

ON THE INDIRECTNESS OF NON-INHERENT ADJECTIVES

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Abstract: The paper deals with linguistic and pragmatic aspects of English adjectives. Its scope is limited to non-inherent adjectives. The author provides some findings of the research conducted into context dependency of adjectives. The presented examples show the ability of non-inherent adjectives to change the meaning in dependence on the context. The paper also accentuates the importance of a pragmatic aspect in the process of interpretation of adjective meaning.

Key words: non-inherent adjectives, context dependence, pragmatics

Introduction

The present study provides linguistic and pragmatic insights into the word class of English adjectives. Adjectives are one of the largest word classes in the English language, possessors of different abilities and carriers of diverse meanings. The scope of the present analysis is limited to one of the semantic subclasses of adjectives – to non-inherent adjectives.

No utterance is completely context free in terms of meaning or function. This can be also applied to the meaning of a lower meaningful unit – to a word. The paper focuses on the context dependency of a non-inherent adjective – on its ability to change its meaning by highlighting a particular meaning element of a noun. The intention to conduct the research was encouraged by the fact that non-inherent adjectives express meaning indirectly which increases the importance of the context in the process of their interpretation.

It is not always clear what was the intention of the author when he/she used a non-inherent adjective. In the case of fixed collocations (*e.g.* a black sheep) the meaning of a non-inherent adjective is known and seems to be easily understood as it is not always interpreted in the same way. The interpretation of the meaning of many non-inherent adjectives is not possible without the context. We think that pragmatic interpretation plays an important role here. One of the areas of pragmatics operation is analysing people's speech and their intentions, which are often hidden behind the linguistic forms they use. Thus the paper also emphasises the importance of a pragmatic aspect in the process of interpretation of non-inherent adjective meaning.

Not all adjectives are related to the noun in the same way. When we use the adjective *small* outside the context, we think about someone or something that has a little size or dimension. When the adjective collocates with a noun, *e.g. man/house*, its meaning becomes clearer. When we use a phrase *a small businessman* we do not know exactly what is meant. We may either refer to a businessman who is short or we may refer to a man owning a small firm. The two examples show two completely different relations between the adjective and the noun. For example, the adjective *small* in a *small businessman* does not describe an attribute of a businessman. It cannot be reformulated as a businessman who is small. Instead, it refers to a businessman whose business is small. The same is seen in the following pairs of expressions containing the same adjective in its inherent and non-inherent function: *the distant hills/distant relatives, a complete chapter /a complete idiot, a heavy burden/ a heavy smoker, social survey/a social animal, an old man/ an old friend* (Quirk, 1995:48).

When we look into the expression *I feel small and petty* (found in one of the analysed novels) we find out that *small* refers to someone unimportant or ashamed, especially because of something he/she has said or done. It is the evidence that we need more context to be able to decipher the exact meaning of the adjective *small*.

1 The role of pragmatics

context on an utterance. Almost every syntactically complete sentence has ‘multiple validity’ that means that in different contexts it can have several potential pragmatic meanings. It is observed that this can be also applied to the meaning of a lower meaningful unit – to a word – in our case to an adjective. As the context changes in dependence on a particular time and a particular place, etc., the meaning of one and the same adjective may change in a new context. To be able to interpret its pragmatic meaning we have to consider what the speaker/writer intends, i.e. the function and the meaning of an adjective in communication.

The members of the Prague School of Linguistics seem to have developed certain pragmatic features in language understanding. The ideas of Daneš, Firbas, Isačenko, Jakobson, Mathesius, Vachek, and Trubetzkoy have influenced modern linguistics. The Prague Linguistic Circle emphasises the importance of function. The approach of its members deals with language as an instrument of social interaction rather than a system that is viewed in isolation. The inclusion of extralinguistic factors, such as the social environment, is one of many important contributions of the Circle (Vachek, 1964).

Halliday (1978: 75) looks at language as a social phenomenon and uses the term social context that is “the environment in which meanings are exchanged”. According to him the social context of language can be analysed in terms of three factors:

- 1/ the field of discourse that refers to what is happening, including what is being talked about;
- 2/ the tenor of discourse which refers to the participants, who are taking part in this exchange of meaning, who they are and what kind of relationship they have to one another;
- 3/ the mode of discourse which refers to what part the language is playing in this particular situation, for example, in what way the language is organised to convey the meaning, and what channel is used – written or spoken or a combination of the two.

Almost all linguists who have dealt with pragmatic issues agree that pragmatics is primarily concerned with what people mean by the language they use, how they actualise its meaning potential as a communicative resource.

