

Meaning of Syntax

A Study in the Adjectives of English

Connor Ferris

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THE MEANING OF SYNTAX

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The Meaning of Syntax

A Study in the
Adjectives of English

Connor Ferris

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Preface

When I started work on this material something over fifteen years ago – first owing to it in an unpublished paper given to the Linguistics Association of Great Britain in 1978 – I was curious that despite the enormous amount being written on syntax, and especially on relations between different sorts of linguistic structure, little or none of it seemed to me to deal with the *essentials*, the way in which the basic linguistic structures are assembled in the first place. I found no satisfaction in the ideas that these processes could be dealt with by simply specifying acceptable strings of word classes, or that a description of the worlds about which we use language could reveal the nature of language itself, nor in the surprising belief that one or other of the many varieties of logic would coincide with the ways that we put words together in thoughts and phrases and sentences. Nothing much has happened in the intervening time to reduce my puzzlement. Here, therefore, is an attempt to answer some of the many questions that present themselves. It seemed sensible to tackle the issues not by taking on the whole of syntax, but by nonetheless taking an area wide enough to show how a different approach could explain – not merely represent – many matters of interpretation and grammaticality. The adjectives of English formed an admirable terrain for this purpose, already explored in its broad outlines but still crammed full of undocumented species and specimens with often interesting and sometimes surprising behaviour.

It also seemed a good idea to draw on, as far as I could, varied examples of the kind of language people really use, since this gives the chance for a wider range of issues to emerge than if we stick to short phrases about John and Mary; there have, perhaps, been too many chairs, tables, dogs, and red houses cluttering the foreground of linguistics and philosophy, and obstructing the view of diverse objects and activities in motion further back.

There are some implications of this work that may be of interest, insofar as it has any validity. One is that a tiny number of elements and relationships produce, by iteration and interaction, the astonishing and fascinating complexity found in, say, an ordinary newspaper article. We can go beyond that; at least as far as syntax is concerned, there may be one single universal attribute distinguishing human linguistic capacity from the kind of mental faculties shared with the higher animal kingdom. Another implication would be that many transformational operations that have been claimed at various times cannot be justified, syntactically or semantically; for others, we may be able to specify lexical conditions under which they will be valid, and it may, indeed, be true that almost all such operations are lexically bound. It may also be worth mentioning that a full account of translation, within and between languages, does seem to need the sort of relations studied in this book, and not only the more superficial constructions which express them in various ways.

I am grateful to the National University of Singapore, where I moved in 1988, for allowing me sufficient academic time to spend on the research necessary to bring this material to its present state. I am grateful in a quite different way to a wonderful scholar who is sadly no longer with us. If there could be linguistic seminars in heaven Dwight Bolinger would certainly have already presented new, true and interesting findings about the language of the angels. More personal debts are owed to two mentors, Professor D.J. O'Connor and Professor R.H. Robins whose guidance in various ways and at various times has been greatly to my benefit. Finally, heartfelt thanks to my wife, Lamduan for the good-humoured forbearance with which she allowed me to steal so many hours from her to store up here.

Connor Ferris
Singapore 1992

Descriptive signs

In addition to the asterisk commonly prefixed to examples of grammatically unacceptable phrases and sentences, the following signs are used in the text:

¹ (superscript): grammatical but semantically bizarre

^x (superscript): grammatical but not related in any systematic way to a previously cited original

[?] (superscript): of doubtful grammaticality

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Chapter 1

The intensional framework of syntax

1.1 The overall goal of this investigation is to argue that there is a very great deal that can be said, that has not yet been said, about the semantic value of fundamental syntactic relations. It addresses this issue by looking at a large body of empirical evidence, specifically at examples of the relations between adjectives and other words in their phrases or sentences (these other words by no means always being nouns or noun phrases). The observations which we shall make can be directly linked to an account of the overall possibilities of English grammatical structure; by this we do not mean to speak of the paradigmatic relationships between different clauses, but of the syntagmatic relations which construct the clause itself. We argue that adjectives appear, diversely, in their own right, as syntagmatic structures unfold, and that clauses proposed to underlie them are illusory.

