

Arguments with adjectives
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Traditional grammar denies the possibility that an adjective can take a (direct) object (Huddleston & Pullum 2001: 527). Principles & Parameters Case Theory likewise relies on the inability of nouns and adjectives to assign objective Case to explain the distribution of English *of* and similar case-marking prepositions in other languages (Chomsky 1981: 50-1). Compare too the theory of categories proposed by Jackendoff (1977), which characterises adjectives as [-obj, -subj], thus contrasting with verbs, which are [+s, +o], nouns [+s, -o] and prepositions [-s, +o]. In our paper we will revisit the issue of whether adjectives may take objects from three complementary perspectives.

First, it is clear that, from the semantic point of view, the range of complements available to adjectives overlaps with those for verbs, as evidenced by such near-synonymous pairs as *fear/be afraid of*, *love/be fond of*, *regret/be regretful of*. The question then arises as to whether such parallels are to be captured at the level of thematic structure or in terms of syntactic subcategorisation, or indeed more radically whether that distinction itself even makes sense in all grammatical contexts (Börjars & Vincent 2008).

Second, as we would expect, this general theoretical argument has typological implications, on the basis of which some recent studies have further challenged the traditional consensus. Thus, Mittendorf & Sadler (2008) and Al Sharifi & Sadler (2009) argue that Welsh and Arabic respectively have constructions analogous to the archaic English *fair of face*, *mild of manner* and the like which are best analysed in terms of an adjective (*fair*, *mild*) which subcategorises for a direct object (*face*, *manner*). Independently of whether the underlying relation is to be characterised in semantic or syntactic terms, these data raise the question of whether the cross-linguistic difference is best located at the level of the case (accusative vs genitive) which realises the relation rather than the relation itself.

Third, from a diachronic viewpoint, Maling (1983) and Platzack (1982a, b) note the existence of a category of so-called ‘transitive adjectives’ in the earlier stages of the Germanic languages, thus posing the question of how the relations and their realisations may change over time (Vincent & Börjars 2010). In particular we will look at the historical interaction of case-markers and prepositions in the expression of the complement of adjectives in Latin (Bodelot 2011), Romance and Germanic.

References

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