

**The Lexical Category of Adjective:
Challenging the Traditional Notion**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

Adjectives have always been defined as the major lexical category that describes nouns and that it is gradable. However, this definition is incomplete and potentially wrong: it is not only adjectives that are able to describe nouns, it is not the case that all languages have gradable adjectives – or adjectives at all –, and not every scholar defines adjectives as a major lexical category. The main goal of this paper is to dig deeper into the notion of adjective, challenging its universality and independence as a lexical category. In order to do so, an analysis and discussion of the semantic and syntactic properties of this class will be provided, alongside with a review of different views regarding its properties. Moreover, adjectives will be approached from the perspective of nanosyntax, analysing them as projections of Place and Path and discussing the semantic properties of deverbal adjectives. Finally, an account of languages that are considered not to have adjectives will be provided.

Keywords: adjective, lexical category, nanosyntax, semantics, syntax, universality, independence.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, nouns have been defined as those words that name people, places, or things; verbs as the words that are used to describe actions or states; and adjectives, as those words that modify nouns. Although these definitions are incomplete and vague, they have been kept for years and taught to grammar learners. However, the boundaries between categories can be fuzzy and controversial, both universally and within the same language (Cabredo 2010, Chung 2012, Baker 2003, Dixon 2004, among others). This paper will be focused on the lexical category of adjectives, which can be considered the most problematic and difficult major class to define (Fábregas 2016, Fábregas and Marín 2017, Baker 2003).

The main problem regarding adjectives is that they do not seem to have any unique property that defines them, both at a semantic and a syntactic level (Baker 2003, Fábregas 2016). Moreover, there is no consensus on their universality since there are authors that defend the idea that they exist in all languages (Baker 2003, Dixon 2004, among others), whereas other authors challenge this concept and state that they are not universal (Chung 2012, Fábregas 2016, Fábregas and Marín 2017).

In this paper, the universality and independence of the adjective as a lexical category will be discussed. The main goal is to dig deeper into this category, analyzing its semantic and syntactic properties and discussing it from different points of view. The objective of this discussion is to challenge the traditional notion of adjective as a lexical category and reach a conclusion regarding its universality and independence.

In order to do so, a nanosyntactic analysis of the adjectives (Fábregas 2016) will be required. Nanosyntax is a syntactic model that deals with sub-word level structures, which means that the root nodes of nanosyntax are elements smaller than morphemes: these are, namely, syntactico-semantic features (Ramchand 2008, Caha 2009, Starke

2010, Pretorius and Oosthuizen 2012, among others). This view changes radically the way syntax is understood, which means that many previously existing concepts and theories are challenged by this approach. Fábregas (2016) bases his theory about adjectives on nanosyntax, reaching the conclusion that adjectives are neither a universal nor an independent category (Fábregas 2016: 4).

The second section of this paper will provide a definition of the concept of *adjective* alongside with a description and discussion of its main syntactic and semantic properties. Moreover, there will be a sub-section in which different perspectives regarding adjectives will be presented. The third section will be divided in two parts: the first one will describe the syntactic model known as nanosyntax, whereas the second one will focus on the adjectives from a nanosyntactic point of view. In the second part of the section, a cross-linguistic analysis of adjectives as projections of Place and Path in Spanish and English will be provided, alongside a discussion of the internal semantic properties of deverbal adjectives. Finally, the fourth section will provide an account of languages that are considered not to have adjectives.

2. Adjectives

2.1 Definition of adjective

The term *adjective* comes from the Latin word *adject-*, which means “added” or “attached”. It was a translation from the Ancient Greek *epitheton (ónoma)* (“attributive name”), and the term was introduced in the English language in the late 14th century through the Old French word *adjectif, -ive*.

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, an adjective is “a word that describes a noun or a pronoun”. Moreover, if we take a look at the Oxford English

Dictionary, it can be seen that the notion of adjective is defined as “a word naming an attribute of a noun, such as *sweet, red, or technical*”.

Both definitions have in common that they define the class of adjectives in relation to nouns – and pronouns, in the case of the Cambridge English Dictionary. However, there is a subtle difference between both. In the Oxford English Dictionary, adjectives do not describe a noun anymore, but they name an *attribute*. Although it is still a conservative and clearly incomplete definition, we can see how it attempts to be a more specific definition than the former one.

Nevertheless, apart from being rather incomplete and antique definitions, they are not true for all the languages in the world (as we will see below). As Matthew (2015: 18) states, “this characterization of adjectives has long seemed attractive” for European languages, but it is an old-fashioned way to describe the word class of adjectives.

Indeed, defining the notion of adjective can be problematic, since the characterization of the adjective as an independent syntactic category is not an easy one, and there are different points of view regarding this topic. Although it is a widespread assumption that adjectives are an independent category from nouns and verbs, it is true that many authors (Cabredo 2010, Dixon 2004, Baker 2003, Matthews 2015) agree on the fact that the boundaries between adjectives and nouns, and adjectives and verbs may be fuzzy.

Moreover, the universality of adjectives has been put into question. As Cabredo (2010: 1) states, “identifying nouns, verbs and adjectives cross-linguistically is a difficult enterprise”. As it is discussed below, Baker (2003) and Dixon (2004) collected some criteria to set apart adjectives (Cabredo 2010: 2), in which it was said that adjectives (i) allow direct modification of nouns (Cabredo 2010: 2, citing Baker 2003), (ii) differ from other predicates in the comparative construction (Cabredo 2010, citing Dixon 2004), (iii)

agree in gender with the modified noun (Cabredo 2010, citing Baker 2003 and Dixon 2004), and (iv) can appear without a preposition in resultative predications (Cabredo 2010, citing Baker 2003). However, the application of these criteria failed since these properties are not shared by all adjectives in the languages. For instance, some languages like Portuguese, Sanskrit, and Dyirbal allow adjectives and nouns to be used to make a comparative construction (Cabredo 2010: 2).

In the next chapters of this section, the features that traditional grammar provides to define adjectives are explained, as well as a deeper insight on the works of other authors regarding the adjective as a syntactic and universal category and the controversy around its characteristics as a syntactic category.

