

THE CONCEPT OF «ABSTRACT» AND «CONCRETE» APPLIED TO THE ADJECTIVAL PREDICATION

Jesús Gerardo Martínez del Castillo
Universidad de Almería

Classemes correspond to features of meaning present in different lexical fields with very generic value. They function as determinations of lexemes, so that the vocabulary of a language is determined in one way or another by the presence of this kind of features (cf. Coseriu 1981, 135).

The opposition [\pm CONCRETE], abstract and concrete, represent two primary features or classemes, present in vocabulary. Adjectives can be classified in terms of the determination made on them by the presence of these two features, classemes having to do with the process of intellection. In accordance with this, there are different adjectival predications, to be placed at different levels of abstraction.

1. PROPOSAL FOR A CLASSIFICATION OF ADJECTIVES

Adjectives convey meaning because they are instruments of a particular language. In fact a language is a technique for any possible speech, and language is the creation of meanings (Coseriu 1985, 46). The lexical meaning of adjectives consists in the particular systematization of facts of experience made by the language (cf. Coseriu 1981, 88; 1987, 136). In this sense the lexical meaning of adjectives (lexemes) belongs to the system of the language. But, at the same time, the language has historically established the uses of the meaning of lexemes. In this sense the meaning of adjectives belongs to the norm of the language.

2. THE CLASSIFYING FUNCTION OF CLASSEMES

The meaning of adjectives can be analysed in the component features making up their structure of meaning. In the meaning of a lexeme different types of features or semes can be distinguished:

- a) those belonging only to the structure of meaning of the adjective (specific semes, Pottier 1976, 24);
- b) those making up a lexical field (generic semes, Pottier 1976, 24); and
- c) those present in more than one lexical field determining a particular lexical field or a lexeme, but not defining the lexical field. These features have been isolated in semantic study, and have been called with different names: «semantic primitives» (Fodor 1977, Wierzbicka 1972 and 1995), «components» (Bendix 1966), «higher-level primary features» (Aarts & Calbert 1979), «semantic types» (Dixon 1982; 1992), «classemes» (Pottier 1976; Coseriu 1981, Geckeler 1976).

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lary of a language is determined in one way or another by the presence of this kind of feature in lexemes (cf. Coseriu 1981, 135; Geckeler 1981, 395). They do not constitute lexical fields, but determine the lexical field (cf. Martín Mingorance 1987, 378) in two ways:

- a) determining the meaning of the lexemes of a particular lexical field. For example, the feature [ABSTRACT]¹ determines the character of the meaning of adjectives, such as “comprehensive”, “total”, or “general”. They mean because they relate the meaning of the noun to the idea of inclusion or extension, thus making the expression more complex: *general rains*, (rains over a large area), *general information* (information known by everybody). The adjective relates what has been denoted in the noun; and
- b) restricting the possibilities of intensification in them. Abstract adjectives are not usually descriptive but relational, thus limiting their possibilities of intensification.

Classemes are present in the structure of meaning of adjectives in different ways. Adjectives can be determined by more than one classeme. They can be characterized by the different types of lexical classes they predicate of, and, at the same time, by other classemes making up the structure of a lexical field. The pair “new”: “young” is determined by the opposition [±HUMAN], and they both, at the same time, are determined by the character of concrete states of affairs (Dik 1981, chapter 3). In the structure of meaning of these adjectives the classeme [±HUMAN] determines their applicability, and the classeme [±CONCRETE] determines their descriptive character, and thus their capability of intensification.

3. THE PROCESS OF INTELLECTION

The classifications of lexemes are made on the base of the different classemes present in the vocabulary of a language. In fact the different attempts made, study one aspect or another present in the vocabulary of a language as a classeme. The most famous classification of adjectives is, perhaps, the one by R. M. W. Dixon 1982 (reformulated in 1992). It is made on the base of the seven semantic types of DIMENSION, PHYSICAL PROPERTY, COLOUR, HUMAN PROPENSITY, AGE, VALUE and SPEED (in Dixon 1982), plus DIFFICULTY, QUALIFICATION and SIMILARITY (Dixon 1992, 78-79). Another one, by Felices Lago in his doctoral dissertation, Granada 1991, is based on the presence of the axiological component in adjectives. The classification suggested in this article is based on the determination made on adjectives by what I call the process of intellection. The primary systematization of facts of experience made by the language by means of adjectives, the creation of meanings, apart from the original function of designation, involves the establishment of different relationships of abstraction. Human beings can understand the world because they abstract, that is, they select some properties in things and neglect all the individual properties. This operation of abstraction is a process done by the means of the language. Language helps human beings understand the world, and the lexicon of a language shows the footprints of this process of intellection of the world. The process of intellection is not uniform, and shows different degrees of abstraction, acting as determinations of the meanings of words. Words, and adjectives, are conceived in a hig-