We confidently assume that the results set out here will, in their broad principles, be valid for any language; however, because of the limitless domains that would appear on the horizon if one were to include proper exemplification from other languages, and since there is ample material to consider in English alone, the latter is the basis on which the investigation will proceed.

If the approach to be found here can be tied to a previous tradition, it will be to the modern speculative grammar of which Jespersen and Sapir were eminent exponents earlier in the century; this tradition has become unfashionable in the past two or three decades, though distinguished work in this mode has still been produced by various scholars, for instance P. H. Matthews in England and Dwight Bolinger in America; in particular, if there are any worthwhile results in the present text, they owe much to Bolinger's example of investigation through careful scrutiny of what really happens grammatically when a

given expression is used. However, even though the work described here is certainly concerned with grammar (and not, for example, based on sociological data or on lexical classification), it cannot be denied that it is remote from much of modern writing on grammar. On the other hand, there are three points which may count in its favour:

First, it provides a straightforward account of the very varied uses of adjectives in English, and points to a quite direct correlation between observable facts and a highly economical set of assumptions about basic grammatical relations. Moreover, these assumptions can themselves be related to the nature of communication in a particularly simple way.

Second, it includes a description of the meaning of each construction, *qua* construction, where English adjectives are found. The word *meaning* is to be taken seriously here. We take it as obviously inadequate merely to assert that fundamental syntax is semantic; nor shall we believe that we have described (let alone explained) the meaning of a syntactic construction by simply giving it a name, such as **attribution** or **predicative adjunction**. We do not intend to set up an alternative formal system (uninterpreted in itself) to act as the interpretation for our syntax, and we shall not just specify patterns of co-occurring word classes on the supposition that causal factors are described by exhibiting the phenomena they govern (or, worse, that the two are the same); this mistake, which has been widely made, reverses the logical priorities – rather as if one were to answer an enquiry about the underlying geological structure of a region by offering aerial photographs of the terrain. In practice, this mistake has been responsible for much confusion in the discussion of syntactic possibilities and their means of expression.

Third, the account can *explain* some of the interpretative and grammatical facts of English, both general and particular. This does not mean merely showing that two parts of the descriptive apparatus march in step with one another; the explanation here is a matter of showing that the facts in question are natural consequences of interaction between the meanings of the syntactic constructions as constructions, and the lexical meaning of the individual items that appear in them. In order to be as specific as possible, we shall cite three examples chosen at random from the text that follows. The account given in this book, based on the constructional meanings, enables us to give answers to these questions:

Why does *Oliver imagined her red-haired* have two different meanings, one where he is trying mentally to change the lady's image, and the other where he wonders what sort of person he is going to meet)? (Chapter 4)

Why is the question in (1) grammatical while that in (2) is not? (Chapter 5)

- (1) he likes his beef tea strong
how does he like his beef tea?
- (2) muzak drives them mad
*how does muzak drive them?

Why is the first sentence of (3) grammatical while the second is not? (Chapter 10)

- (3) rarely do headmasters smoke in excess
*generally do headmasters drink in moderation

1.2 It is tempting at this point to plunge straight into an account of the adjectival system and how it produces such results as those above; and in fact we should state clearly at this point that readers who prefer to build up the picture piece by piece, assessing the validity of the connexion between data and theory by starting from the evidential end, may pass immediately to Chapter 2 without any disadvantage.

However, to assert that there is a very great deal remaining to be said about the mutual effects of semantics and syntax may seem a bold claim, perhaps even a surprising one, given the number of those who have worked on both areas and the many publications with titles suggesting that the two have been linked inside their covers. It may therefore not be entirely idle to try to hazard suggestions as to why the field should still be so open. The best possible way to do this will be to set down the account resulting from a different approach, so that one can see what it is that has been overlooked so far; and this is something which this book sets out to do.

