PREDICATIVE ADJECTIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

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ABOUT ARTICLE

Abstract: It is compared predicate adjective constructions (PA) and constructions with a predicate nominal containing an adjective (PAN) and asked whether the attributive function of the adjective or the presence of a noun in the PAN leads to a difference in function in the two constructions. In most cases the adjective determines the function of the construction, leading to many parallels in usage between the PA and PAN constructions.

INTRODUCTION

A comparison with predicate nominal constructions (PN), in contrast, shows that not including an adjective in the constructions leads to a different set of meanings and implications. The conversational usage of these constructions provides evidence for a partial correspondence of form to function: Copular Predicate Constructions often constitute a complete turn in conversation, and if not a full turn, form their own prosodic units. Other properties of these constructions—the definiteness of the NP and the presence or absence of a N—correspond to different interactional work. A comparison of all three constructions shows that the adjective plays a determining interactional role, despite differences in syntactic configuration . In the context of the current Special Issue, we would like to ask how the structure and content of these clauses relate to the role they play in conversation. This article addresses this question by considering a pair of English constructions built around the copula, those in which the predicate is an Adjective (the Predicate Adjective construction, or PA) or an Adjective + Noun (the Predicate Adjective Noun construction, or PAN) . Focusing on these two constructions highlights the traditional distinction between the attributive and predicative roles that adjectives can play in a clause, as the PA is predicative and the adjective within the PAN is in an attributive construction. For comparison, we will also draw on a set of Predicate Nominal constructions (PNs).

The functions served by PAs and PANs in language use has, to the best of our knowledge, never been investigated. We will demonstrate that these constructions serve to do specific interactional jobs, and, as might be expected, PAs and PANs are similar to each other in some respects and different in others.

In particular, we hypothesize that the properties of adjectives influence the interactional work of these constructions. As often noted, adjectives are gradable and take degree modifiers The interpretation of the meaning of an adjective depends upon an implicit standard of comparison, which changes according to the context. This variability allows for a degree of subjectivity in the use of adjectives by speakers. The lexical meaning of the adjective is an important determinant of the interactional work accomplished by the Predicate Copula Constructions. As Schegloff (1996b) has pointed out, it is in interactional settings that we can see grammar 'at work', and can thus begin to appreciate what 'grammar' must be understood to be.

METHODS

The Data and Method Our data are drawn from video and telephone audio recorded conversations among American English-speaking friends and family members. We chose these data sets as typical of the conversations we have studied over the past several decades. A copular predicate in a main or dependent clause. The copula in its various inflected forms was the most common verb in the sample, but verbs such as seem also qualify and were identified. It turned out that there were so few instances of verbs other than the copula that our analysis can be restricted to true copula forms.

Adjective for PAs, the adjective is in predicative position and for PANs the adjective is attributive, modifying the noun. This criterion requires a determination of what is an adjective. Setting aside determiners for the moment, most of the noun modifiers in the data fit the intuitive definition of adjective—words such as good, difficult, or funny. The adjectives in the PAs are almost all gradable adjectives, with only a few that simply name a category, such as Brazilian or pregnant. Some noun modifiers have special distributional properties, e.g., ordinal numerals, as in my first child, and the word same. These modifiers have functions distinguishable from the more prototypical adjectives, as do the very few cardinal numbers found in our data, such as in 800 in 800 dollars or 160 in 160 km. Thus we chose not to include cardinal and ordinal numerals and the word same in our analysis.

