

Inflectionless adjectives in Bulgarian as a case of nominal predication

Aims & Claims: In this talk I discuss a small class of nominal modifiers in Bulgarian, previously labelled as ‘inflectionless adjectives’ (Halpern 1995; Spencer & Luís 2012; Nicolova 2017; Adamson 2019, 2020 a.o.). I claim that these are not adjectival modifiers within the noun phrase, but are in fact an instance of predication within the noun phrase, similar to English nominal predication with comparative semantics such as *idiot of a man*. This accounts for the semantic and syntactic properties of the construction, including the placement of the definiteness marker which has been a question of debate in the literature.

Background: Adjectives in Bulgarian typically inflect for gender and number, but a small group of loanword adjectives does not. These adjectives include, among others, *serbez* ‘bold’, *ursuz* ‘crabby, mean’, *erbap* ‘capable, cocky’, *sert* ‘assertive, testy’. These adjectives are also exceptional with respect to the placement of the definite marker (DEF). Generally, this marker attaches to the noun (1a), but if the noun is preceded by adjectival modifiers, DEF is found on the (first) adjective (1b) (Halpern 1995; Franks 2001; Embick & Noyer 2001; Dost & Gribanova 2006; Harizanov 2014; Adamson 2019, a.o.). In the case of inflectionless adjectives, however, DEF nevertheless attaches to the noun, thus skipping the adjective (1c). It has been noted, though, that for some speakers DEF cannot be used with inflectionless adjectives at all.

- | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) a. kniga-ta | b. nova-ta kniga | c. sert-*(ăť) măž-%ăť |
| book-DEF.F | new.F-DEF.F book | assertive-DEF.M man-DEF.M |
| ‘the book’ | ‘the new book’ | ‘the assertive man’ |

Previous approaches to inflectionless adjectives: Halpern (1995) argues that these are neologistic compounds, thus the placement of DEF on the second noun, i.e. the head noun, is not surprising. Adamson (2019) claims that these are not compounds since the adjectives can be intensified and can stand in comparative form. Instead, he proposes that DEF moves postsyntactically to the head of the closest phrase that bears nominal features (gender/number), but prior this operation, the adjectives in question are rendered featureless by a diacritic rule. While I agree with Adamson (2019) that modification by degree adverbs and formation of comparative forms speak against a compound analysis, forms like *po-serbez* ‘CMPR-bold’ are indicative of some syntactic structure present (DegrP), and not of adjectivehood per se, as the comparative clitic can attach to nouns (*pò măž* ‘more (of a) man’) or to verb (phrases) (*pò običam* ‘CMPR-love.prs.1sg). I will show that that inflectionless adjectives differ from genuine adjectives both semantically and syntactically. I will also point out some crucial properties of the noun phrases containing inflectionless adjectives, such as referentiality and syntactic distribution, that remain unaccounted for in the existing analyses.

Analysis: Firstly, I argue that in contrast to genuine adjectives, stand in a predicational relationship with the noun. Thus, they are not modifiers, but predicates. As for their syntactic distribution, noun phrases with inflectionless adjectives are typically used as predicates of copular clauses (2) or occur in exclamations (3) (the exclamative reading is the most natural interpretation when the noun phrases is given without a sentence embedding it). But they have a limited distribution in argument positions, as they are incompatible with a definite reading, cf. (4)–(5).

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| (2) Marija e mnogo ursuz žena. | (3) Eh, kakva ursuz žena! |
| Maria is very crabby woman | EXCLA what.kind.F crabby woman |
| ‘Maria is a very grabby woman.’ | ‘What a crabby woman!’ |

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| (4) Obadi mi se edna ursuz žena. | (5) (?)(?)Ursuz žena-ta pak mi se obadi. |
| called to.me REFL one:F crabby woman | crabby woman-DEF.F again to.me REFL called |
| ‘A crabby woman called me.’ | ‘The crabby woman called me again.’ |

(5) was modelled after Adamson (2020) who marks it as grammatical, but it is (highly) degraded according to the speakers I have consulted. Crucially, the acceptability considerably improves if the noun phrase bearing the DEF marker has a generic interpretation (6). (The DEF marker can be used with generic noun phrases, both in the singular and in the plural.)