¹ The negation of [CONCRETE] in the opposition [±CONCRETE], cf. Aarts & Calbert 1979, 2.1.1

her or in a lower degree of abstraction. Abstract and concrete are two opposite concepts, representing the two poles of this process of intellection.

4. DIFFERENT DEGREES OF ABSTRACTION

We can see the following steps in the process of intellection:

- a) to state the designation;
- b) to describe the thing designated, that is, to create meanings; and
- c) to re-elaborate and put the meanings previously created in connection with one another.

The first step, stating designation, has to do with the universal level of the activity of speaking, and is, previous to all creations of meaning (cf. Coseriu 1992, 96).

The second step is very complex, and we can distinguish two kinds of creation of meaning in it: one representing the description of something, and another one representing an elaboration of relationships of meaning. The former is the creation of the meanings corresponding to concrete nouns. For example, *a tree, a house, an animal*, elements with a particular systematization (denotation) and capability of designation (they can be made into particular objects); but the latter represents a further step in the elaboration of meanings. It is the creation of relationships of meaning based on meanings already existing. It is the case of concrete adjectives. "Old", for example, is an elaboration of the relationships of meaning implicit in the concept of "age": «existence», «time», «development», «dimension», plus «applicability», the categorial meaning of adjectives. *An old house*, is to be understood within the background of a continuum of meaning executed in two poles, represented in the language by the opposition "old": "new". Even adjectives with no opposite counterparts, such as "cosmic" and "physical", for example, represent this kind of elaboration. The content of "cosmic", for example, can be analysed as «relationships of meaning about something of a particular kind of semantic objects (the universe) applicable to semantic objects of another kind». In comparison with the previous one, two facts are manifest: the relationship of meaning about something mentioned indirectly (the universe) and the categorial meaning (their applicability). The new semantic object has denotation, but not definition of it; it has not capability of designation either, two aspects acquired when in combination.

And the third step is typical of abstract adjectives and abstract nouns. To create "goodness" it is necessary to abstract from many particular objects said to be good. And to create the meaning of "utter" it is necessary to abstract from particular units of meaning, previously elaborated, abstract from them, and apply them to the new meaning being created in the combination. The operations of abstraction for the creation of the meaning of "utter" can be described in the following way: the expression, *a fool*, means a particular semantic object with denotation and designation in the real world. It is made up of an element meaning with unity, and thus, composition in itself. In the expression, *an utter fool*, on the other hand, the adjective introduces the relationship of composition and unity, emphasizing the absolute value of the state of affairs, already delimited in its composition and unity. Whether "fool" is delimited or not before the combination does not matter. That is, the adjective requires a previous semantic object, so that that composition and unity can be applied. The new semantic object is made up of the following elements: the meaning of the noun, a semantic object with composition and unity; the relationships of unity and composition introduced by the adjective; and the applicability of the adjective (categorial

meaning). The relationships of unity and composition constitute meaning abstracted from different semantic objects with unity and composition, something that may not be the case in the noun. We can paraphrase the example as «the absolute state of being a fool, so that there cannot ever be any other state of being a fool».

With this we can state different degrees of abstraction in the process of intellection:

- a) the lowest degree is represented in the act of designation of things. This operation is previous to all, and thus we can say it is the first degree of abstraction;
- b) the second degree is represented by the first creation of meaning, the creation of concrete nouns;
- c) the third degree of abstraction is represented by the elaboration of relationships of meaning, that is, of concrete adjectives; and
- d) the fourth degree of abstraction, is the creation of both abstract nouns and adjectives.