2.2 Properties of adjectives

2.2.1. Semantic properties

Although it is argued that “adjectives often share properties of either nouns and verbs” (Cabredo 2010: 3), this section will examine the properties that have always been associated with adjectives, focusing on the semantic aspect.

To begin with, adjectives have always been considered to be those words that describe – or name an attribute – or modify a noun from a semantic point of view. But, semantically, this is not the only characteristic that motivates the consideration of adjectives as a different class.

First of all, adjectives are gradable. Gradability has always been recognized as “a prototypical property of adjectives” (Cabredo 2010: 4), since degree expressions in English just combine with adjectives, e.g. *very cold* or *a bit cold*. However, it does not happen the same in other languages. For instance, as Cabredo (2010) shows in her work,

the degree expression *trop* in French combines with adjectives but also with nouns and verbs, (1).

- (1) a. *trop apprécier* (Fr)
too appreciate
“appreciate too much”
- b. *trop de soupe*
too of soup
“too much soup”

(Cabredo 2010: 4)

In (1a), we can see how the degree expression *trop* combines with a gradable verb in the infinitive form, whereas in (1b), *trop* combines with a mass noun that is preceded by a preposition. These examples show us that gradability is not an exclusive property of adjectives, since in other languages it can be applied to other syntactic categories.

The same happens in the case of the comparative and superlative forms. Whereas in languages like German or English comparative and superlative forms are only limited to gradable adjective, there are languages like Spanish that allow comparative and superlative morphology in other categories (Cabredo 2010: 5).

- (2) *Muy filósofo estás, Sancho...* (Sp)
very philosopher be-LOC. 2SG Sancho
“You are in a very philosophical mood, Sancho”

(Cabredo citing Miguel de Cervantes, translation by J. Rutherford. *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Penguin Classics, 2001.)

(Cabredo 2010: 5)

However, in a study carried out by different researchers in which the adjectives of 13 different languages are analysed, Hajek (2004: 353) states that out of those 13 languages, “ten [languages] show evidence of some kind of comparative pattern, function, or structure limited to adjectives”. Therefore, comparative and superlative constructions may not be an exclusive characteristic of adjectives cross-linguistically, but it is a key feature of this category.

Moreover, Kennedy and McNally (2005) classified gradable adjectives according to their scale structure. They argue that gradable adjectives can be open or close, and that open adjectives have relative standards of comparison e.g. the adjective *big* can be modified by *very* (Cabredo 2010: 6) – and that close adjectives have absolute standards of comparison e.g. the adjective *unique* cannot be modified by *very*, but by *completely*.

Secondly, adjectives can be intersective or non-intersective. On the one hand, intersective adjectives are those adjectives that “license inferences between the attributive and the predicative use based both on the noun and on the adjective” (Cabredo 2010: 6), (3).

(3) “x is [Adj N]” \rightarrow “x is Adj” and “x is N”

On the other hand, non-intersective adjectives are those adjectives that do not make reference to the object denoted by the noun. For instance, the adjective *possible* in the Noun Phrase *a possible candidate*. Being “a possible candidate” does not entail being a candidate. Non-intersective adjectives can be divided in subsective, (4), or non-subsective adjectives, (5).

(4) Subsective adjectives

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------------|---|
| a. | X is Adj N \rightarrow X is a N | X is a perfect typist \rightarrow X is a typist |
| b. | X is Adj N \nrightarrow X is Adj | X is a perfect typist \nrightarrow X is perfect |

(5) Non-subsective adjectives

a. X is Adj N -/-> X is a N X is an alleged murderer -/-> X is a murderer

b. X is Adj N -/-> X is Adj X is an alleged murderer -/-> *X is alleged

(Cabredo 2010: 7)

However, the difference between intersective and non-intersective adjectives can also be partly found in the syntax, due to the fact that “only attributive adjectives allow intersective and non-intersective readings, while predicative adjectives are always intersective” (Cabredo 2010: 7).

2.2.2. Syntactic properties

From a syntactic point of view, adjectives can be divided into two categories: attributive, (6), and predicative adjectives, (7). As it is well-known, attributive adjectives are defined as those adjectives that “directly modify a noun” (Cabredo 2010: 10) and are found before the noun that are modifying –although in some cases, they can be found just after the noun–, and predicative adjectives are the ones that can be found after the verb:

(6) The *expensive* shoes that I like.

(7) The shoes that I like are *expensive*.

This section will focus on the syntax of both attributive and predicative adjectives, highlighting their main features, discussing the different analyses that have been proposed, and establishing a syntactic relationship between both types of adjectives.

Nevertheless, before focusing on attributive and predicative adjectives, it needs to be highlighted that most adjectives can freely occur in both the attributive and the predicative positions. Actually, a few adjectives can only occur in just one position. For instance, the adjective *main* can only occur in attributive position, while the adjective *afraid* can only occur predicatively (Matthews 2015: 16).

- (8) a. The *main* reason
 b. *The reason is *main*.

- (9) a. *An *afraid* man
 b. The man was *afraid*.

To begin with, there are two main views regarding attributive adjectives. The first view is that attributive adjectives can be seen as heads in a syntactic tree. In this analysis, adjectives “take the NP as a complement or as a specifier” (Cabredo citing Abney 1987, Bhatt 1990, and Delsing 1993). The main argument of this approach was that adjectives that are positioned before the noun do not admit complements in English. However, this is not the case for other languages such as Swedish or German, which do admit prenominal adjectives to have complements. There are even languages that admit prenominal adjectives followed by adjuncts:

- (10) glavnata po značenje pricina (Bulg)
 main.the in significance reason
 “the main reason for importance”

- (11) o kírios kata proetereótita logos (Gk)
 the main by priority reason

(Cinque 2010: 47)

The second view regarding attributive adjectives is that they can be seen as specifiers, which means that “adjectives are phrases that are either adjoined to NP or specifiers of dedicated functional projections in the extended projection of the noun” (Cabredo 2010: 12). Cinque (1994) makes a distinction within this approach between thematic adjectives in nominalisations, (12a), adverbial adjectives in nominalisations, (12b), and adjectives that modify underived nouns, (12c).

