

**Alicja Nagórko**

## **ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF SEMANTIC CLASSIFICATION OF ADJECTIVES**

Originally published as "O podstawach semantycznego podziału przymiotników," *Studia Semiotyczne* 13 (1983), 143–150. Translated by Agnieszka Przybyła-Wilkin.

---

In terms of meaning, words classified as adjectives name characteristics of denotata or relations existing between them.

Being names of characteristics and relations, adjectives (a) belong to the abstract class (it is impossible to indicate objects they refer to in the extralinguistic reality), (b) are syntactically and semantically dependent: as modifiers of nouns they only gain meaning in connection with the modified noun, (c) can be predicative complements. These semantic and syntactic features of adjectives raise interest of contemporary linguistics in this word class.

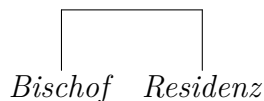
A lasting and continuously argued issue is the semantic classification of adjectives. In my article, I would like to address some aspects of this classification.

### **Qualitative and Relative Adjectives**

This classification is almost commonly accepted in Polish linguistics (cf. Szupryczyńska 1980) In Western literature, an increasingly frequent claim is made that relative adjectives express only syntactic relations between the modified noun and the derivation root (Marchand 1966; Sussex 1974; Babby 1975; Neubauer 1977) and thus belong to the transformational element and not to the semantic representation. In other words, relative adjectives in

their traditional understanding<sup>1</sup> exist only in the surface structure. This claim is particularly well illustrated by the German linguistic material, where relative nouns are replaced by numerous nominal compounds such as *Präsidentenpalsat*, *Holztisch*, *Adjektivendung* etc.

F. Neubauer (1977: 35) cites an example showing various transformational possibilities for one starting entity: using a derivational morpheme (if there is a noun on the surface) or not (a purely syntactic transformation):



1. *die Residenz des Bischofs*
2. *die bischöfliche Residenz.*

Similar examples, in which an adjective performs a purely syntactic function, may also easily be found in Polish, e. g. *państwo buforowe* – *państwo-bufor* [a buffer state], *szofer murzyński* – *szofer-Murzyn* [a Negro chauffeur] (Kurkowska 1954: 74), *żądania robotnicze* – *żądania robotników* [labourers' demands] (Grzegorzczkova 1972: 142). Of course not all relations expressed with adjectives can be transformed similarly. Adjective structures are very often a product of great condensation of content, cf. *książeczka samochodowa* [car savings passbook] (Satkiewicz 1971: 86).

Regardless of this, it seems an acceptable claim that the division into relative and qualitative adjectives does not belong to the syntactic level of language but rather, so to say, to the word formation level. This division should be given up in the case of primary adjectives. The meaning function of an adjective is to name a quality. Such a solution seems to be in accord with the feelings of many researchers, who, while using the traditional division into qualitative and relative adjectives, indicate the fuzziness of the boundary between the two classes, cf. *szkolny budynek* [a school building] and *szkolny sposób mówienia* [a bookish manner of speaking] (Grzegorzczkova 1975: 16).

## Relative and Absolute Adjectives

In contemporary semantics, another classification of adjectives is considered fundamental. It turns out that from the semantic point of view,

---

<sup>1</sup>Another, syntactic meaning of the term "relative" is excluded as one having nothing to do with semantics. In this sense, "relative" means "having case government," see Behagel 1923: 32.

adjectives traditionally described as qualitative, such as *long – short*, are in fact relative adjectives. This was pointed out – following Sapir – by Fillmore in his paper *Entailment rules in a semantic theory* (1965, cf. the critic by Fillmore in Bartsch, Vennemann 1972: 59-60).