These constructions may be augmented in various ways, including, for example, with intensifiers modifying the adjective (like real, total), auxiliaries (like could be, might be), hedges (like sort of, kind of), turn-initial particles (like so, but, and, I think), and quotatives (like she's like, he goes). Constructions that met the other criteria and included these types of additional elements were included in the data set. As for PNs, they were identified as having a noun phrase (without an adjective) as complement to the copula. Whether the Copular Predicate Construction is interactionally serving to inform, assess, or both

To further understand the pragmatic level—the interactional work of PAs and PANs— we draw on research in conversation analysis focusing on the routinized social actions that humans use language to accomplish. Levinson (2013, p. 107) characterizes these actions as the 'main job' that a given turn in an interaction is taken by the participants to be performing. Some of these actions are typically relatively straightforward for both participants and analysts to discern, such as greetings, compliments, and invitations, and the ways in which recipients typically respond to them is also relatively routinized (cf. Schegloff 2007). Other actions are more difficult to pin down among participants and analysts. For example, in a given sequential position, a given turn can be understood by participants, and analyzed by researchers, as either a piece of news or a warning, or both, or an interrogative in a specific position

may be treated by participants as either a request for information or as an offer. Because adjectives are relative and gradable, it is sometimes difficult, again, for both those in the interaction and those analyzing it, to distinguish between informing and assessing. For example, expensive in, informs the recipient about the price of shoes, but expensive is a relative term which can differ in interpretation according to the individual's stance and frame of reference, thus making it a subjective assessment while still being informative.

A small majority of PAs and of PANs are assessments (53%), and informing make up around 38%, with the remainder doing both kinds of work. In contrast, the PNs play an informing role in about 80% of cases. This difference between the constructions with and without an adjective suggests that the adjective plays a significant part in the work of assessing, and we will see in Section 8 that this is indeed the case. A firm conclusion is that Copular Predicate Constructions are used most commonly, at least by English speakers, to discuss known entities and situations. Additionally, in accordance with previous studies of conversational data, full NP subjects are much less frequent than pronouns, occurring in only 5% of the examples . The trends in pronominal usage are the result of the interactional functions of PAs and PANs. The most frequent pronouns are it and that. A difference in their usage emerges in a frequently used conversational structure in the data: the telling of a story or the construction of a situation by one speaker, whom we'll designate as S1. If this speaker is initiating a comment or an assessment on a situation, s/he may use a PA or PAN, which in effect guides the recipient's reaction to the situation, in which case the pronoun it is usually used, as a recipient (S2) reacts to the comment in the form of a PA or PAN, that is more commonly used than it. However, when S2s use a PA or a PAN, they use them 85% of the time to do assessments. That is, S1, the speaker creating the situation, uses PAs and PANs as part of their telling, but the recipient, S2, usually provides reactions in the form of assessments, referring to the situation that S1 has described.

From speakers' use of it and that, we also see that those who have the floor conceptualize situations differently from those who do not: if I have the floor, as in we will use the neutral pronoun it to refer to the situation, which is in my epistemic territory . The subjects of PA and PAN constructions reveal two key aspects of the work that speakers draw on these constructions to do; first, while speakers indeed tend to talk about themselves and other humans, a strong trend is to use a PA or PAN construction to assess situations. Definite and Indefinite PANs and PNs PANs are more complex than PAs, as their predicates include a noun and thus constitute a full NP.

In English, of course, this means that they often have a determiner as well, which can be either definite or indefinite. Naturally, the same is true for the PNs. As we will see, the definiteness of both PANs and PNs is closely interwoven with their interactional function: the semantic function of categorizing is nearly always done with an indefinite Predicate NP, while the semantic function of equating is nearly always done with a definite Predicate NP.

When using PANs to talk about people, there is also a tendency to refer semantically to rather conventional categories, such as a bad person, a better person, a funny guy, or a productive member of society. Pragmatically, these often imply an assessment as well. When it comes to situations, at the pragmatic level, the assessing function is prominent, though the speaker is still pragmatically assigning the situation to a category, albeit a rather subjective one. Sometimes the assessment is expressed in the