- (12) a. the *Italian* invasion of Albania

In addition, it has been observed that attributive adjectives allow multiple modification without coordination,² whereas predicative adjectives need coordination when multiple modification occurs (Cabredo 2010: 17). For instance, it is possible to say *the small brown box*, but it is not possible to use *small* and *brown* in predicative position without coordination, e.g. **the box is small brown*.

Overall, adjectives are a problematic lexical category, both semantically and syntactically speaking. Although adjectives are considered a universal category, there are many authors that state the contrary and present different approaches that defy the universality of this class. In the next section, more approaches to adjectives will be presented and discussed.

2.2.3. Other views

Adjectives are a controversial category. Cross-linguistically, it is difficult to find characteristics that exclusively define them. Even in the same language, adjectives do not seem to be a consistent lexical category and sometimes the boundaries between categories can be difficult to establish. Then, which is the feature that defines adjectives? In this section, a brief account is provided of two main views, namely Baker's (2003) and Fábregas's (2016), which radically differ from the traditional grammar view.

Baker (2003) states that adjectives do not have any unique property that defines them, which means that they are basically defined by not being nouns and not being verbs. Then, the prototypical function of adjectives as modifiers and the notion that they are gradable do not represent exclusive characteristics, but derived ones (Baker 2003: 191).

² Simpson (2005: 834) argues that there are languages like Thai, Nung and Indonesian that do not allow multiple modification without coordination in attributive position. As is stated in Cabredo's (2010: 18) work, "when two adjectival modifiers appear, they have to be conjoined (in Thai and Nung) or the second modifier has to be expressed in a relative clause (in Indonesian)".

For instance, it is suggested in his work that “it is wrong to build a theory of adjectives around the property of noun modification” (Baker 2003: 195). Actually, not only adjectives can perform that function since nouns and verbs can also perform the function of nouns modifiers “if they are embedded in the right additional functional structure” (Baker 2003: 193).

Pullum (2017) supports this view by claiming that gerund participles, (14), past participles, (15), and nouns, (16), can perform the function of attributive modifiers, and not because they do are they considered adjectives.

- (14) a sleeping dog
- (15) the exhausted passengers
- (16) Edinburgh weather

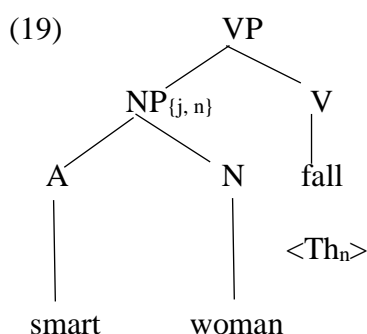
(Pullum 2017)

Fábregas (2016: 2) agrees with this view, and gives an account of nouns, (17a), and prepositional phrases, (17b), in Spanish that can also modify nouns. Moreover, he states that the same happens in comparative structures in Spanish, where we can find nouns (18) as their core, (18).

- (17) a. una oferta estrella (Sp)
 an offer star
 “the best offer”
- b. un objeto de metal (Sp)
 an object of metal
 “a metallic object”
- (18) tiene más amor que otro (Sp)
 s/he.has more love than another

(Fábregas 2016: 2)

In terms of syntactic structure, “adjectives are parasitic categories that cannot be defined inside one single projection” (Fábregas 2016, citing Hale & Keyser 2002). Baker (2003: 195) agrees with this statement in his theory, due to the fact that “adjectives are simply lexical heads that are not nouns or verbs”.



(Baker 2003: 195)

Finally, gradability cannot be considered a characteristic feature of adjectives, either. First of all, there are adjectives that cannot be gradable, such as *pregnant* or *prime* (Baker 2003: 213). Secondly, Baker (2003) states that nouns and verbs can be gradable as well since there can be different degrees of hunger or “different levels of being smart” (2003: 213). Thirdly, not only adjectives can carry degree morphology in Spanish, but also adverbs (Fábregas 2016: 3), as exemplified in (20).

(20) Lej-ísimo
 far-SUPL
 “very far away”

(Fábregas 2016: 3)

To sum up, both Baker (2003) and Fábregas (2016) offer rather radical views regarding adjectives that challenge the traditional notion of this category. However, Fábregas (2016: 4) claims that adjectives cannot be considered a universal or an independent category. In the next section, Fábregas’s theory about adjectives will be developed and analysed.

3. Nanosyntactic view

3.1 Nanosyntax

Nanosyntax is a syntactic approach that attempts to explain phenomena that were not possible to explain by means of other syntactic approaches. As Pretorius and Oosthuizen (2012: 433) state, nanosyntax is “a more “fine-grained” system [...] that can account for the behaviour of linguistic elements which used to appear unpredictable”.

The origins of nanosyntax can be found in the cartographic framework (Rizzi 1997, Cinque 1999, Kayle and Pollock 2001, among others), which is a syntactic theory that tries “to provide a detailed structural map of natural language syntax” (De Clerq 2017). Moreover, nanosyntax shares many features with the Distributed Morphology approach (Halle and Marantz 1993, Harley and Noyer 1999), since both theories deal with sub-word level structures and challenge the notion that lexicon precedes syntax.

However, even if the nanosyntactic approach aims to describe inexplicable phenomena, it keeps the same systematicity and resources as other syntactic approaches –for instance, the Minimalist Approach. The structures used are binary syntactic trees that are merged together (Pretorius and Ooesthuizen, 2012: 434) and movement is part of this approach –although the concept of head movement may be problematic.³

As I said above, nanosyntax assumes that syntax precedes the lexicon, that is to say, syntax builds the structures and then these structures are matched with corresponding syntactic structures that are encoded on lexical entries in the lexicon (Pretorius and Ooesthuizen, 2012: 439). Then, according to this assumption, terminal nodes are not morphemic anymore, which means that morphemes will contain subtrees and the