In the sentence

(1) *John is taller than Bill*

both arguments of the relation named by the adjective are given in the surface structure. However, also a sentence with an adjective in the positive form:

(2a) *John is tall*

should be, as Fillmore argues, semantically interpreted:

(2b) *John is taller than average.*

Hence, when writing of relative nouns, the author means their relativisation in relation to the norm. The reference point for the "average" with which we compare an object need not be indicated explicitly, as in the case of the comparative, but this is also possible (cf. *He's tall for a pygmy*). The norm is basically established every time anew by the speaker and the listener, depending on the context. Therefore, these adjectives are not absolute but context-dependent (whether linguistic or extralinguistic context is in question).

The division into relative adjectives (such as *big – small, heavy – light, long – short, expensive – cheap, thick – thin* etc.) and absolute adjectives (e. g. *carnivorous, sick, red, alive* etc.) was introduced by Jerrold J. Katz (1967; 1972). The difference between relative and absolute adjectives is particularly visible in the case of inference from sentences with the comparative. Here is an example by Katz: the sentence

(3a) *The mountain is higher than the building*

does not entail that

(3b) *The mountain is high*

whereas from the sentence

(4a) *The tablecloth is more spotted than the place mat*

we can draw the correct conclusion:

(4b) *The tablecloth is spotted*<sup>2</sup>

The adjective *high* is relative and the adjective *spotted* is absolute. The difference between the two types of adjectives manifests itself in yet another way in the following example:

---

<sup>2</sup>An example of (un)acceptability of a similar inference is given by Apresjan (1968) for adjectives *big* and *red*. Adjectives of the same type as *big* are described by Apresjan as "nepredel'nye", ones of the same type as *red* – as "predel'nye". Cf. Laskowski 1977.

(5) *A small elephant is big.*

Sentence (5) is definitely not contradictory. It means that an elephant which is *small* for an elephant, is all the same *big* in the animal world. A sentence containing an absolute adjective and its antonym in places of *small* and *big* respectively will turn out to be contradictory:

(6) *A carnivorous (sick, dead) elephant is herbivorous (healthy, alive).*

An elephant (an animal) cannot be *carnivorous* and *herbivorous*, *sick* and *healthy*, *alive* and *dead* at the same time.

Relative adjectives are similarly understood by other authors, cf. Bierwisch 1967; Bartsch, Vennemann 1972; Eisenberg 1976.

This understanding of the term "relative" is based on the notion of norm. In the discussion of the topic, the existence of two fundamentally different categories of normative adjective has been revealed: the issue of norm is to be handled differently in the case of parametric (descriptive) adjectives and in the case of evaluative adjectives. Let us elaborate shortly on this point.

According to Bierwisch (1967), for parametric adjectives like *long* – *short*, the comparative norm is located in the middle of the (numerical) scale between its end points (+Pol) and (-Pol). In his later work, Bierwisch (1971: 238) replaces the scale with a given comparative object *Z*.

J. Katz (1967: 186) postulates that the reference point for generic sentences to be the category to which the compared object belongs, i.e. its *genus proximum*. This would be, for example, the category *buildings* for *skyscrapers*, the category *insects* for *fleas* etc. Examples:

(7) *Skyscrapers are tall for buildings*

(8) *Fleas are little for insects* (Katz 1972: 256).

In non-generic sentences, the object class indicated by the subject of the sentence remains in the reference point, e. g.:

(9a) *This ship is long*

(9b) *This ship is long for a ship* (among ships).

In the case of evaluative adjectives, the point is not to find a compared object or an appropriate scale, but to make a reference to the world of values common for the given linguistic community. Wierzbicka (1972: 84) writes: "[...] the speaker has to treat the addressee as someone who shares with him the same norm [...] in order to be able to meaningfully use the word *good*."

According to Bierwisch (1967: 12):

The situation is quite different for *gut/schlecht*, as Mrs. Anna Wierzbicka has brought to my attention. *Die Zigaretteist gut* does not mean that the cigarette is better than the average, but that it fits the expected standard, just as *Die Zigaretteistschlecht* does not mean it is less good than the average, but that it

does not fit the standard. What is going on here may be paraphrased as follows: The scale established by such pairs as *gut/schlecht*, *schön/häßlich*, *gesund/krank* is not divided into two parts by the average point, but the norm is one of its end points.