noun: a real let-down, a total waste. More often, the adjective supplies most of the assessment meaning: a good thing, a pleasant surprise, a stressful weekend, a nice option. In such cases, the category named by the noun tends to be quite general. One difference, then, between PANs and PNs is that in the former, an assessment may be expressed either in the adjective or the noun. In kind of a dead-end job and a good class the assessment is expressed in the adjective, but in a real let-down and a total waste the assessment is in the noun. In PANs, it is more common for the assessment implication to be carried by the adjective, while the noun is more neutral or informing, as in a nice option and a stressful weekend. Thus, even though a PAN is syntactically a predicate nominal, it appears that most of the work of assessing is accomplished by the adjective. This explains the fact that, among PNs, around 80% are informing, while PANs are more evenly split, tending toward assessment in 53% of cases, as mentioned above.

In a definite PN, the clause in general establishes an equivalence, whose function it is to equate one referent with another. As for the social work these clauses are doing, most of them are doing informing; they veer into assessing in a few cases, in which the noun expresses a subjective evaluation, such as that's the trouble. More commonly, PNs are doing their prototypical work of delivering a piece of information from a knowing to an unknowing recipient. In contrast, there are very few definite PANs in our data, and these are mostly conventionalized assessments, as in the biggest pain in the ass, the funniest thing, and the good news. Thus, the presence of an adjective in a definite PAN strongly correlates with speakers' use of a PAN clause to do assessing. The small number of definite PANs and their use as conventionalized assessments suggest that constructions with definite PANs are not productive. In fact, the work of assessing or stating a subjective evaluation of the subject falls on the shoulders of the adjective rather than the N in more than 80% of our PAN-assessing examples. This fact leads to the question of the role of the N in a PAN. Our PAN examples fall roughly into four types. The first type are examples in which the N is bringing new information to the conversation; as we would expect, these mostly do informing rather than assessing work.

That is, the speaker offers the assessment interesting and could have done this with a PA it's just really interesting, but she adds the N reading. This N makes a minimal semantic contribution, but places the experience into a category 'reading', which groups it with other reading, and supports the inference that this book is 'interesting' as a reading experience, rather than, for example, as a reference work or a humor book.

CONCLUSION

The role that the adjective plays tends to depend upon the lexical meaning of the adjective, with adjectives such as stressful, pleasant, nice, good, and bad expressing assessment in most cases. The results reveal an interesting interplay between the syntactic form of the utterance and its lexical content in determining the work it is doing in conversation. As noted by many researchers lexical items and constructions are strongly associated in cognitive representation. That is, what language users know about lexical items includes not just their meaning, but also the constructions in which they have been experienced. Conversely, knowledge of constructions includes the set of lexical items used in the construction. Given that cognitive representations are records of previous experience with words and constructions (Bybee 2006), these representations also contain information about the interactional and

social contexts in which they have been used. All of this information— lexical meaning, constructional meaning, interactional context—influences the choices the speaker makes about the content of her utterance. These same factors guide the listener in the interpretation of the utterance. The analysis suggests that when speakers aiming to accomplish a certain interactional move have made certain lexical choices, the constructions in which those lexical items occur become available, and one of those constructions is then employed. With respect to adjectives, some have been found to occur more often in predicative position while others occur more often in attributive position For example, Boyd and Goldberg study a set of English adjectives with an a-prefix, such as asleep and afraid, which only occur predicatively. In the data analyzed in Bybee and Napoleão de Souza 2019, the English adjective sad occurs predicatively about 80% of the time, while red occurs predicatively only about 10% of the time. In addition to these syntactic usage tendencies, constructions also have pragmatic and interactional histories registered with them. Given this detailed knowledge about constructions, pragmatics, and interaction, we suggest that, for example, the choice of the adjective weird as an assessment could lead directly to the utterance it's/that's weird, using a PA, a common construction for weird and an inanimate subject. The data examined here also underscore the importance of the lexical content of the turns. Given that the speaker's choice of words to inform or assess may be a major determinant of the construction chosen, certain interactional structures may also trigger the combined choice of lexical item and construction.

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