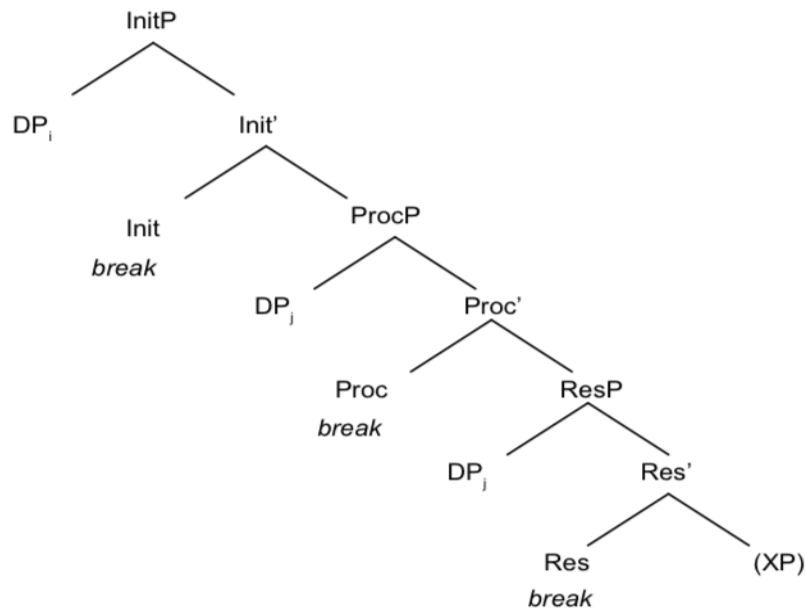
³ Since the terminal nodes are not lexical items but sequences of sub-word level features, Caha (2009: 26) claims that head movement must be replaced by “phrasal-movement”.

terminals will be submorphemic. According to Starke (2009), this view may have many consequences, one of them being that lexical items can be of different syntactic sizes, which leads to the conclusion that “various sizes of lexical elements lead to different syntactic categories” (Starke 2009: 2). For instance, as far as Starke is concerned, verbs may be “bigger” than nouns, and adjectives “smaller” than the latter.

However, if the terminal nodes are not made of morphemes, what are syntactic trees made of? Actually, they are made of syntactico-semantic features. This is the point where nanosyntax mostly differs from the rest of syntactic models, since it means that each node represents a unit which is smaller than a lexical item –a syntactico-semantic feature–, and that a morpheme is spelled out by a sequence of features (Pretorius and Oosthuizen 2012: 435).

We find a good example about of syntactico-semantic features in Ramchand’s (2008) work, where she proposes that verbal predicates are constituted by three syntactico-semantic features: [Init(iation)], [Proc(ess)], and [Res(ult)]. According to her, [Init] is a causation element and it is not obligatory, [Proc] is an element expressing change and it is obligatory, and [Res] expresses final state and it is optional (Pretorius and Oosthuizen 2012: 435). In her work, Ramchand makes a representation of the verb *break* according to this theory:

(21)



(Pretorius & Oosthuizen 2012: 435)

In this syntactic tree, we can see that the whole structure spells out one lexical item (*break*), and that this lexical item is composed of the three syntactico-semantic features mentioned above. Moreover, Ramchand (2008) states that the DPs present in the tree have different roles. The DP of the specifier position of the [Init] projection is called INITIATOR and functions as the external argument or subject of the predicate. The one filling the specifier position of [Proc] is called the UNDERGOER and the one filling the specifier position of [Res] is the RESULTEE, and both are the internal argument or the object of the predicate (Pretorius and Oosthuizen 2012: 436).

Finally, it is important to remark that there may not be one-to-one matching between syntactic trees and trees stored in lexical items, which means that there may be more than one lexical item competing to spell out a structure that syntax has produced (Starke, 2009). In these cases, nanosyntax needs to use different mechanisms in order to choose which are the most suitable lexical items for a given syntactic tree. One of the most prominent mechanisms to choose a lexical item for insertion is the Superset Principle.

According to Pretorius and Oosthuizen (2012: 441), the Superset Principle inserts a lexical item to spell out a sequence of syntactico-semantic features “if the item matches all or a superset of the features specified in the syntactic structure”. Then, in order for insertion to be done, the lexical item needs to have the same features than the syntactic tree provided by the syntax. However, if that lexical item contains more features that are not specified by the syntax, these features are “underassociated”, that is to say, ignored (Pretorius and Oosthuizen 2012).

However, what happens if two lexical items that are competing for insertion are qualified to be inserted in the syntax? In this case, the Elsewhere Condition is applied. Starke (2009: 4) also refers to this principle as “Minimise Junk Principle”, and he states that “if several lexical items match the root node, the candidate with least unused nodes wins”. Therefore, the Elsewhere Condition chooses the lexical item that is more specific according to the syntactic structure.

3.2 Syntactico-semantic properties of adjectives

As has been mentioned before, Fábregas (2016: 4) offers a radical view regarding adjectives: he clearly states that “adjectives are neither a universal category nor an independent category”. In his study, he compares both Spanish and English adjectives within the nanosyntactic approach, focusing on both their syntactic and semantic features.

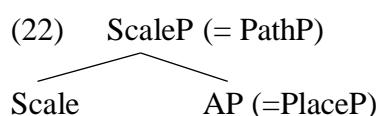
This section will be divided in two parts: the first one will be focused on the syntactic –and morphological– aspects of this approach, where adjectives are treated as projections of Place and Path;⁴ whereas the second part will discuss the internal semantic

⁴ Pantcheva (2011) defines Path as a component that can be decomposed in a sequence of ordered points, such as Goal, Source, or Location. The notion of Place –or Location– would be allocated inside the notion of Path, and it represents a point inside this sequence of points of a Path. However, Fábregas (2007, 2016) addresses the notions of Path and Place focussing on the concept of directionality.

properties of adjectives derived from verbs, focusing on the concepts of *dispositionality*, *habituality*, and *modality*.

3.2.1 Place/Path Projections

Fábregas (2016) states that adjectives are built in a different way depending on the language. In his comparison between Spanish and English adjectives, he makes two claims: semantically, all languages make an association between adjectives and scales; but syntactically, not all the languages reflect scales –e.g., English does not whereas Spanish does (Fábregas 2016: 5). More specifically, he argues that “in Spanish adjectives are built by using the notion of PathP, while in English one uses the notion of PlaceP” (Fábregas 2016: 4).



(Fábregas 2016: 5)

According to him, there are three properties in the adjectives that throw light on this issue: first, he states that the syntactic distribution of adjectives in resultative phrases differ from Spanish to English; second, he analyses change of state verbs that are derived from an irregular adjective; and third, he discusses the occurrence of absolute and relative adjectives followed by a P(repositional) P(hrase) in both English and Spanish.