Beyond that, however, there are clearly certain factors which have acted to throw a kind of cloak of invisibility around the semantic contribution made by syntactic constructions. Together these produce a powerful effect, and, after reviewing them and the way they work, it becomes very much less surprising that the semantic essence of syntactic constructions has proved so elusive in the past. Since such a review stands rather apart from the rest of the material, it is presented separately, in Appendix A, where we consider what syntax is and is not, and the difficulties that have beset previous attempts to explain it, of which the principal result has been an implicit acceptance of what may be called the 'perspicuity of grammar'.

In the remainder of this chapter, we shall present an outline sketch of the assumptions about the fundamental structure of grammar which form the background to our discussion of English adjectives, and

which allow us to derive the kind of detailed inferences about grammaticality and interpretation exemplified above. It will be pleasing if the features of this sketch seem intuitively natural, as indeed we would claim, but justification for them is of course to be sought primarily in the observations of Chapters 2 to 10 and the way that these observations fit our assumptions about the bases of adjectival syntax. Our treatment in this chapter will try to be as informal as possible in order to be comprehensible. Notes towards a more formal account are offered in Appendix B.

1.3 At the simplest level, we assume that there are only two types of element possible in human linguistically structured thought, **entities** and **properties**. Elements of these two types contract any of four 'horizontal' relations, belonging to the same level, with other entities or properties or both, as will be described immediately below (it is probable that exactly one of these relations is specifically linguistic rather than being a relation implied by human mental activities in general).

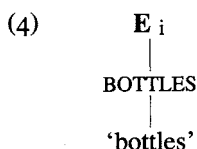
Both types of element (or strictly speaking tokens or occurrences of both types) contract a 'vertical' relation of **instantiation** with linguistic expressions, or more precisely with the meanings of linguistic expressions. In all that follows, we shall assume that these basic linguistic expressions are words, as indeed they normally are, unless we have specific reason for focusing our attention on phrases or morphemes. We may also say that the linguistic expressions (or their meanings) that appear in particular token constructions **identify** entities and properties (and we shall feel free to extend this use of **identify** to the activity of the speakers and writers who use the constructions). Entities, being elements of a specifically linguistic domain which we shall call the **intensional level**, may or may not have a referent in some real or imaginary external world; we can certainly talk about an entity while uncertain of the existence of any related 'thing' in the world about which we are speaking, or even while explicitly rejecting such an existence. In precisely the same way, when we use the word *property* it will mean an element of this domain used by speakers in constructing their acts of linguistic communication, and not a property as perceived or conceived extralinguistically in a real or imaginary world, unless we specifically state that the latter is intended.

Another way of putting this is to say that human linguistic thought is such that all particular thoughts (whether expressed overtly or not) can be constructed only in terms of ideas classified as either entities or properties, and put together by means of some combination of the four fundamental relations already alluded to.

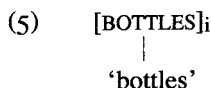
The first of these relations is what we shall call **qualification**. Both entities and properties may be specified in more detail by extending them with elements of either type using this relation. By virtue of being the additional 'extending' elements, the latter are **subordinate**.

Let us clarify by giving some examples, assuming first a speaker who wishes to give linguistic expression to some part of the world which is perceived as an **entity**. As a first step, he or she identifies it by using a word-meaning which is conventionally taken to match the nature of the perception. (That is to say, the fit between meanings and perceptions is a matter of social convention, just as much as the historical process by which each language comes to have its own particular set of word forms for the meanings which it uses. The paradigm example to remind us of the conventionality of the relationship between meanings and perceptions is the case of expressions for colour, and this holds good even if we are willing to accept a case for the universality of certain focal points of colour perception.) The other constraint on the speaker is that the word-meaning chosen must also be one which is conventionally accepted as used for entities rather than for properties.