(6) Ursuz žena-ta se poznavá po pogled-a.
 crabby woman-DEF.F REFL recognize.PRS.3SG by gaze-DEF.M
 ‘You can recognize a crabby woman by her gaze (lit. The crabby woman is recognized...).’

Halpern (1995), Spencer & Luís (2012) and Adamson (2019) report that some speakers do not allow for a DEF marker with inflectionless adjectives, but the contrast between (5) and (6), unaddressed in these works, shows that the picture is even more complicated. I claim that this contrast follows from the restrictions on referentiality of these noun phrases (*pace* Adamson 2019). A potential counterargument could be that these noun phrases can be modified by demonstratives (7) (Spencer & Luís 2012). It is well-known, though, that demonstratives give direct reference about the identity of the referent as they make it directly accessible, whereas processing definite articles requires additional interference (Lyons 1999).

(7) Tazi ursuz žena pak mi se obadi.
 this.F crabby woman-DEF.F again to.me REFL called
 ‘This crabby woman called me again.’

I claim that these constructions are comparable to well-studied cases of nominal predication such as *an idiot doctor*, *an idiot of a doctor*, *a jewel of a village* (see Napoli 1989 on Italian; Den Dikken 2006 on English and Dutch; Aarts 1998; Villalba & Bartra-Kaufmann 2009 on Spanish; Den Dikken & Lipták 1997 on Hungarian). These nominal predications in Bulgarian ascribe a permanent property to the referent, just like the so-called ‘comparative nominal predication’ (*an idiot of a man*). This is particularly obvious when the subject of the predication is a profession-denoting N: (8) can only mean ‘he is a crabby person’, but not ‘he is crabby in his (8)toja tvoj ursuz bajraktar capacity of a standard-bearer’ (in contrast to this.M your.M crabby standard-bearer ‘attributive nominal predications’ like *an idiot* ‘this crabby standard-bearer of yours’ [BNC] *as/of a doctor*, see Den Dikken 2006).

Nominal predication structures are small clauses (PredP, à la Bowers 1993 or R(elator)P in Den Dikken 2006) consisting of a subject and a predicate that subsequently undergoes predicate inversion. This is shown in (9). This produces a word order which is string-identical to nouns modified by adjectives, but the construction is structurally different.

(9) [_{DemP} Dem [_{NumP} Num [_{FP} [_{XP} predicate]_j [_F F [_{PredP} [_{NP} Subj] [_{Pred} Pred t_j]]]]]

The inverse predication is topped off by nominal layers that account for the external nominal distribution and harbour demonstratives/indefinite articles and pronominal adjectives (cf. (8)). The difference between English and Bulgarian nominal predication lies in the size of the predicate and the subject: the subject is a bare NP in Bulgarian. This is supported by the fact that modifiers interleaving the predicate and the subjects are degraded: *??serbez bŭlgarsko(-to) dete* ‘(the) bold Bulgarian child’ (*pace* Adamson 2019). This analysis accounts for the properties of the construction: (i) the semantics of a predicational relationship between the two elements; (ii) the placement DEF is no longer expected to be on a par with regular adjectives, as those occupy different structural positions; (iii) similar restrictions on referentiality in nominal predication have been noted for English as well (see Den Dikken 2006); (iv) the exclamative flavour of such constructions has also been observed for Spanish (Villalba & Bartra-Kaufmann 2009).

Outlook: Though nominal predication in Bulgarian seems less widespread than in English, the proposed analysis could potentially be extended to a rather poorly-understood class of (alleged) compounds with comparative semantics (*snaga topola* ‘slender body (lit. body-poplar)’, Radeva 2007; Bagasheva 2017) and other left-headed compounds (e.g. *cigulàr-virtuòz* ‘violinist virtuoso’, Nicolova 2017). Both types are interesting wrt the placement of DEF as well as pluralization.

Selected References: Adamson (2019): Derivational trapping and the morphosyntax of inflectionlessness • [BNC] = Bulgarian National Corpus • Den Dikken (2006). Relators and Linkers • Halpern (1995): On the placement and morphology of clitics • Nicolova (2017): Bulgarian grammar