The first property that Fábregas (2016) analyses is the distribution of resultative phrases in Spanish and English. More specifically, he compares both languages in terms of their need towards the use of a PP and/or an AP in order to introduce the resultative construction⁵.

⁵ Farkas (2013: 27) defines the concept of resultative construction as “a predicate structure where VP expresses the causing process and XP denotes the end state/location achieved by the (surface) subject (DP₁) or the postverbal DP (DP₂) as a direct consequence of the action of the verb”.

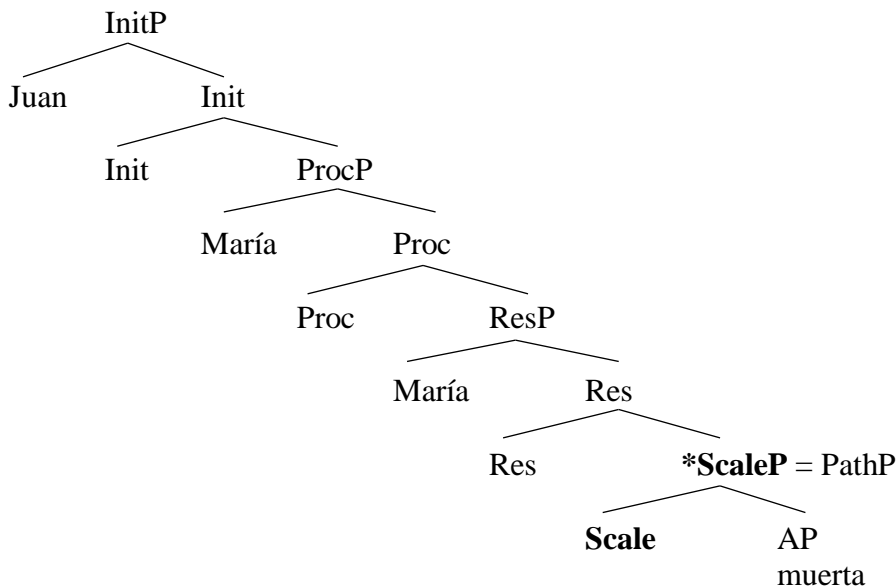
First of all, he argues that resultative phrases can be selected by PPs and APs in English, but not in Spanish, where they can only be selected by Prepositional Phrases.

- (23) a. John shot Mary dead.
 b. *Juan disparó a María muerta. (Sp)
 John shot A Mary dead.

(Fábregas 2016: 5)

The Spanish example in (23b) does not mean “John shot Mary and as a result she died”, but “John shot Mary when she was already dead”. Then, this example leads us to Fábrega’s (2016: 6) second point: [ResP] cannot take [PathP], but [PlaceP]⁶. If we look at (22), we can see how [PathP] is defined as [ScaleP], and [PlaceP] is actually the AP. Therefore, Spanish adjectives will project [ScaleP] and [PlaceP] while the English ones will just project [PlaceP], which means that they can be selected by [ResP].

- (24) *Juan disparó a María muerta.



(Fábregas 2016: 7)

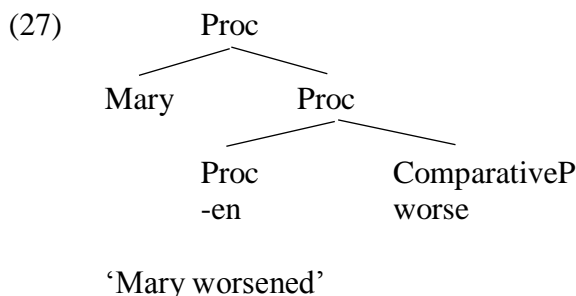
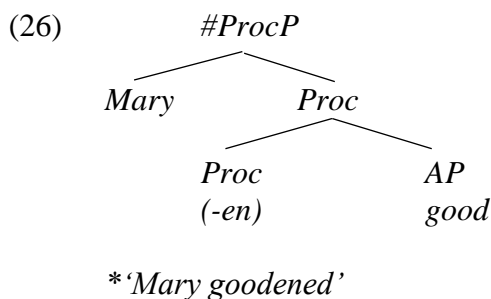
⁶ See Section 3.1. where Ramchand’s (2008) proposal about the syntactico-semantic features of verbs is presented.

The second property is a morphological one, which claims that deadjectival verbs⁷ in Spanish can be derived from the positive degree and the suppletive comparative, whereas in English they can be derived just from the suppletive comparative (Fábregas 2016: 8).

- (25) a. to worsen / *to badden
 b. a-buen-ar (Sp)
 to-good-V

(Fábregas 2016: 8)

In this case, we come back to what it has been said before: Spanish adjectives project [ScaleP], which means that they project the feature [ProcP] that is necessary for adjectives in positive degrees to become deadjectival verbs. However, English adjectives do not project that feature and therefore they need a suppletive comparative that introduces a scalar object (Fábregas 2016: 9).



(Fábregas 2016: 9-10)

⁷ Hale and Keyser (1993, 2002) define deadjectival verbs as verbs “derived by movement of lexical material from complement position into the abstract, phonologically empty head of the verbal projection” (Farkas 2015: 31).

Moreover, Ramchand (2008) provides a view of incorporation into V that supports Fábregas's approach. She distinguishes between Rheme of process – it expresses manner or path –and Rheme of result– which expresses location or final state. Then, as Farkas (2015: 31) states, “incorporation into V creates derived verbal items minimally specified for [(+v), +V], given that the rhematic material is meant to describe and identify the process”.

The third and last property that Fábregas presents compares the compatibility of absolute and relative adjectives with “overt standard of comparison Prepositional Phrases” (Fábregas 2016: 10) in Spanish and English. In this analysis, he reaches the conclusion that English allows both absolute and relative adjectives to be followed by a PP to make a comparison, while Spanish just allows relative adjectives to do so.