Let us choose, for the sake of a particular example, the word-meaning BOTTLES. (Where it is necessary to distinguish explicitly between meanings and forms of words we shall follow the convention of Lyons and others in using small capital letters for the former.) We may now represent this simplest of linguistic situations as follows (the minor complication potentially caused by the presence of PLURAL is ignored here):



Naturally we shall use **E** as our symbol for the occurrence of an entity, and **P** for that of a property. An alternative notation which may sometimes be more convenient is (5), with square brackets marking the fact that this word-meaning is taken to match an entity:



If, however, the mind does not feel that BOTTLES is sufficiently specific to identify the target of its attention, then the identification

may be extended as in (6), where we adopt a plain arrowhead as our representation of **qualification**:

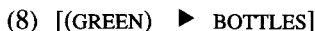


We assume that a qualified entity remains an entity (see Appendix B), and this can more conveniently be represented by our alternative notation as in:



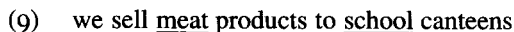
It is quite important to stress the retention of the same subscript *i* in (7). If we were talking in terms of the possibilities of identification provided by logical combinations of words from the dictionary, then (7) could not possibly identify the same entity, or set of entities, as (4) or (5). But we are concerned with a fundamentally different matter, the possible ways in which some entity (or property), already accepted mentally, might be identified by a speaker, either for the purposes of his own thought or for communicating some idea to an audience; in the latter case, there is no reason at all to object to the suggestion that the same item might be referred to either by (7), or by (4) or (5).

As a detail of notation, if it seems useful to have a way to distinguish property-meanings from entity-meanings, then we may use round brackets for the former, thus allowing us to replace (7) by:



We may also point out that the physical orientation of the arrowhead in our representations naturally reflects the direction of qualification, not the surface order of the instantiating elements.

1.4 We should now immediately take account of the fact that few words serve solely to identify entities that a speaker wishes to mention. Possible exceptions are names, and in some languages perhaps certain deictics. The case of ordinary nouns is more complex. They are sometimes used solely for the sake of the descriptive properties which they express, as perhaps in:



But the majority of their occurrences are aimed at identifying some entity. Even in the latter instances, however, the entity is identified by

means of the properties which it designates. To put it another way, a noun, as an item from the lexicon of the language, has descriptive content and may be considered as a property concept just as much as any verb or adjective, with only the exception that it is habitually used in individual acts of communication in order to identify an entity, by means of that descriptive content.

Thus we might, in the case of names, allow a representation like:

(10) [ADOLPHUS]

The explicit omission of round brackets conveys the claim that the name identifies some entity directly, not through the mention of some properties. (At the same time, we can very usefully retain the small capitals to indicate that, although no conventional property is involved, there is some body of cohesive information that corresponds to the form 'Adolphus', and that can be used to pick out some particular entity for discussion.) However, ordinary nouns never strictly correspond to a structure like (10); the word *bottles* for example really demands an intensional representation which is already (minimally) complex; schematically, it is:

(11) P ► E_i

Taking into account the particular word-meaning used we might write either :

(12)

$$\begin{array}{c} E_i \\ | \\ (\text{BOTTLES})^e \\ | \\ \text{'bottles'} \end{array}$$

(13) [(BOTTLES)^e ► E]_i

(The superscript *e* would tag the meaning as one which is conventionally used for identifying entities.)

Despite these remarks, it will be preferable to use a more compact notation, so, provided that it is understood that single nouns cover an intensional structure like that above (and this will matter in later chapters) we shall feel free to show them as simple occurrences of *E*, thus retaining P ► E as our notation for the pattern of any of the following :

- (14) green bottles
 hungry marchers
 chocolate cake

1.5 It is inappropriate and indeed impossible to characterize the semantic, and purely linguistic, value of qualification in extensional or referential terms. Certainly the range of types of referential relation holding between perceived properties corresponding to a qualifying adjective and perceived entities corresponding to its accompanying noun is enormous; a small random sample would include the cases that could be covered by (15) as well as by (14):

- (15) plastic bottles
 empty bottles
 useful bottles
 different bottles
 missing bottles