Fromkin & Rodman (1978: 189) define pragmatics as the general study of how context affects linguistic interpretation”. Sperber and Wilson’s (1986: 78) stress that “it concerns both speakers’ indirect meaning, beyond what is said, and also hearers’ interpretations, which tend to enrich what is said in order to interpret it as relevant to the context of discourse”. According to Hatch (1992: 261) “the study of pragmatics is the study of what speakers mean to convey when they use a particular structure in context”. Hopper and Traugott (1993: 67) characterise pragmatics as the study dealing “with meanings beyond structure”. Widdowson (1996: 63) says that “... pragmatic features are not signalled in the language itself: they have to be inferred from the context in which the utterance is made”. Hence, when interpreting a word it is inevitable to take the context into consideration. The pragmatic character of the analysis necessitates presentation of pragmatic understanding of the code – language in general. Language can be seen in two ways: formal – as a system of sounds, words and their relationships to one another, as a system of grammatical structures, and functional – as human behaviour, as a communicative system. Yule in his *Pragmatics* (1996: 3) defines pragmatic approach to communication in the following way: “... it necessarily involves the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said. It requires consideration of how people organise what they want to say in accordance with who they’re talking to, where, when, and under what circumstances.”

In my view it is possible to find out actual pragmatic meaning only after putting an adjective in a concrete and specific context. Then the context determines ‘actual communicative validity’ of the adjective. Pragmatic meaning is recoverable from the whole

situation of the utterance and the speaker's/writer's intention. I consider pragmatic meaning to be the result of the speaker/writer's adequate selection of the adjective that is guarded by the context.. It is the 'adaptation' of semantic meaning to the given context resulting in the speaker/writer's required understanding of his intention.

2 The research conducted into non-inherent adjectives

2.1 Background of the research

Adjectives are semantically as complex as nouns and verbs but their lexical semantics has never been studied as extensively as that of nouns and verbs. Quirk et al. (1995) distinguish three dimensions of semantic subclassification of adjectives: stative/dynamic, gradable/non-gradable and inherent/non-inherent. The present paper focuses on the interpretation of meaning of semantic subclasses of English adjectives. Quirk (1995:436) gives advice how to determine the semantic subclass of adjectives: "if the adjective is inherent, it is often possible to derive a noun from it whereas in the case of a non-inherent adjective no such derivation is possible." As every adjective shows a certain property of a noun, it has to collocate with a noun. It may be used attributively, standing in a pre-noun position, or predicatively, following a linking verb and functioning either as a subject or object complement. Adjectives may be used inherently or non-inherently. Non-inherent adjectives refer less directly to an attribute of the noun than inherent adjectives do. "Modification of a noun by means of a non-inherent adjective can be seen as an extension of the basic sense of the noun" (Quirk, 1995:46).

The goal of the present research is to show the nature of non-inherent adjectives, their usage, their functions and their semantic and syntactic features in the English language. The aim of the analysis is to map out non-inherent adjectives across the register of fiction. For the purpose of the research several novels were analysed (see bibliography). They serve as a source of an authentic language.

The analysis shows that the meaning of a non-inherent adjective without the context would be vague. In most cases it would be difficult to determine the precise meaning of an adjective outside the context.

2.2 Formal characteristics of non-inherent adjectives

A) According to Biber (1999:511 – 512) the most common adjectives across all registers that occur more than 200 times per million words are big, little, long, small, great, high, low, large that are adjectives, originally created as adjectives. The analysis shows that these adjectives also most frequently occur in the analysed novel in their inherent meanings.

Considering the formation of the analysed non-inherent adjectives, the majority (63%) are the adjectives without any adjectival suffix, such as old, deep, hard, big.

The following examples of non-inherent adjectives were found in the analysed corpus.

... *but it is clear that **old** habits are hard to break, and old friendships are as important to him as they are to everyone else.* Here the adjective *old* refers to the length of friendship.

*You may not want to know about how lovemaking got underway in the **old** days.* Here the adjective *old* refers to a past time in someone's life.

*And she's never married again. Faithful **old** bean.* Here *old bean* refers to somebody old who remains alone.

*He can make me feel **small** or wrong...* Here the adjective *small* expresses the feeling of shame and unimportance, especially because of something that has been said and done.

*He takes a **deep** breath...* Here the adjective *deep* refers to the amount of air taken into his body.

*I suddenly have a **deep** yearning to go and see a Chinese film...* Here *deep* does not refer to a depth of something; it refers to strong desire to see a Chinese film.