(28) Relative adjectives

- a. This child is tall for a three-year-old.
- b. Juan es alto para un chico de tres años. (Sp)

(29) Absolute adjectives

- a. This glass is full for a wine glass⁸.
- b. *Esta copa está llena para una copa de vino tinto. (Sp)

(Fábregas 2016: 10)

In order to explain this phenomenon, he proposes that, on the one hand, Spanish makes the distinction between absolute and relative adjectives in the syntax, which means that there are different [ScaleP] projected depending on the adjective. On the other hand,

⁸ McNally (2011) argues that *full* is an absolute adjective, and that absolute adjectives do not allow *for*-phrases in order to make a comparison. However, the case of *full* is a special one. As she states, “the addition of information about comparison class or specific compared individuals may be added to improve the precision of the property ascription” (2011: 12). Moreover, Fábregas states that absolute adjectives followed by a *for*- phrase is possible in English if they are accommodated in context (2016: 10).

English does not make this distinction syntactically but semantically, even if the adjective needs to be accommodated in context (Fábregas 2016: 11).

To sum up, Spanish and English syntactically differ in three three properties discussed. First of all, Spanish projects scalar syntactic structure while English does not. Secondly, Spanish adjectives are Path, which means that they are not selectable by [Resp] but by [ProcP]. However, English adjectives are selectable by [RespP] because they just project [PlaceP]. Thirdly, PPs in Spanish are sensitive to the syntax, since it projects different syntactic structures depending on the adjective, whereas English PPs are not.

Therefore, we can conclude from this analysis that adjectives are not syntactically projected in the same way in English and Spanish. That is to say, Fábregas manages to challenge the universality of the adjectives. In the next section, an internal semantic analysis of deverbal adjectives is provided, focusing on the concepts of *dispositionality*, *habituality*, and *modality*.

3.2.2. Internal analysis of deverbal adjectives

As we have seen, it is difficult to find universal and characteristic properties of adjectives. Baker (2003: 190) defines adjectives as a category that is neither a noun nor a verb, stating that “there is nothing special about adjectives”. Furthermore, Fábregas and Marín (2017) highlight “the absence of a positive definition of what an adjective is”. In their work, they even state that when a noun or a verb transform into an adjective, they may “be losing (part of) their positive properties” (Fábregas and Marín: 8).

In this section, the main semantic properties of deverbal adjectives will be provided and discussed. The first thing that has to be taken into account is that the

deverbal adjective loses “the Aktionsart⁹ of the base verb” (Fábregas and Marín 2017: 9). Therefore, we have to apply a non-episodic reading since they do not refer to any specific event located at any moment or location (Fábregas 2016: 13). Although there are more non-episodic readings, this section will be focused on the main ones: *dispositionality*, *habituality*, and *modality*.

Dispositionality refers to the internal properties of the entity described, which has a certain tendency to participate in an event if the right conditions are given. Fábregas (2016) exemplifies this type of non-episodic reading in the following way:

- (30) un cuchillo cortante (Sp)
a knife cut-NTE
“a cutting knife”

(example adapted from Fábregas 2016: 14)

The knife will only cut if there is some pressure exerted and its blade is in contact with another surface or entity. Then, if the right conditions are not facilitated, (30) would be false. Dispositionality entails that the internal properties of the noun are enough to make an entity participate in a specific event if there are facilitating conditions, although it must be taken into account that these facilitating conditions can be very complex – for instance, they can refer to a specific location, to the consciousness of the object, etc. (Fábregas 2016: 25).

The second non-episodic reading is habituality. On the contrary, the habitual reading does not refer to the internal properties of the noun described, but to the regularity of an entity participating in an event (Fábregas 2016; Fábregas and Marín 2017). For

⁹ The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar (Bas 2014) defines Aktionsart as “the lexical expression of aspect; the expression of various types of situations (actions, processes, etc.) by lexical items as opposed to by grammatical means”.

instance, in the phrase *a forgetful child* (Fábregas 2016: 15), the child is prone to forget things, even though he or she has not forgotten anything today.

The most important feature of habitual readings is that the modified nouns include among their properties “the capacity to have mental states” (Fábregas 2016: 21). Therefore, an animate entity is necessary in order to have a habitual reading, due to the fact that animate entities have causation properties¹⁰ and they can even control how the situation created by them may develop (Fábregas 2016: 21).

The third and last non-episodic reading of derived adjectives is the modal reading. Modals can be divided into two different kind of adjectives: potential and deontic adjectives (Rainer 1999: 4600-4601, 4607-4609). Potential adjectives are those adjectives whose properties could “allow participation in an eventuality” (Fábregas and Marín 2017: 10), but those properties do not force the entity to participate in a given event, “they just make it possible” (Fábregas 2016: 17).

(31) ule – garri (Basque)

understand – GARRI

“understandable, that can be understood”

(Fábregas and Marín 2017: 10)

In (31), the adjective entails certain characteristics of the entity that may describe, but these characteristics do not force the occurrence of any event, even if the facilitating conditions are given. For instance, a book can be *understandable*, but if someone chooses not to read it, the event is not created.

In the case of deontic deverbal adjectives, there is no “causal relation between the internal properties of the entity and the possible participation in an event” Fábregas 2016:

¹⁰ Fábregas (2016) names the relationship between the properties of the noun and the properties of the habitual reading in the eventuality of the derived adjective as a relationship of “weak causation”. However, this does not always imply willingness from the entity to perform an action. If we take example (9), we can see how the child is not *forgetful* on purpose.

16). That is to say, the properties of the entity described by the adjective neither force and event nor change if this event has occurred. In (32), we see how the certificate must still be paid even if the circumstances facilitate the payment but the certificate is not paid (Fábregas 2016: 25).

(32) un certificado pagadero (Sp)
 a certificate pay – DERO
 “a payable certificate”

(Fábregas 2016: 16)

Fábregas and Marín (2017) offer three possible answers to the question of why verbs lose their temporality when they are transformed into adjectives. The first possible answer is that “the notion of “property” that the adjective imposes over a verb directly produces recategorization of the denotation of the base”, which means that tense would be ignored, as well as its temporality. The second one would be that non-episodic readings are produced due to the presence of operators. According to this theory, AP would not be necessary in the syntactic structure of deverbal adjectives, since operators would “bind the eventuality” (Fábregas and Marín 2017: 10). In (33), (33a) would represent the classic structure for a deverbal adjective, while (33b) would represent the structure in which operators bind the eventuality.