As can be seen, the norm for evaluative adjectives according to Bierwisch lies on one of the poles of a pair of antonyms, more specifically: on the positive pole.

This leads to a conclusion formulated by Wierzbicka (1972), Wunderlich (1973), Eisenberg (1976): evaluative adjectives are absolute. The reference scale is not conditioned by the context but given by the adjective itself. This is why the meanings of evaluative adjective are not context-dependent.

According to Eisenberg (1976: 122), the sentences

(10a) *Joseph ist gesund*

and

(10b) *Joseph ist krank*

do not mean that Joseph is more or less healthy than the average. They only say that in the first case, the condition of Joseph corresponds with the norm, while in the second one – it does not.<sup>3</sup>

Absolute adjectives are similarly understood by Wierzbicka (1971b: 41) "Evaluations like *good* and *bad* are – from a semantic point of view – absolute: they do not signify *better than...*, *worse than...*, they signify *we would want it*, *we would not want it*."<sup>4</sup>

One would, of course, like the evaluative adjectives to have absolute meaning. Is it so indeed? If we consider the sentence

(11) *John is better than Peter but they are both bad*

acceptable, we should question the claim about the absolute character of adjectives such as *good*. In any case, the adjective *good* passes the relativity test above: as sentence (11) shows, from the sentence *John is better than Peter*, it does not follow that *John is good*.

What is, then, the place of evaluative adjectives? It seems that a more fitting frame for them is created by the division into gradable and non-gradable adjectives. Let us therefore analyse the criterion of gradability.

---

<sup>3</sup>The fuzziness of the division into relative and absolute adjectives is demonstrated by numerous inconsistencies in the interpretation of particular examples by different authors. Neubauer classifies the mentioned pair *ill* – *healthy* as descriptive, along with the lexemes like *long* – *short*. According to Renata Bartsch and Theo Vennemann, the adjectives *beautiful* and *intelligent* are relative, even though Eisenberg classifies them as absolute – there are plenty of similar examples.

<sup>4</sup>Such a semantic definition of the adjective *good* was criticised as not everything we *want* is *good* (cf. Bartsch, Vennemann 1973: 58).

## Semantically Gradable and Non-gradable Adjectives

Sapir (1944: 123), who was the first one to handle semantic classification of adjectives, saw gradability as a universal category exceeding the frames of this word class: "[...] every quantifiable, whether existent (say *house*) or occurrent (say *run*) is intrinsically gradable." Bierwisch (1967) introduces the constituent Deg(ree) as a part of the structure of the spatial adjectives he described. Lyons (1969: 465) distinguishes between antonymy and complementarity, saying about the first that "[...] words such as *big* and *small*, or *good* and *bad*, do not refer to independent 'opposite' qualities, but are merely lexical devices for grading as 'more than' or 'less than' with respect to some implicit norm."<sup>5</sup>

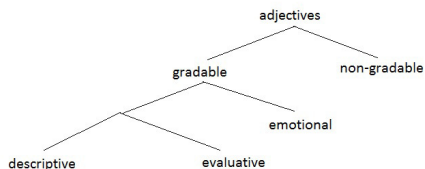
This does not apply to such complementary adjectives as *male* – *female*, *alive* – *dead*. Hence the ability to enter antonymic relations is a feature of gradable adjectives, while non-gradable adjectives enter complementary relations.

Grzegorzczkova (1975), in her discussion of adverbial modifiers of adjectives, claims that non-gradable adjectives take only modifiers of completeness such as *absolutely*, *nearly* but cannot be connected with gradual modifiers, cf. *\*very naked*, *\*too whole*, *\*slightly empty*. Wierzbicka (1969: 90) writes about these adjectives that they contain an element of negation in their meanings (*This drawer is empty* = *There are no thins in this drawer*, cf. Janus 1977: 49). This would explain their semantic non-gradability.

