)
  \textit{penalize} (1956-)

Morphology
- In morphology (the form and structure of words), normal to accept that members of a category may vary in their typicality. Thus:
  - \textit{heavy} is a very ‘good’ adjective
  - \textit{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 so Woody Allen. Neurotic as ever and so on top of his game. I could hear his voice every time Brangel opened his mouth. (2000)
  - It’s very silly, it’s very odd, it’s very Woody Allen. Love it. (2000)
  - Sleeper Nice Woody Allen movie made better by not being too Woody Allen (2000)
- 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 lottery launch
- Predicative complement:
  - The launch was recent.
  - The launch was a lottery.
  - The launch was lottery.

Overlap between N and A
- Pre-modifying phrase within NP
  - \([... \quad N_{\text{head}} \quad \ldots]_{\text{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.

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

Case studies

Denison, ‘N ~ A’
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 safe as well as fun. (1966)
  - [...] to a place as fun and earthy as a mud fight [...] (1990)
  - It was so fun. (1990)
- Don’t be too worried if the software seems too fun to be educational. (1993)

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 Nany Glo, Pa. (1926)
  - And later without definite article:
    - Spray-dried flavors are key ingredients of a new tableted carbonated drink concentrate. (1958 OED)
    - In addition to illness, homelessness is a key issue. (BNC)

Key

- Almost certainly A:
  - Two ideas were key in the discovery of the kineform. (1970 OED)
  - Groove is key, but it’s not the whole enchilada (1993 [OED draft additions June 2008])
  - I think this is key. I mean, it’s what every study has ACTUALLY found (ANC2)
  - Ongoing education may be just as key as more stringent certification requirements. (1998)
  - it was too key a nation to us to take a very strong stand on (1999)
**Key**
- Must be A:
  - and it's something key and crucial that I have learned in my life. (1996)
  - So therefore that was more key to you than [...] the police planting evidence or not planting evidence, etcetera? That was more important to you? (1996)
  - Organizational services are moving from the realm of being discretionary to being more key, more critical to an improved quality of life (1995)
  - It’s the most key part of this business. If you don’t make the right decisions, you can lose a considerable amount of money […] (1998)

**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 chaff. [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 seems to disappear from late 18C, with rubbishy coming to be used instead.

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

(Denison 2000)

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 a load of pants. Absolutely, definitely, no counter argument it is: 

  * Utter pants.

  * 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 pants. Things get better every day’ (1999)
  - Not going to let that spoil the night though, NAE DANGER of it being a pants nig. (2008)

- Probably/certainly A:
  - Oh, and TV shows about cutting age technology are really pants usually (2000)
  - This is also very pants indeed. (2004)
  - Currently feel like the pantsest teacher in the world – is this normal or am I really just rubbish? (2006)

Powerhouse

- Equivocal/uncertain:
  - Few fans, however, were prepared for the powerhouse offensive that Michigan uncorked. (1938)
  - George Auld’s new powerhouse band (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 so powerhouse, LOL (2007)
  - and frankly most of the expected titles don’t look too powerhouse. (2008)
  - We knew Hillary was powerhouse; now we know she’ll be accountable (1999)
  - You can hear her voice switch to a lighter, tamer tone rather than reach for anything powerhouse wherever 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 the most genius, the most entertaining and the most poignant chapter in the Father Ted chronology. (2003)
  - One of the most niche, artistic films you’ll probably see all year. [...] (2007)
- Playful?
  - The nicest 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)

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**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

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**Scheiß**

- Adjective, because inflected for comparative, though Lehmann (p.c.) says never attributive:
    - 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)
      - I’m feeling really crappy
    - Ich fühle mich echt scheisse – brauch euren rat
      - I feel myself really shit – need your advice

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**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.

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**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 category changes do affect overall tree.
- Could maintain constituent structure analysis.
- Allow categories to show prototype effects.

Aristotelian category

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.
References