*"I'd been having so many **bad breaks**, I just had to make a belline to Myann's."* The expression *bad breaks* refers to bad luck.

*Edward knew it was going to be kind of a **blind date**, but still thought it would end well.* A *blind date* expresses the meeting of two people who do not know each other.

*"Be careful, Jane, these **fast roads** might be fatal".* The adjective *fast* expresses the high speed allowed on highways.

*He was a **fresh hand** in our office.* A *fresh hand* is a novice.

*"Come on, you **lazy bones**!"* The expression *lazy bones* is used here to refer to a very lazy person.

*"Well, it's a **pretty penny**".* A *pretty penny* refers to a huge amount of money.

*"If I didn't give **private eye** on money, he would tell him that I thought he was insane".* *Private eye* is a detective.

*I just think they make you **soft**.* Take you further away from how things really are. Here the adjective *soft* means easily affected.

*"Father is a **sound sleeper**, he won't hear anything", I assumed.* The adjective *sound* says that father sleeps well and noisily.

*"I wanna **square meal**, mum".* This isn't a rectilinear meal on right-angled crockery, but a good and satisfying meal.

B/ Twenty-one percent of the found non-inherent adjectives contain adjectival suffix (except for participial suffixes *-ing* and *-ed*). The most frequent suffixes of the non-inherent adjectives in the analysed corpus are: *-y*, *-ous*, *-al*, *-ful*, *-like*, *-ish*.

- Suffix *-y*:

*They're all arseholes... these **bloody** homeless people...* Here the adjective *bloody* is used to emphasise the speaker's negative attitude towards homeless people.

*Well, where's he going to go in a **bloody** taxi... he hasn't got anywhere to go.* Here the adjective *bloody* expresses the speaker's mood and personality.

*Well... get drunk. Get stoned. Have sex. Don't give all our **bloody** money away...* Here the adjective *bloody* is used to emphasise anger and annoyance of the speaker.

*You used to e-mail me **filthy** Clinton and Lewinsky jokes all the time.* Here the adjective *filthy* refers to very offensive e-mail jokes.

*That **glassy stare** she gave me froze me so that I forgot about my suggestions immediately.* Here the adjective *glassy* means *unpleasant, without interest*.

*"For all the **shitty** things I do..."* Here the adjective *shitty* expresses bore and annoyance of the speaker.

*Catherina's **silky hair** and silvery voice took his breath away.* *Silky* means *fine, shiny* like silk. *Catherina's silky hair and **silvery voice** took his breath away.* *Silvery* expresses *exceptional* (voice).

*"Is he very **tasty** or something"?* Here the adjective *tasty* refers to attractiveness of a person.

*I cannot help feeling that there must be someone else... I know better than to provide David with a long, **thorny** list...* Here the adjective *thorny* refers to the list that causes difficulty and disagreement.

- Suffix **-ous**:

*I don't want to live through the next few **hideous** minutes of this conversation...* Here the adjective *hideous* expresses *very unpleasant* (conversation).

*David and me, all of whom have had a glimpse into his stinking, **poisonous** soul...* Here the adjective *poisonous* refers to the *extremely unpleasant and unkind* inner world of the person referred to.

- Suffix – **al**

*And there was a long, thoughtful, **fatal** pause before he said anything, a pause that allowed me first to ignore and then to forget what it was he eventually cobbled together.* Here the adjective *fatal* expresses importance of the pause, expectation of something crucial to be said.

*I begin to explain the **fatal** flaw in their approach and equipment, and then think better of it.* Here the adjective *fatal* expresses disaster or failure.

- Suffix **-ful**:

*My cowardice was more **powerful** than his insult.* *Powerful* expresses able to influence or control what people do or think.

- Suffix **-er**:

*Some **upper hand** was working against him and making life difficult for him.* *Upper* expresses superior force, fate, God.

C/ Participial adjectives (both present and past participles ending in *-ing* and *-ed*) make sixteen per cent of the non-inherent adjectives found in the analysed corpus.

Present participles prevail and are used predominantly in the attributive function.

*“I passed the test with **flying colours**...”* “With *flying colours* means that I passed the test very successfully.

*“I wasn't sure when you went back... **Fucking ages ago**”.* Sometimes *fucking* does not have any specific meaning, it only emphasises the mood of the speaker.

*“I don't live in a **fucking community**”.* *Fucking* here refers to a spoilt community.

*“Pick the **fucking phone up**”!* –*Fucking* here only emphasises irritation of the speaker.