It would not be correct, however, to conclude from this evidence that the meaning expressed by qualification is a broad composite notion, from a syntactic point of view. One might try to construct formal models in which the phrases of (15) and others receive distinct representations, on the grounds that differences do exist in the types of situation which the phrases correspond to, and indeed such attempts have been made (cf. for example Kamp, 1975); but this is quite a different matter from trying to model the syntax by which the phrases are assembled as phrases. As an analogy, one does not consider the notion of fatherhood a vague one, within the semantic domain of family relationships, simply because there is an immense number of types of relationship which may exist between actual fathers and their offspring; to do so would be a category error. If qualification is hard to define, it is because it is one of the fundamental notions that are called on in building linguistic structures; it is one member of a subsystem which in its essence will actually reduce to three terms: **qualification**, **equation** (on which see Section 1.7), and **absence of relation**. The right way to indicate its nature is, therefore, to give instances where it is present, and to describe its interaction with other parts of the system to which it belongs, in particular when the interaction leads to predictions which can be checked; simple as the system may be, we shall find that successive interactions can swiftly lead to structures of quite satisfying complexity (see Appendix B). If any further immediate description of qualification is sought, we can only say that it introduces an element which the speaker does feel to be relevant to identification of a property or an entity, but subject to the constraint

that the element so introduced is not actually equivalent to the item qualified.

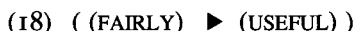
We should also, however, add a comment on a negative aspect, concerning the idea of **applicability**. Although it is not in itself part of the system which generates intensional structures, and we shall not make the term part of our fundamental descriptive apparatus, we may say that the property of an adjective **applies** to an entity when the language user takes the property which it designates to be valid (in positive statements) for some entity which he or she also recognizes (even if the entity itself may be acknowledged as an imaginary one). In the case where an **E** is extended by qualification in order to provide a more suitable identification to an audience, as in (14), it is entirely natural to assume that a **P** which does the qualifying – typically an attributive adjective, in traditional terms – will **apply to or be valid for** the entity identified by the whole pattern [**P** ► **E**]. Yet, as we shall see in Chapter 2, this is *not* invariably the case. The reason is that the main function of such an extended phrase remains identification of some entity or other; and there are occasions when that purpose can be helped along by introducing a **P** which applies to some other **E**.

However, this is the exceptional case. We shall find that there is a very good general rule that, while adjectives may qualify verbs or verb phrases as well as nouns, the property which an adjective designates is understood to **apply** to the entity of that noun phrase with which it is in construction most directly (but not necessarily immediately, as we see in Chapters 3 to 9).

1.6 It is not necessary that an item qualifying an **E** should be a **P**. This is not the case in our next example, (16). Here, since the word-meaning **PLAYS** is not enough to identify the target of the speaker's attention, it is extended by a subordinate entity:

(16) [[SHAKESPEARE] ► PLAYS]_k

the subordinate linguistic expression continues to identify its own entity even though it is present in order to assist in the identification of a different entity, which is specified by the expression as a whole. (Even if we do not accept the predominant view that names lack a meaning fixed by social convention, no alteration is required in the principles we are sketching here.) Next, in (17), we have a minimal property complex made up of a property extended by another property, **P** ► **P**, alternatively represented as in (18). (The distinctions among different types of property complexes are considered in some detail in Chapter 8.):

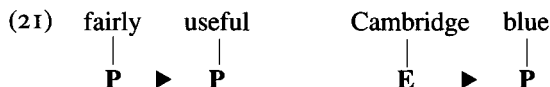


Obviously in many cases such as (18) no confusion will be caused if we omit the inner pairs of brackets.

In (19) and (20) we have the less common case of a property extended by an entity, $E \blacktriangleright P$; we continue to assume that a qualified property remains a property:



Where we are considering some actual form of words with a view to describing their categorizations and relationships, and especially where the phrases are somewhat more complex, it may be appropriate to partly invert the notation, and to omit the separate representation of the word-meaning, as in (21) which so depicts the intensional structure of (18) and (19):