Neubauer (1977) considers the opposition gradable – non-gradable (*graduierbare* – *nichtgraduierbare Adjektive*) superior in his classification of qualitative adjectives. He distinguishes three classes of gradable adjectives: descriptive (like *big* – *small*), emotional (like *happy* – *unhappy*) and evaluative (like *good* – *bad*). Emotional adjectives are distinguished among the gradable adjectives in that in their description there is no need to refer to a norm. Neubauer claims that lexemes such as *cheerful* – *sad*, *happy* – *unhappy* are rather names of states than characteristics and would probably better fit according to a classification of verbs. Descriptive adjectives are different from evaluative ones in that they refer to objectively measurable qualities whose values may be indicated by units of an appropriate scale. Keeping the rule of dichotomy, the classification by Neubauer looks as follows:

---

<sup>5</sup>Contemporary semanticists are not inclined to define the adjectives *good* and *bad* by the comparative.



Neubauer's division into descriptive and evaluative adjectives corresponds to the observation by Wierzbicka (1971: 131), who claims: "[...] in the case of the relations of quantity and possibility, the comparative is primary, the positive secondary; in case of evaluations [underlined by A. N.], opinions, feelings, attitudes – the positive is primary, the comparative secondary”.

Thus we receive two groups among the gradable adjectives: a) adjectives where the comparative is primary, such as *long – short*, b) adjectives where the positive is primary, such as *good – bad*. As the quotation above shows, according to Wierzbicka, type b) also includes the emotional adjectives, which in Neubauer's classification constitute a separate group hardly fitting the frames of adjective classification.

The problem of internal classification of gradable adjectives is indeed handled in different ways by different authors. In fact, the boundary of semantic gradability itself, and therefore the division of adjectives into gradable and non-gradable, is demarcated in various ways.

Particularly controversial are such meaning classes as names of colours and tastes (or wider: names of secondary qualities). According to Wierzbicka (1971: 131): "in the case of secondary qualities, the positive is primary, while the comparative, despite being more complex than the positive, is not explicated directly by the positive, but by some other comparative." The author defines this group of adjectives through comparison (the *sweet* taste – to sugar, *salty* – to salt etc.).

It can be easily noticed that colour names have similar explications in dictionaries: *red* is compared to the colour of blood, *black* – to coal and soot, *white* – to milk etc.

An interesting characteristic of colour names noted by Apresjan (1968: 37) and Laskowski (1977) is that the comparative does not denote the whole spectrum of a given colour but only its extreme point. The sentences

(12) *A is redder than B*

(13) *This paper is whiter than that one*

refer to two *red*, *white* etc. objects, contrary to the comparatives such as *longer*, which may refer to *long* as well as *short* objects. This would suggest the binary character of the meanings of adjectives such as *red*.

Neubauer (1977: 247) notes that in German, some colour names are gradable (*Omo wäscht weißer als Persil*) and others are not (*rot, blau, grün*). He suggests to classify them separately.

It may be impossible to demarcate a clear boundary between gradable and non-gradable adjectives. Without doubt, the gradable adjectives, and descriptive adjectives among them, do not constitute a homogenous category.

Descriptive adjectives are usually classified based on the psychological criterion of apperception, i.e. divided into sensations that are sight-related, hearing-related, tactile etc. (Neubauer 197; Szramm 1979). A desired classification should pay more attention to the linguistic features of the given category, such as lexical connectability (cf. *pale, rubicund, stale*), grammatical connectability (object-related vs. act-related characteristics, cf. *long pencil, long walk*), potentiality and actuality in the meanings of such lexemes (*a clean, sober, healthy, bad...*) etc. The semantics of this word class requires further fundamental research. A starting point of this research should be the semantic gradability of the adjectives.