5. THE ADJECTIVAL PREDICATION IN ENGLISH

The adjectival predication is basically a static state of affairs. The function of the adjective consists in the application of its content on the content of the noun. The base of that application is the nature of the adjective: the expression of an open dimension capable to be defined, specified and intensified. This fact imposes certain peculiarities on adjectives: first, they cannot convey their meaning unless they apply their content to something else; second, they cannot stand, even exist, on themselves but need a support for their existence both as semantic elements and as elements of combination; and third, the functions of adjectives in the language is but the result of their nature as the expression of an open dimension: they can be intensified, can accept different semantic elements within their structure of predication, can accept different referents and establish a comparison between them, and, can, sometimes, be the expression of a binary dimension of meaning. In any case they need definition of their content and specification of their extent, operations provided by the language with different means.

6. TWO TYPES OF PREDICATIONS

In accordance with the meaning they convey, adjectives form different adjectival predications. Some adjectives have a descriptive character, and some have instrumental character; some make up predications contributing to define semantic objects with possibilities of real designation, and some are the expression of states of affairs existing only as an elaboration by the language. In this way we can distinguish two types of predications: the adjectival concrete predication and the adjectival abstract predication.

6.1. *The states of affairs of concrete adjectives*

Typical concrete adjectives denote states of affairs capable of becoming definite in the combination, and can contribute with their meaning to the description of a semantic object, either as a class of semantic objects lacking determination², or as a particular deter-

² Cf. Coseriu 1982, 283-323.

mined semantic object with designation in the real world. That is, they have a basic descriptive character, and represent one of the lowest operations in the process of intellection of the world. They contribute with their denotation to create meanings thus representing a primary elaboration after the statement of the mere designation, which is given by other means in the combination.

6.1.1. The dimension and extent of concrete adjectives

The fact of the application of the state of affairs of the adjective to the state of affairs of the noun has the effect of orientating the dimension of the adjective to particular kinds of semantic objects. This operation of adjectives has to do with the process of determination of words (Coseriu 1982, 291-298). Adjectives, especially concrete adjectives, mean differently depending on the noun they are combined with. The meaning of “high” is different in, *high proportion; high anxiety; high risks*; and in, *the high mountains*. In the first cases the dimension of meaning of the adjective is defined to mean, roughly, «in a large degree», and in the second case it is defined to mean a physical property of things. The first examples represent an elaboration of concepts made on other concepts, and the second a mere description. The first examples, extensions of meaning of a concrete adjective, represent further elaborations of meaning. They are in a degree of abstraction higher than the description established in the last example. Typical concrete adjectives represent the first creation of meaning, and belong to the third degree of abstraction (cf. 6). They are descriptive and contribute with their dimension of meaning either to describe or classify the object designated. In the examples, *high mountains, a high kerb*, the adjective creates meaning, contributing with its denotation.

6.1.2. The content of concrete adjectives

Adjectives are defined and specified in the combination with nouns. Concrete adjectives make up a descriptive predication, which, so far as it is descriptive, can be intensified. With this they contribute with their meaning to the description of new semantic objects, with definite designation in the real world if determined in the noun. Typical concrete adjectives, for example “small” or “tiny”, in, *a number of small sharp teeth; the smallest church in England; tiny shells; tiny little room*, create meanings ultimately consisting in an open dimension of meaning with a descriptive character and capable of intensification, something added to the meaning of the noun.

6.2. The state of affairs of abstract adjectives

The question is completely different with typical abstract adjectives. The function of these adjectives is not to contribute with their content to the description of a new semantic object but to denote certain relationships of meaning created on the semantic object in the noun, relating it to relationships of meaning having to do with the process of intellection. Typical abstract adjectives relate the state of affairs in the noun to the relationships of meaning conveyed by them. They do not describe, but relate. “Total”, for example, in, *the total group of students; a total amount of \$3000*, relates the state of affairs in the noun to certain relationships of meaning existing, in one way or another, in the language, sometimes implicit in the concept denoted. In effect, “group” and “amount” are described in full without the contribution of the adjective. They are related to the relationship of com-

position and completeness, something implicit in the idea of unity of the semantic object denoted by the noun. “Total” emphasizes something implicit in the state of affairs in the noun it is combined with.

6.2.1. Complex states of affairs

“Total” situates the object denoted in the noun within kinds of meaning overcoming the mere description of it, referring it to the unity or composition it has or it is given in the linguistic act (in the examples, to the composition of “group” and “amount”). With this the semantic object in the combination is situated within meanings in a higher level of abstraction. The contribution of the adjective is to relate the meaning of the noun to other meanings. “Total” thus is a complex meaning, an elaboration by the language, since it needs other meanings, previously defined and independent, given in the noun, to convey its meaning. Typical adjectival abstract predications primarily relate the semantic objects defined in the combination, thus creating complex meaning. They do not add anything in connection with the description of the state of affairs in the noun, but shades of meaning added to the semantic object in the noun, thus relating it.