(Fábregas and Marín 2017: 11)

The third possible answer that they offer is that a deverbal adjective is actually a verb that has lost the information necessary to “define a change of state or an episodic event” (Fábregas and Marín 2017: 11). All of these three possible answers do not solve the problem and do not define adjectives as an independent and universal category. Then,

to sum up, we have seen in this section how verbs lose their temporal structure when transformed into adjectives. Moreover, we have gone through the main non-episodic readings of deverbal adjectives and we have seen three possible answers to the fact that deverbal adjectives do not entail the participation of an entity in a specific event at a specific instance. However, Fábregas and Marín (2017) do not find any unique property that define adjectives as an independent lexical category.

4. Languages without adjectives

Dixon (1977) made a distinction between languages that have an open class of adjectives –e.g. European languages–, a closed class of adjectives¹¹ –e.g. Swahili–, and languages that have no adjectives at all –e.g. Hocank (Helmbrecht 2014: 4). This section will focus on languages without adjectives and the two different views regarding these languages.

In the first sub-section, a review of two languages –Wolof and Hocank– that have been claimed not to have adjectives will be provided. Although there is a widespread claim in favour of the fact that some languages do not have adjectives (Pullum 2017, Fábregas and Marín 2017, among others), there are some authors like Baker (2003) that state that all languages have adjectives. The second sub-section will review Baker’s work in which he defends the idea that this lexical category exists in every language.

4.1 Wolof and Hocank

Fábregas and Marín (2017: 8) claim that “a language can be perfectly functional without words of this class [adjectives] because other lexical categories will play the role adjectives play”. In fact, languages that are considered not to have adjectives use nouns

¹¹ As is stated in Helmbrecht (2014), languages with a closed class of adjectives have no more than 50 lexical items –and even less in some cases– which always designate the same semantic properties: dimension, age, value and color.

or verbs in order to express the meaning that would be expressed by an adjective in those languages that do have adjectives.

This sub-section will deal with two languages that are considered adjectival-verb languages, that is to say, languages that use verbs instead of adjectives. First of all, Mc Laughlin's (2004) study about Wolof will be reviewed, providing a brief description and analysis of the languages. Secondly, the sub-section will focus on Hocank and the study that Helmbrecht (2014) carried out.

Wolof is a language spoken in Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania, and it belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. As Mc Laughlin (2014: 242) states, "one of the striking characteristics of many Niger-Congo languages is the small set of underived adjectives they possess". For instance, languages like Ibo and Ewe have a set of eight and five underived adjectives, respectively (Mc Laughlin 2014 citing Welmers 1973, Dixon 1982 and Ameka 2002).

In the case of Wolof, the lexical items that should be adjectives behave in a "verb-like manner" (Mc Laughlin 2014: 242), so they work as intransitive predicates and they modify nouns within a relative clause construction. Verbs in Wolof are invariable, so person, number, and aspect are carried by an auxiliary.

- (34) *Dem naa Ndakaaru*
v:go 1sg: PERF Dakar
"I went to Dakar"

(Mc Laughlin 2014: 244)

Although adjectival verbs behave in a similar way that verbs –they function as transitive and intransitive predicate, inflect for tense, mood and aspect, take verbal extensions, take adverbs, etc.–, Mc Laughlin manages to make a distinction between verbs and a class of adjectives that denote the semantic properties of dimension, age,

value, and colour.¹² However, she states that an adjective class cannot be separated from the verb class since “the extent of class membership is not completely clear” (Mc Laughlin 2014: 261).

In the case of Hocank, the results are slightly different. Hocank is an endangered language –with 200 speakers approximately– spoken in North America (mostly in Wisconsin) that belongs to the Siouan language family. In his study, Helmbrecht (2014) states that Hocank is an adjectival-verb language. However, unlike Wolof, there is no possibility of minimally separating a class of adjectives from verbs (Helmbrecht 2014: 22).

To begin with, he states that “modification is expressed by alternative constructions in Hocank involving nouns and verbs” (Helmbrecht 2014: 22). According to him, there are four different constructions that express modification in Hocank: nominal compounds, genitive constructions, noun-verb compounds, and relative clauses (Helmbrecht 2014: 14).

Secondly, he deals with the issue of gradability, more specifically with how the comparative construction is formed. Since there is no morphological evidence of an adjective class in Hocank (Helmbrecht 2014: 17), the comparative structure is created by means of three different ways: a lexical strategy, periphrastic expressions, and context-based pragmatic inference.

The first strategy that Hocank uses to create comparatives – the lexical strategy – makes use of a set of “relational nouns that have inherent comparative meaning” (Helmbrecht 2014: 19). For instance, the Hocank word *hicitó* means “female’s older brother”. The second strategy that he proposes –the use periphrastic expressions– is the

¹² Wolof has borrowed many words from French due to colonization. This fact can be noticed in words like *bulo* (from French “blue”), *kontar* (from French “against”) or *dakkor* (from French “in agreement”) (Mc Laughlin 2014: 259).

most common strategy in the language. According to him, although there are several periphrastic expressions in Honcank that denote comparison, the most frequent one is the use of the verb *hijaíra*, which means “more” as a comparative structure and “increase” as a verb (Helmbrecht 2014: 20). Finally, the comparative meaning can be expressed through pragmatic inference as well, that is to say, it can be guessed from the context without needing any morphological change.

4.2 Adjectives exist in every language

The view that adjectives do not exist in certain languages is not shared by every linguistic. For instance, Dixon (2004) states that “all languages have an adjectival class that is in some way distinct from other word classes in a given language” (Mc Laughlin 2014 citing Dixon 2004). This sub-section will focus on Baker’s (2003) theory which defends the idea that adjectives exist in all languages.

In traditional grammar, the lexical semantics of words are seen as a continuum, with nouns at one extreme and verbs at the other one. The class of adjectives is found in the middle –e.g., English–, which means that this continuum is divided into three different lexical categories. However, there are languages that do not have three-way category distinction. For example, Japanese has two classes of adjectives,¹³ so its continuum is divided into four categories, while a language like Mowawk, which is considered not to have an adjective class, has only two lexical categories in its continuum (Baker 2003: 238).

