The ‘Adjective’ in Tibeto-Burman: A Case of the Mising Language

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to describe the form and distribution of Mising adjectives and adjectival in their modificational and predicational functions. ‘Adjective’ refers to “terms which describe property concepts” (Dixon 1997). The term ‘adjectival’ is used because, in the Tibeto-Burman languages, words which describe property concepts are frequently derived from other word categories – primarily from verbs. Moreover it has been argued that Tibeto-Burman languages frequently do not support an independent category of adjectives and it is likely that they were not part of the proto-language (Noonan 1997). Thus this analysis can be brought to bear on the question of whether adjectives are a distinct and independent category in Tibeto-Burman and whether or not are they re-constructible to the proto-language.

Keywords:

Introduction

Within functionalist theory, grammatical categories are claimed to arise from prototypes according to either of two inter-related schemata. The first is the time stability schema of Givón (2001). In brief: nouns represent the most time-stable concepts, and verbs the least. The second is the predication schema, whereby the basic unit of communication is the predication, whose basic parts are predicates and arguments. Nouns represent those words which are prototypically used as arguments; verbs represent those words which are prototypically predicates. According to either schema, adjectives are problematic: they represent concepts whose time stability is between that of nouns and verbs, and their status as predicates or arguments is, as a group, indeterminate. It has been observed that as a result of this is many languages lack a definable set of adjectives; instead either nouns or verbs express property concepts as the sense requires. And of those languages that do have a set of...
adjectives, the ‘true, or ‘core’ adjectives may be either small in number and constitute a closed set, and/or they may exhibit behaviours that distinguish them from nouns or verbs only in small ways (Dixon 1977, 2004). According to Noonan (1998), the native Tibeto-Burman pattern is, for the most part, to express property concepts as nouns (when modifying) or, as stative verbs (when predicking). Modifying adjectivals are usually nominalised, i.e. derived with a morpheme which also derives, or historically derived, nouns. Predicate adjectivals, on the other hand, will take the form of stative verbs, which in fact they are.

According to Noonan (1998), in Tibeto-Burman, where other patterns are found, the language has very likely innovated. One common sort of innovation involves the establishment of a class of adjectives through massive borrowings. In Tibeto-Burman languages, these adjective borrowings do not generally undergo the derivational processes that native forms do; and they form a separate (sub-) class.

Mising will be examined in light of these generalizations, and the following specific questions will be asked: How are property concepts in Mising expressed, with derived (adjectival) or underived (adjective) forms? If derived, are they nominalised? If underived, what is their origin – are they native or borrowed? What form and distribution do borrowings have; do they differ from native ones? How are the form and distribution of adjectives/adjectivals distinct from those of nouns and verbs?

**The ‘adjective’ in Mising**

Mising has two distinct lexical classes which encode property concepts. The first class of adjective contain the native terms. These native terms in turn are divisible into two distinct types- Core or underived and derived or nominalized native term adjectives. The second class of adjectives is the borrowed adjectives. Majority of these adjectives are borrowed from Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language widely spoken in Assam. In Mising, core semantic fields which cross-linguistically are expressed with adjectives (as identified by Dixon 1997, 2004) for example: colour, value, dimension and age, are core, nominalized and borrowed.
Native Terms

This section describes the form and distribution of the core native adjectives as opposed to borrowings – both those which are attributive and adnominal, i.e. those underived native terms which describe and modify nouns, as well as native terms which express property concepts as predicates.

Underived Adjectives

Mising, unlike other Tibeto Burman languages, has a small class of simple underived, i.e. non-nominalised adjectives (1a)-(1b):

1. (a) anu
   ‘new’

(b) aku
   ‘old (+inanimate)’

As well as the following, which are kinship terms (2a-2b):

(2a) bott sacrifices-kinship-brother
     big-brother

(2b) ajji sacrifices-kinship-brother
     small-brother

These simple adjectives cannot be nominalised when functioning as predicate adjectives in copular complement constructions, as in (3a).

(3a) *galuk-da anu-nə [>anno ]
     shirt-DEF new-COP
     ‘The shirt is new.’

Underived adjectives may be nominalised to become nominal-adjectives (nouns). In these cases, the nominaliser*nə is used. The meaning that results is specifically inchoative one the ‘getting old one’, as in (3b).

(3b) aku-na-da-m bi-tok
     old-NMZ-DEF-ACC give away-IMP
‘Give away the one getting old.’

These underived adjectives take verbal inflections, for example the stative (4a), and the stative-anterior (4b).

(4a) galuk-də anu-dak  
shirt-DEF new-STAT  
‘The shirt is new.’

(4b) galuk-də anu-dag-ai.  
shirt-DEF new-STAT-ANT  
‘The shirt was new.’

**Derived Adjectivals**

The majority of native property-describing terms in Mising are derived with the nominaliser-ₙə. Hence they are called adjectivals. Examples (5a)-(5c) demonstrate that ₙə is a nominalizer; it productively derives agent nominals.

(5a) rə-na-də  (5b) tnv-na-də  
buy-NMZ-DEF drink-NMZ-DEF  
‘the buyer’  ‘the drinker’

(5c) məə-dvr-na-tə  
think-exasperate-NMZ-DIS.EAST.LOC  
lumə-ŋə  
say-NEG-EMPH  
‘That sad one (up there) is not saying a thing!’

As seen in (5c), these nominalised forms take case markers, as do nouns.

In Mising, modifying native adjectivals are derived from verbs like in other Tibeto-Burman languages. In their non-nominalized form, they can express predications and take verbal inflections, as in (6a)-(6b).

