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THE PROBLEM OF SUBSTANTIVATION OF ENGLISH ADJECTIVES

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Abstract. The article examines the problem of substantivation of English adjectives as a complex process situated between morphology, syntax, semantics and discourse. Substantivation is interpreted as the use of an adjective in a nominal function, either through full conversion into a noun or through partial nominal use in noun phrases such as the rich, the unemployed, the elderly and the unknown. The article analyzes the grammatical status of substantivized adjectives, their semantic classes, syntactic behavior, article usage, number interpretation and stylistic functions.

Keywords: substantivation, adjective, nominalization, conversion, English grammar, word-formation, syntax, semantic shift.

INTRODUCTION

The substantivation of English adjectives is one of the most debated issues in English grammar and word-formation because it lies at the intersection of two linguistic categories: adjective and noun. In the traditional grammatical description, an adjective is defined as a word that denotes a quality, property or characteristic and modifies a noun. A noun, by contrast, denotes a person, object, phenomenon, abstract concept or class. Substantivation occurs when an adjective begins to function as a noun or as the head of a noun phrase: the poor, the rich, the young, a native, a criminal, the unknown. At first sight, this phenomenon may seem simple: an adjective takes the place of a noun. In reality, the grammatical nature of substantivized adjectives is more complex, since not all such forms acquire the full morphological and syntactic properties of nouns.

The difficulty of the problem is connected with the analytic structure of English. English has relatively weak inflection compared with many synthetic languages, and word class boundaries are often flexible. A form may move from one grammatical class to another without visible affixation. This process is often described as conversion or zero derivation. H. Marchand considered conversion one of the productive mechanisms of English word-formation, since a word can change its functional category without formal change [1]. Substantivation of adjectives is related to this mechanism, but it cannot be fully reduced to it. Some adjectival forms become ordinary count nouns, while others remain adjective-like and require a definite article or contextual support.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The first important issue is the distinction between complete and partial substantivation. Complete substantivation occurs when an adjective has fully passed into the class of nouns and can take plural endings, articles and other noun markers. Examples include a native — natives, a criminal — criminals, a conservative — conservatives, a liberal — liberals, a regular — regulars. In these cases, the word behaves like a noun: it may be preceded by the indefinite article, used in the plural, modified by adjectives and function as subject, object or predicative complement. For example, Several conservatives opposed the reform shows that conservatives is no longer a mere adjective. It names a class of people and carries nominal grammatical features.

Partial substantivation is different. It occurs when an adjective is used nominally but does not acquire all noun properties. The typical structure is the + adjective, as in the poor, the rich, the blind, the unemployed, the elderly, the young. These forms usually denote a whole class of people characterized by a particular social, physical, age-related or economic feature. They normally have plural or collective meaning, but they do not take the plural suffix -s. One says the poor need support, not the poors need support. R. Quirk and his co-authors describe such forms as adjectives functioning as heads of noun phrases, but their behavior remains distinct from ordinary nouns [2]. This intermediate status makes partial substantivation a grammatical problem.

A central question is whether substantivized adjectives should be treated as nouns or as adjectives occupying a nominal position. Traditional grammar often calls them "substantivized adjectives," suggesting that they become nouns. Modern grammars are more cautious. R. Huddleston and G.K. Pullum interpret many of these constructions as fused-head noun phrases, where the adjective combines the meaning of modifier and head [3]. In this view, the rich may be understood as "rich people," but the noun people is not simply omitted in every case. The adjective itself carries the semantic content of the group and functions as the head of the phrase. This analysis explains why such forms retain adjective-like features, for example modification by adverbs: the very rich, the extremely poor, the newly unemployed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Substantivized adjectives differ semantically. One group denotes social and economic classes: the poor, the rich, the homeless, the unemployed. Another group denotes physical or psychological conditions: the blind, the deaf, the disabled, the mentally ill. A third group denotes age categories: the young, the old, the elderly. A fourth group expresses nationality or ethnic identity: the English, the French, the Dutch, the Chinese. A fifth group refers to abstract concepts: the good, the beautiful, the sublime, the unknown, the impossible. These groups are not identical in their grammatical behavior. For example, the French may refer to a national group, while the good refers to an abstract moral category. The semantic interpretation of substantivized adjectives therefore depends on lexical meaning and discourse context.

Article usage is one of the clearest indicators of partial substantivation. Many substantivized adjectives require the definite article when they denote a class: the poor, the old, the unemployed. The article does not necessarily indicate definite reference in the ordinary sense; rather, it marks a generalized social category. This differs from regular plural nouns, which can appear without the article in general reference: poor people need help. In the poor need help, the definite article is part of the construction. This feature shows that substantivized adjectives in English are grammatically constrained. They do not behave freely like ordinary nouns.

Number agreement also reveals their special status. Many substantivized adjectives referring to people take plural agreement: The rich are not always secure, The elderly need medical care. However, abstract substantivized adjectives normally take singular interpretation: The unknown is frightening, The beautiful attracts attention. Nationality adjectives vary. The English are proud of their literary heritage takes plural agreement because it refers to a people, while English as a language name is singular and non-count: English is widely studied. This contrast demonstrates that number is not determined only by form. It is determined by semantic class and syntactic environment.

Another issue is the relation between substantivation and ellipsis. Some phrases may be interpreted as elliptical, with a noun recoverable from context: I prefer the red dress to the blue, where the blue means the blue dress. In this case, the adjective does not become a noun in the lexical sense; it depends on the preceding noun. This is different from the poor, where no single

antecedent noun is required. I. Plag points out that English word-formation must distinguish lexical category change from syntactic processes that only resemble category change [5]. Therefore, not every adjective used without an overt noun should automatically be called a substantivized adjective. Contextual ellipsis and lexical substantivation must be separated.

The productivity of substantivation in English is limited but significant. It is especially common in social, political, legal and journalistic discourse. Phrases such as the accused, the deceased, the injured, the displaced, the vulnerable occur frequently in legal reports, news texts and humanitarian documents. These expressions allow the speaker or writer to refer to groups compactly and formally. D. Biber and his co-authors show that grammatical choices vary across registers and that nominal patterns are especially important in written and informational discourse [6]. Substantivized adjectives contribute to this economy of expression because they condense a descriptive phrase into a compact nominal unit.

CONCLUSION

The substantivation of English adjectives is a complex linguistic phenomenon that cannot be explained by the simple statement that adjectives become nouns. English demonstrates several degrees of substantivation. In complete substantivation, an adjective becomes a noun with regular nominal properties, as in a conservative — conservatives. In partial substantivation, the adjective functions as the head of a noun phrase but retains adjectival features, as in the poor, the young, the unemployed. In contextual ellipsis, an adjective appears without a noun only because the noun is recoverable from context, as in the blue meaning the blue one or the blue dress.

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