¹³ These two classes of adjectives are mainly differentiated when adjectives are used attributively or predicatively at a morphological level. This is possible since Miyagawa (1987) considered that adjectives in Japanese have the feature [+V] and adjectival nouns the feature [+N, +V]. However, according to Baker’s theory (2003), the features [N] and [V] are privative and cannot combine with each other, which means that a word has a referential index or not, or a specifier or not (Baker 2003: 241). Then, he argues that they are different morphologically speaking, but they have the same syntax and semantics, which means that they are not two different kind of adjectives.

Nevertheless, Baker (2003) states that all languages have a class of adjectives due to the fact that categories are not defined by a continuum, but by the presence of privative features. Then, there would not be any category between the adjective and the verb, or between the adjective and the noun, or any language with less than three categories (verbs, nouns, and adjectives).

Firstly, Baker analyses the Chichewa language, which it is considered a language that uses nouns to express the syntactic category of adjectives. As he states in his work, Chichewa uses an abstract noun connected to a head noun by means of a prepositional element (Baker 2003: 246) in order to express “adjectives”.

(35) m-kango *(w-a) nzeru
 3-lion 3-ASSOC intelligence
 “a lion of intelligence, a smart lion”

(Baker 2003: 246)

Furthermore, degree is indicated by means of adverbs, there are no resultative secondary predicate constructions, and there is no “productive morphology for transforming nonverbal roots into stative, inchoative, or causative verbs” (Baker 2003: 246). However, Bresnan and Mchombo (1995, cited in Baker 2003) distinguish six words that are true adjectives: *kali* “sharp, fierce”, *kulu* “big”, *tali* “long”, *fupi* “short”, *ng’ono* “small”, and *wisi* “raw, unripe, immature” (Baker 2003: 247). Then, we cannot consider Chichewa as a language that does not have adjectives.

Secondly, we will focus on Choctaw, a language spoken in North America that belongs to the Muskogean language family. Choctaw uses verbs instead of adjectives, as Wolof and Honcank, since “adjectival verbs” are used “as predicates, with no copulas and with the usual tense and agreement prefixes” (Baker 2003: 251). In the case of Choctaw, the properties of the “adjectival verbs” are identical to the prototypical verbs.

However, these “adjectival verbs” can be in attributive position, a property that verbs do not have. Actually, if they behaved like verbs, they should form a relative clause instead of appearing in attributive position. Moreover, when “adjectival verbs” are in attributive position, the construction is similar to the attributive modification one: it is formed by a noun with an “adjectival verb”, but without any clausal element (Baker 2003: 252).

In order to explain this phenomenon, Baker states that adjectives in Choctaw are constructed alongside the syntactic structure, but then they are transformed into verbs because of the combination of the lexical properties. Then, Baker’s theory predicts the existence of adjectives in Choctaw, although “they are neutralized on the surface in most contexts” (Baker 2003: 254).

5. Conclusions

As we have seen, the lexical category of adjectives is rather controversial. In the first section, we have already observed that the semantic and syntactic properties of adjectives are not universal. Semantically, gradability and the possibility of forming a comparative and/or a superlative construction are not exclusive properties of adjectives since there are languages (e.g. French and Spanish) where other categories have these two properties. Syntactically, there are two different views regarding adjectives in attributive position: they can be seen as heads or as Specifiers. However, the first view is based on the fact that attributive adjectives do not accept complements in English. Again, this statement is not true in other languages, due to the fact that there are languages that allow complementation of attributive adjectives.

Moreover, authors like Baker (2003) and Fábregas (2016) adopt a more radical view regarding adjectives. Whereas Baker (2003) states that adjectives are defined by the

fact that they do not have any unique property that defines them, Fábregas (2016) claims that adjectives are neither universal nor independent since they do not have any characteristic and/or exclusive feature.

The third section has been based on nanosyntax. An account of this syntactic theory has been provided, alongside with a description of its basic elements: the syntactico-semantic features. Fábregas (2016), basing his analysis on the nanosyntactic model, made a cross-linguistic study of the syntax and semantics of Spanish and English adjectives. In this study, Fábregas reached two main conclusions: the first one is that, syntactically, adjectives are not projected in the same way in Spanish and English; the second one is that there is not a clear answer as for why verbs lose their temporality when they are transformed into adjectives. The former conclusion makes a claim against the syntactic universality of adjectives, whereas the latter highlights the lack of exclusive properties that define adjectives. Furthermore, one of the explanations that Fábregas and Marín (2017: 11) provide to explain the loss of temporality of these adjectives is that maybe deverbal adjectives are just verbs that have lost the properties to provide an episodic reading.

Finally, in the fourth section, we have seen that there are languages that do not seem to have adjectives. However, there are different views regarding this issue. On the one hand, there are authors (Fábregas 2016, Helmbrecht 2014, Mc Laughlin 2014) that agree with the claim that adjectives do not exist in all languages. On the other hand, authors like Baker (2003) and Dixon (2004) state exactly the contrary: adjectives exist in all languages, even if there is evidence that verbs or nouns perform the function of adjectives in those languages.

The main objective of this paper was to dig deeper into the notion of adjective and challenge the traditional definition of this lexical category. Overall, we can clearly state

that the traditional conception of adjective is incomplete, vague, and it is not adjusted to the real syntactic and semantic nature of adjectives. Nonetheless, what is the real syntactic and semantic nature of adjectives? This question is still to be answered, as further more conclusive research is needed.

In conclusion, there is no consensus regarding adjectives. They seem to have some features that define them, but none of these features are exclusive and universal. Moreover, the fact that adjectives can be defined as a lexical category that it is not a noun or a verb (Baker 2003), makes us consider the possibility that adjectives are not an independent category.

Finally, the view that Fábregas (2016) offers represents a radical change with respect to the way adjectives are approached. Although his theory makes an unprecedented claim in favour of the non-existence of adjectives, it does not differ so much from those authors that state that adjectives do not have unique properties that exclusively define them. Further research on the nature of adjectives from a nanosyntactic perspective may be necessary in shed a light on the issue of categorization of adjectives which, as has been discussed throughout this paper, constitutes an interesting gap in the syntactic and semantic literature.

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