(6a) məə-po-na kouwou-də keli-la-duŋ  
think-please-NMZ child-DEF play- PROG-IMPF
‘The happy child is playing.’

(6b) keli-la-duu-nə kouwou-də
play- PROG-DUU-NMZ child-DEM
məə-po-la-duŋ
think-please-PROG-IMPF
‘The playing child is happy.’

With the exception of the underived adjectives ‘new’ and ‘old’ property terms for core semantic fields (as per Dixon 1977, 2004), for example, colour and value, are nominalized (7a)-(7b). In many Tibeto-Burman languages, core terms are both native and borrowed. However, in Mising, both native and borrowed terms are nominalised.

(7a) ŋo-m ləv-nə gayin-də-m bi
1-ACC red-NMZ cloth-DEF-ACC give
‘Give me the red cloth.’

(7b) bv ai-maa-nə kou-ə
3 good-NEG-NMZ boy-COP
‘He is a bad boy.’

Borrowed adjectives

In Mising, many adjectival expressions are borrowed from the Indo-Aryan lingua franca- Assamese. These adjectives which are borrowed from Assamese are not a distinct category with a separate distribution from native underived adjectives or from native derived (nominalised) adjectivals. In their adnominal modifying function, they are nominalised, for example pisol from Assamese (8a). As predicates they are verbal and take all verbal inflections (8b).

(8a) ŋo pisol-nə lambə-dək gəv-məŋ
1 slippery-NMZ path-TRV go-NEG
‘I won’t go through the slippery path.’

(8b) lambə-ə pisol-dək
The path is slippery.

Structural and Distributional Similarities Between Native and Borrowed Adjectivals

Nominalized adjectivals, native (9a) and borrowed (9b), pattern with nouns. Both modify nouns and the modifying term precedes the modified.

(9a) ŋo oŋobozar-to oŋ-ŋom rə-ka
  l fish market-DST.E.LOC fish-ACC buy-PF
  ‘I have bought fish at the fish market (to the east of here).’

(9b) ŋo kampo-nə oŋ-ŋom bozar-to
  l white-NMZ fish-ACC market-DST.E.LOC
  rə-ka
  buy-PF
  ‘I have bought white fish at the market to the east of here.’

(9c) ŋo heujiya-nə oŋ-ŋom bozar-to
  l green-NMZ fish-ACC market-DST.E.LOC
  rə-ka
  buy-PF

The borrowed adjective ‘heujiya’ green in example (9c) is nominalized and precedes the modified.

Both native (10a) and borrowed (10b) adjectivals take noun phrase markers, as for example ‘təŋor’ cunning (10b). The transcription of the word, here, is slightly modified to suit Mising phonology.

(10a) məə-po-nə-kidi -də lu-duŋ
     think-please-NMZ-PL-DEF say-IPFV
     ‘The happy (ones) are saying.’
Nominalized adjectival that has a reference to action and process, both native and borrowed, do not appear with the equative copula ‘ə’ (11a), as do nouns, non-nominalized adjectival or ‘core’ adjectives. More explanations will be provided in the next section of this paper.

(11a) *koo-də  
boy-DEF  
run-able-NMZ  
COP

In predications, adjectivals, native (12a) and borrowed (12b), and ‘core’ adjectives (12c) pattern with verbs.

(12a) ncc-dc  
woman-DEF  
look-nice-STAT

‘The woman is beautiful.’

(12b) koo-də  
boy-DEF  
cunning-STAT-ANT

‘The boy was cunning.’

(12c) galuk-də  
shirt-DEF  
old-FUT

‘The shirt will be old.’

**Dissimilarity with Verbs**

Although they function as verbs do in most linguistic situations, Mising nominalized adjectivals and ‘core’ adjectives differ from verbs in their ability to appear in copular constructions. It seems that predicate adjectivals and underived adjectives as opposed to those that modify are not nominalised, Adjectivals are nominalised only when they exist as
adnominal. Yet both derived and underived adjectives may occur with the equative copula. In this respect they differ from verbs (13a-13b).

(13a) * koo-də dug-ə  
boy-DEF run-COP

(13b) koo-də kang-kan-ə  
boy-DEF look-nice-COP

‘The boy is beautiful!’

But Adjectives and adjectivals are not nouns either. They can appear with verbal inflections and cannot occur with the equative. So they are a class on their own – an adjective class.

**Conclusion: Points of Convergence and Divergence in MisingAdjectivals**

As is the case with other Tibeto-Burman languages, Adjectival modifiers, in Mising (7a)-(7b), are virtually always expressed with derived nominalized forms. Though Mising does have a very small class of underived adjectives, Nominalized adjectivals behave like nouns in Mising (9a)-(10b) too: they modify nouns, take noun phrase markers, and do not take verb inflections. As in other Tibeto-Burman languages, Mising (12a)-(12c), adjectivals in predications take all verbal inflections, i.e. they pattern with verbs. However, the two languages differ with respect to adjectivals as complements in copular clauses.

Unlike many other Tibeto-Burman languages, non-derived adjectivals seem to appear in a copular construction in Mising. The issue is discussed in the last section of this paper. Mising also diverges from other Tibeto-Burman languages in that adjectives borrowed into Mising are nominalized (8a)-(8b). Borrowed adjectives, in Mising, behave exactly as do native adjectives, both ‘core’ and nominalized, which does not occur in many other Tibeto-Burman languages and most other Bodic languages.

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