Qualification is clearly an ordered relation and we shall assume that it is a binary relation; one of the two elements related is the principal element (on **co-ordination**, see Section 1.9 and Chapter 8). Within the domain of syntax (though not necessarily within that of etymological morphology) the categorization of the extended phrase will be the same as that of its principal element; this is entirely natural, given that extensions are prompted by a desire for greater specificity. To put it another way, if the principal element is an E , then the complex produced by such an extension remains an E ; and if the main element is a P , then the complex is a P . Qualification has the effect of indicating that the subordinate element is to be used in the identification of a single entity or of a single property corresponding to the complex as a whole. It is to be distinguished from the relation of **assignment** (below), notably because, in qualification, the property of the subordinate element – even where that is an adjective – may not be true of the whole, despite the fact that it helps to identify it. (For a full discussion of such cases, see Chapter 2.) We may also note that it is

possible for the word instantiating the subordinate element to be otiose from the point of view of the speaker or hearer or both (see Chapter 7).

We are calling the level of entities and properties, together with qualification and the other fundamental relations, the **intensional** level. There are good reasons for distinguishing it both from the level of the meanings of expressions, as will become apparent later in the text (see in particular Chapter 6), and from whatever more general non-linguistic level of mental activity has to take responsibility for human perception of external phenomena; a sufficient reason is that speakers of the language are well aware that they can seek to identify one and the same entity or property by using the meanings of various different expressions:

- (22) his father, the last Borgia cardinal, remained a Spaniard at heart

Examples like (22) are familiarly put forward as showing the distinction between meaning and reference; they may serve that purpose but that is quite a different matter. It may possibly be, as it surely is in (22), that, where a single entity is present to the mind of the speaker, the same speaker cannot simultaneously entertain the idea of more than one referent corresponding to that entity (though there may be certain problems for this view in the case of collective nouns such as *government* or *congregation* or *quartet*, for which see Chapter 8); however, it is much less obvious that, where there is assumed to be only a single referent, there should be only a single intensional entity present to the mind; rather, it seems to us that the separation of the referential and the intensional elements is precisely what lies behind such examples as (23) (from Searle, 1969), or (24):

- (23) Everest is Chomolungma

- (24) the sheriff did not know that he was Arthur's brother

In the latter sentence, of course, we are interested in the interpretation which has *he* co-referring with *Arthur's brother*, and the reason that we do not find a reflexive in the final position is precisely that these two elements are distinct intensionally even though they share the same referent.

What is clear beyond doubt is that the level of intensional entities cannot be identified with any level or world of objectively existing referents; (25) is a perfectly coherent remark despite the fact that the speaker explicitly denies the existence of one of the principal participants in it:

- (25) If Jack had married, his wife would now be the dowager duchess of Luntshire

1.7 Example (26) shows us the second and less common relation contributing to the unfolding of syntactic structures, which we shall call **equation**, adopting the obvious symbol to represent it:

- (26) Fitzpatrick, our neighbour, used to plant potatoes

the subject exemplifies the basic pattern [E = E], (as does the underlined portion of (22)); in more exact terms, what we have in this subject phrase is:

- (27) [[FITZPATRICK] = [(OUR) ► NEIGHBOUR]]

As we have just remarked, equational phrases are rarer than phrases involving qualification; and, among them, there is a very large disproportion in favour of equation between **E** and **E**, rather than between **P** and **P**. Nevertheless, the latter can be found; two examples would be:

- (28) what I need is a cup of strong, dark coffee
for a fast, convenient trip to the city, take the Skytram

This is clearly not to say that *strong* and *dark*, or *fast* and *convenient*, are equivalent at the type level; only that on some particular occasion of use, as here, they may be regarded by speaker, or copywriter, as equivalent. Once again we may stress that any attempt to describe syntax by assessing the logical possibilities of combination of the 'type' meanings which words and other lexical items may have in the dictionary will simply launch us into the wrong enterprise. The intensional level structures which we are describing here are not rules of logical combination, constrained by what may or must be possible, given the type meaning of the words which are combined; there is any amount of evidence to this effect if we simply allow our attention to rest on it. For instance, there is a contradiction, in a strict interpretation of:

- (29) the circle in the left of the picture is essentially another rectangle

The sentence could not be a usable part of the language if language adhered to logical conventions. We shall not now make the point that contradictions and tautologies are often socially acceptable; the