6.2.2. The dimension and extent of abstract adjectives

The state of affairs denoted by these adjectives is an open dimension as well, and needs definition, but not specification of its extent, since the extent of the adjective is defined in the relationship it establishes. When they are applied to the noun they are defined in the type of dimension they convey. “General” conveys two types of meaning in the following examples, *his general attitude*, and ... *a general coating of dust*. In the first example it denotes a series of acts usual in him, whereas in the second it denotes something in a low proportion and everywhere. In the first example it denotes occurrence; in the second, quantity and place. In any case the semantic objects denoted in the noun are related, respectively, to occurrence or quantity and place. With this, the dimension of the adjective, made into relation, does not need any further specification.

6.2.3. Independent or non-independent states of affairs

The most striking difference is that typical concrete adjectives establish a kind of meaning able to be described without any connection with the noun they are combined with. In the combination the resulting meaning is the sum of both the denotation of the noun and the denotation of the adjective. In this sense they are descriptive, and can be described in the dimension they convey. “Old”, “big”, “high”, “angry”, “hungry”, “happy”, “long”, “deep”, etc., can be described in the state of affairs they denote without any connection with any noun in a combination. The precise extent of the state of affairs denoted, however, will be specified when they get into combination with nouns. On the contrary, typical abstract adjectives, cannot be described in themselves, but in connection with the noun in a particular combination. They do not contribute with their meaning to define the primary state of affairs in the combination, since the state of affairs they convey exists only as relationships of meaning added to the semantic object denoted in the noun. The dimension they denote is applied to the noun, thus conveying states of affairs relating the semantic object in the noun to the relationships of meaning they convey. In this respect their meaning, that is, the dimension they convey, consists in the expression of those rela-

tionships of meaning, and the extent of it is but the proper definition of the dimension applied to the semantic object created. The meaning they convey is relational and instrumental. For example, the state of affairs denoted by the typical abstract adjectives “simple”, “comprehensive”, “sheer”, “absolute”, “complete”, etc., does not refer semantic objects able to be defined but relationships on other semantic objects. They do not contribute to the definition of the state of affairs in the noun, but start from the things denoted in the noun. When “simple” in, *the simple truth*, is applied to the noun it does not add anything to identify or describe truth; it merely establishes the relationships of composition and unity on “truth”, something abstracted from other semantic objects and added to it, since truth cannot have any composition or unity. The state of affairs denoted in, *the point I'm making is a simple one*, compares the point the speaker is making with other points, and establishes that the one referred in the example has no complication in connection with others. “Simple” only exists as a relationship of meaning, not describing anything or stating any semantic object, but situating the semantic objects it is applied to within other meanings having to do with the intellection of them. In, *continuous rainfall*, the state of affairs predicated is the state of affairs predicated in the noun. If we paraphrase the combination we can say «rainfall, plus rainfall, plus rainfall», or «rainfall without interruption». That is, the adjective merely establishes relationships of succession on the semantic object «rainfall».

6.2.4. Direct and indirect affection on the noun

Concrete adjectives directly affect the noun they are combined with and describe the state of affairs in it, but abstract adjectives affect the state of affairs in the noun in so far as they relate it to other meanings. The addition of “tiny” to “shell” in the example above defines the type of object in the noun, describing it. A tiny shell is something different from a shell. The adjective affects the noun and makes up a new meaning. But the addition of “continuous” to “rainfall” does not alter the kind of objects denoted in the noun. “Rainfall” in the example is referred to a kind of meaning in the process of intellection by humans, according to which “rainfall” is considered in a succession of events, not altering the kind of semantic object in the noun. The function of typical abstract adjectives has not anything to do with the direct affection of the object denoted in the noun, and thus in the combination. It is something relating the state of affairs previously created. In this way typical concrete adjectives are descriptive, whereas typical abstract adjectives are instrumental. They are used with the purpose of providing the means to understand the complex relationships of meaning in the process of intellection of the world. They are the manifestation of one of the most typical functions of human beings, the functions in the process of intellection and the re-elaboration of things in the world. In the primary systematization of the facts of experience made by the language (Coseriu 1981, 88), previous to all kinds of knowledge, concrete adjectives perform the function of description of the facts of experience, but abstract adjectives perform a function in a higher level of abstraction, the relation of semantic objects to other concepts, necessary to understand the world.