## Bibliography

1. Apresjan, Jurij Derenkovich (1968) "Ob eksperimental'nom tolkovom slovare russkogo jazyka." *Voprosy jazykoznanija* 5: 34-49.
2. Babby, Leonard H. (1975) *A Transformational Grammar of Russian Adjectives*. The Hague – Paris: Mouton.
3. Bartsch, Renate and Theo Vennemann (1972) "The Grammar of Relative Adjectives and Comparison." *Linguistische Berichte* 20: 19-32.
4. Bartsch, Renate and Theo Vennemann (1973) *Semantic Structures. A Study in the Relation Between Semantics and Syntax*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Frankfurt a. Main: AthenäumVerlag.
5. Behaghel, Otto (1923/32) *Deutsche Syntax*. Heidelberg: Winter.
6. Bierwisch, Manfred (1967) "Some Semantic Universals of German Adjectivals." *Foundation of Language* 3: 1-36.



7. Bierwisch, Manfred (1971) "On Classifying Semantic Features." In Steineberg, Jakobovits 1971: 410-435.
8. Eisenberg, Peter (1975) *Oberflächenstruktur und logische Struktur. Untersuchungen zur Syntax und Semantik von Adjektivkonstruktionen des Deutschen*. PhD Thesis. Berlin.
9. Fillmore, C. J. (1965) *Entailment Rules in a Semantic Theory*. POLA Reports 10. Columbus: Ohio State University.
10. Grzegorzczkova, Renata (1972) *Zarys słowotwórstwa polskiego*. Warszawa: PWN.
11. Grzegorzczkova, Renata (1975) *Funkcje semantyczne i składniowe polskich przysłówków*. Prace Językoznawcze 77. Wrocław: Ossolineum.
12. Janus, Elżbieta (1977) "Wykładniki intensywności cechy we współczesnej polszczyźnie." *Polonica* 3: 47-57.
- Katz, Jerrold J. (1967) "Recent Issues in Semantic Theory." *Foundation of language* 3: 124-194.
13. Katz, Jerrold J. (1972) *Semantic Theory*. New York: Harper and Row.
14. Kurkowska, Halina (1954) *Budowa słowotwórcza przymiotników polskich*. Wrocław
15. Laskowski, Roman (1977) "Od czego „lepszy” jest lepszy." *Język Polski* 5: 323-334.
16. Lyons, John (1969) *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
17. Marchand, Hans (1966) "On Attributive and Predicative Derived Adjectives and Some Problems Related to the Distinction." *Anglia* 84: 131-149.
18. Neubauer, Fritz (1977) "Aspekte der Klassifikation von Adjektiven." In *Kasustheorie. Klassifikation, Semantische Interpretation*. Papiere zur Textlinguistik, vol. 11, Klaus Heger and János S. Petofi. Hamburg: Buske.
19. Sapir, Edward (1944) "Grading: a Study in Semantics." *Philosophy of Science* 11: 93-116.

20. Satkiewicz, Halina (1971) "Słowotwórstwo." In *Kultura języka polskiego*, Danuta Buttler, Halina Kurkowska and Halina Satkiewicz. Warszawa: PWN.
21. Steinberg, Danny D. and Leon A. Jakobovits (1971) *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
22. Sussex, Roland (1974) "The Deep Structure of Adjectives in Noun Phrases." *Journal of Linguistics* 10: 111-131.
23. Shramm, Aleksandr Nikolaevich (1979) *Ocherki po semantike kachestvennykh prilagatel'nykh*. Leningrad: Izdatelstvo LGU.
24. Szupryczyńska, Maria (1980) "O podstawach podziału przymiotników na relacyjne i jakościowe." *Poradnik językowy* 1: 1-4.
25. Wierzbicka, Anna (1971a) "Porównanie – gradacja – metafora." *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4: 127-147.
26. Wierzbicka, Anna (1971b) "The deep semantic structure of the comparative." *Linguistische Berichte* 16: 39-45.
27. Wierzbicka, Anna (1969) *Dociekania semantyczne*. Wrocław: Ossolineum.
28. Wierzbicka, Anna (1972) *Semantic primitives*. Frankfurt a. Main: Athenäum Verlag.