Adjectives or relative clauses? A new perspective on adjectives in American Sign Language

Shuyan Wang
shuyan.wang@uconn.edu
University of Connecticut

1. Introduction

• I will propose that:
  • Prenominal adjectives are adjuncts to the noun and follow the ordering constraints proposed by Cinque (1994).
  • Prenominal adjectives are predicative relative clauses.
  • 'Adjectives' that can be used with aspectual inflections are actually verbs.

2. Background

• First, MacLaughlin (1997) observed that prenominal adjectives in ASL follow the general word order suggested by Cinque (1994): QUALITY > SIZE > SHAPE > COLOR, as in (1). On the other hand, postnominal adjectives in ASL permit free order, as in (2).

  (1). a. [BIG RED BALL (kudv)p]r b. *[RED BALL BIG (kudv)p]r (MacLaughlin 1997)
  (2). a. [BALL RED BIG (kudv)p]r b. *[BALL RED BIG (kudv)p]r (MacLaughlin 1997)

• Second, MacLaughlin (1997) noticed that prenominal adjectives are attributive while postnominal adjectives are predicative in nature. For example, OLD FRIEND in (3a) can mean 'a friend that has been known for a long time' or 'a friend who is old'. However, with a postnominal adjective, the phrase only means 'a friend who is old'.

  (3). a. [POSSESS OLD FRIEND]r b. [POSSESS FRIEND OLD]r (MacLaughlin 1997)

• Third, non-predicative adjectives in ASL can never occur post-nominally.

  (4). a. *[STUDENT IX]r FORMER b. *[STUDENT FORMER]r (MacLaughlin 1997)

3. Previous Analyses and Problems

• Boster (1996) proposes that all adjectives in ASL are adjuncts base-generated either before or after the noun.
  • It is widely assumed that only phrases, rather than segments or bar-level categories, can be elided or moved.
  • If ASL adjectives are adjectives (i.e., segments of an NP), they cannot be left behind.
  • However, Boster’s analysis cannot explain the differences between prenominal and postnominal adjectives in ASL (cf. (1), (2), and (3)).

• MacLaughlin (1997) proposes disparate analyses for prenominal and postnominal adjectives: the former are specifiers of Modifier Phrases, as in (8); the latter are adjectives of NP, and there is a null operator linking the AP with the NP by a rule of predication (cf. Williams 1980), as in (9).

  (8). [MICE [POSSESS [BIG [BALL RED]]]]
  (9). [NPO [POSSESS MAN] [MICE [POSSESS [BIG [BALL RED]]]]

• MacLaughlin (1997) proposes that the aspectual markers are always used with postnominal but not prenominal adjectives: brow raising, head tilted back, and upper lip raising.

• Liddell (1980) indicates that the same set of non-manual markings are used simultaneously with ASL relative clauses.

• Therefore, the accurate gloss for phrases with postnominal adjectives should include the non-manual markings, as in (11).

  (11). a. relative clause [BIG BALL RED]p b. relative clause [POSSESS OLD FRIEND]p

• Second, with the non-manual markings, prenominal and postnominal adjectives can co-exist (see (12)), contrary to the observation by Bernath (2009) (cf. (6a)).

  (12). relative clause [BIG BALL RED] DISAPPEAR

• Finally, some signers tend to add SELF between a noun and a postnominal adjective, together with the non-manual markings mentioned above, as in (13).

  (13). relative clause IXp BUY BALL SELF BIG RED


4. New Observations

• First, based on the data from ASL native signers, I found certain non-manual markings are always used with postnominal but not prenominal adjectives: brow raising, head tilted back, and upper lip raising.

• Importantly, Liddell (1980) indicates that the same set of non-manual markings are used simultaneously with ASL relative clauses.

• Therefore, the accurate gloss for phrases with postnominal adjectives should include the non-manual markings, as in (11).

• Second, with the non-manual markings, prenominal and postnominal adjectives can co-exist (see (12)), contrary to the observation by Bernath (2009) (cf. (6a)).

• Finally, some signers tend to add SELF between a noun and a postnominal adjective, together with the non-manual markings mentioned above, as in (13).

Acknowledgement: I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Diane Lillo-Martin for insightful comments and suggestions. I also really appreciate the comments from the audience at the Sign Language Reading & Discussion Group (SLRiG) at the University of Connecticut. Finally, I would like to thank the ASL signers for providing data and judgments.


5. New Proposals

• Based on all the observations, I propose that:
  i. ASL prenominal adjectives are adjuncts to the noun, as proposed by Boster (1996), and that they should obey the ordering constraints proposed by Cinque (1994);
  ii. postnominal adjectives are all predicates in relative clauses (copula structures);
  iii. the 'adjectives' that can be used with aspectual inflections are actually verbs, as proposed by Bernath (2009, 2010) and Loos (in press).

• The ‘relative clause’ analysis of prenominal adjectives expects their parallel with relative clauses: similar non-manual markings, and the presence of SELF.

• Also, according to this new proposals, both prenominal and postnominal adjectives are actually adjectives to the noun. The difference is that a prenominal adjective is an AP (see (14a)) while a postnominal adjective is a CP (see (14b)). In either case, ASL adjectives cannot be stranded by the topicalization of the noun.

• The proposal that the aspect-inflected ‘adjectives’ are actually verbs rather than adjectives has some advantages. Any analyses not treating aspect-inflected adjectives as verbs have to explain:
  i. why ASL aspectual markers are not restricted to verbs;
  ii. why not all adjectives can be used with these inflections;
  iii. why the aspect-inflected adjectives can only occur as predicates in copula structures (cf. (5)).

The current proposal can solve all these questions.