6.2.5. Definite and indefinite designation

The adjectival concrete predication has, if not definite designation —adjectives take designation from nouns— at least capability to take definite designation. In effect, concrete adjectives denote entities with designation in a possible world, either real or imaginary. On the contrary adjectives of the abstract predication denote meanings representing

an elaboration by the language. The fact of applying typical abstract adjectives to nouns with concrete designation creates new semantic objects existing as an elaboration by the language. For example, if we compare the expression, *he is a liar*, with, *he is a compulsive liar*; ... *a gambler*; with, ... *a compulsive gambler*, we shall see that the type of semantic objects denoted and the thing designated are perfectly defined in the first sentences without the contribution of the adjective. In the second sentences the contribution of the adjective adds certain relationships of meaning having to do, not with semantic objects existing in themselves (as meanings), but with relationships of meaning resulting from an elaboration by the language on the base of the meaning denoted in the noun. In other words, to understand the state of affairs of typical abstract adjectives it is necessary to start from the semantic objects previously created in the noun. Typical abstract adjectives cannot be understood in themselves but with the help of a semantic support representing a semantic object perfectly defined previously. The designation, thus, is not given by the type of semantic relationships added by these adjectives, but it is given previously by the exclusive contribution of the noun. In the examples:

*the cost rose despite a general decline; the general standard of education there is very high; I'm sure he'll get the general idea,*³

the state of affairs created by the adjective “general” is nothing but a process of in-definition of the things designated. The examples would be much better specified if the adjective was not present: “decline”, “standard” or “idea” in the examples have different determiners and denote states of affairs directly referring to things, making a definite description of the state of affairs in question. The addition and application of “general” to them makes the expression less definite. The adjective adds relationships of extension, thus making the object denoted appear more distant and farther from the thing referred.

6.2.6. Higher degree of abstraction

The adjectival abstract predication, thus, represents an elaboration in a higher degree of abstraction, since it relates, rather, than describes the states of affairs conveyed in the combination. Concrete and abstract adjectives are at different levels of abstraction. The former are descriptive, the latter instrumental; the former can be assigned to the second degree of abstraction, the latter to the third (cf. 6).

6.2.7. Different kind of classeme

Adjectival abstract and concrete predications are to be separated as well because of the different kind of lexical classes (classemes) they predicate of. Typical concrete adjectives predicate of particular lexical classes either existing in the real world or in an imaginary world, but the fact that typical abstract adjectives create relationships of meaning among semantic objects previously created makes them very apt to predicate of complex lexical classes. Many types of meaning created by speakers in the linguistic act are very adequate to this type of adjectives. In the example, *keeping my news from Ted was awkward*, the adjective predicates of a complex meaning. “Awkward”, on the other hand, is an adjective usually applied of concrete lexical classes, but even in those cases there is a previous

³ All the examples are from the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary.

elaboration on the part of the language necessary to understand the thing denoted. In, *an awkward gesture*, “gesture” is defined in such a way that involves other gestures: it is related to a particular norm according to which some gestures are in accordance with the usual or normal performance of gestures and some are not. In, *the final applause was explosive; the company’s eventual collapse*, the relationships of meaning created involve a complicated relationship of meaning on the semantic object predicated. The classeme of these adjectives refers series of semantic objects of the class referred, and one of those is singled out. In the paraphrase of the examples these aspects are clear: «there were various acts of applause and the last one was explosive», and «the company had a series of (different) problems and the one after the long process was the collapse». The classemes can be paraphrased as «the applause in connection with other acts of applause», or «the collapse after a series of events».

The classeme is in direct connection with the nature of adjectives. The classeme of typical concrete adjectives is but an aspect of the description they contribute with in the combination. On the contrary, the classeme of typical abstract adjectives represents an aspect of the process of relation they contribute with in the combination.

7. CONCLUSION

Adjectives convey two types of predication, one having to do with the one level of abstraction, that is, with the description of the facts of experience, and another one with an elaboration based on the primary description of the facts of experience, representing a higher level of abstraction. The former is necessary to describe the world; the latter to understand it.

On the other hand, the meanings conveyed by abstract adjectives exist in the language as independent semantic objects. This manifests the essential unity of lexicon.

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