*“That silly guy is like a **laughing stock**, I just can't stand him.”* *Laughing stock* refers to a foolish person.

*David and me, all of whom have had a glimpse into his **stinking**, poisonous soul...* The adjective *stinking* refers to a person who has done a lot of evil.

*His new novel has had unanimously **stinking** reviews...* The adjective *stinking* expresses hostile reviews.

Past participles are less frequent. They occur both in the attributive and predicative function.

*A **drunken** one-night stand, say, followed the morning after by immediate and piercing remorse.* The participial adjective *drunken* refers to the people who drank lot of alcohol.

*I'm tired of all those things. I was **stuck**. I need to do something.* The adjective *stuck* is in the predicative function and expresses the inability.

2.3 Syntactic features of non-inherent adjectives

Depending on their position, adjectives are divided into attributive, predicative or postpositive.

2.3.1 Attributive usage

The majority (72%) of these non-inherent adjectives function **attributively**. It is the most typical common position between a determiner and a noun. Thus adjectives in this position are called "attributive" because they attribute a quality or a characteristic to the noun.

- **bitter**

*It's not an ironic laugh or a **bitter** laugh...*

*I took a **bitter** pleasure in telling him...*

In the two previous examples the nouns *laugh* and *pleasure* determine something good and outside the context, completely isolated they are perceived as inherently positive. The adjective *bitter* in its non-inherent meaning combined with the two nouns changes completely the positive meaning of the nouns. Smile is not a smile and pleasure is not a pleasure. Collocated with the adjective *bitter* the nouns are looked upon unfavourably expressing the feeling of unhappiness and disappointment.

- **bloody**

*... that'll be a **bloody** miracle in itself. Bloody* is used for emphasizing that you are angry or annoyed about something,

*I can't stand her ... what a **bloody** idiot!* *Bloody* is used for emphasizing that you are angry or annoyed about something.

*For all the usual **bloody** reasons.* *Bloody* is used for emphasizing.

*'What, when I've got a **bloody** tea-leaf living next room?'* *Bloody* is here used for emphasizing that a person referred to is angry or annoyed about something.

*He's what passes for a **black** sheep in the Carr family.* *Black sheep* refers to someone who is not accepted by the family.

*His love... will be met with **blank** incomprehension...* The adjective *blank* intensifies the meaning of the noun and has the meaning complete and total.

2.3.2 Predicative usage

Only twenty-eight per cent of the found non-inherent adjectives function **predicatively**. Out of the non-inherent adjectives in the predicative position the majority of them (94%) function as subject complement following a linking verb and only a very small number of the adjectives (6%) function as object complement.

Out of these that function as subject complement, 63% occur after linking verb *be*, *seem* and *appear*.

*Hope is to all intents and purposes **blind**, ...* *Blind* means unable to realize or admit the truth about something.

*She stopped dead, catching her breath with a frightened look at her husband, whose expression was suddenly **wooden**.* *Wooden* expresses no feelings.

*"I wasn't **green**. I wasn't born yesterday".* *Green* refers to someone who is not experienced, especially because of being young.

Eighteen per cent adjectives follow sense verbs *feel*, *look* and *sound*.

“And I feel **small** and petty...” *Small* refers to feel or look ashamed or unimportant, especially because of something someone has said or done.

“Your telly’s too **small**,” says Christopher. And it daunt do very loud. When that thing blew up it sounded **rubbish**”. *Rubbish* refers to something that is of poor quality.

Thirteen per cent of the adjectives are used after verbs signifying a change of a state of affairs (mainly after *turn*, *get* and *go*).

2.4 Intensifying functions of non-inherent adjectives

Non-inherent adjectives have often an intensifying function. In the following examples the adjective *complete* functions as an amplifier, it scales upwards and has a strong highlighting effect.

A **complete** stranger...It expresses the highest degree.

*Christopher and Hope stay for tea, which is eaten in almost **complete** silence...* It expresses the greatest degree possible.

“For me personally, it was a **complete** failure”. *Complete* here intensifies the meaning of the noun and expresses the highest degree of disappointment, loss.

Conclusion

In this article I attempt to show certain characteristics of non-inherent adjectives. All of the presented examples of non-inherent adjectives found in the analysed novels show the indirect reference hidden in the adjective. Non-inherent adjectives characterise the referent figuratively. The context in which a certain adjective occurs is important. It becomes inevitable for the correct and proper understanding of the exact meaning of a particular non-inherent adjective. It also proves a close interrelation among cognition, pragmatics and grammar.

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