

Adjectives in an adjective-less language: Wolof

Property-assigning expressions (PEs) do not universally lexicalize as adjectives (As) (Wetzer 1996, Stassen 1997). Wolof, for instance, is generally assumed to lack adjectives altogether, all PEs being verbal (**A**). We argue, on the basis of the semantic properties of a certain type of relative clauses restricted to PEs, that although they are verbs on the surface, they must derive from an underlying adjective, leading to the claim that As, as a separate lexical category, do exist in the language (**B**). We argue that the apparent categorial deficiency results from the need of little *a* to be embedded under the functional head Pred(ication), which is null in Wolof and other similar languages (**C**).

A. Evidence for the verbal nature of PEs in Wolof include their ability to predicate without a copula (*di* in (1), which **must** be used with nominal predicates) and their combinability with verbal inflection (2):

- (1) Faatu moo-**di** *rey / sama jàngalekat. (2) Xaj bi da ñuul-**oon** / dem-**oon**.
Faatu 3sg.Foc-Cop big / my teacher dog Cl-Def FocV black-Pst / leave-Pst

To this evidence, and following Baker (2003), we add that PEs, in Wolof, cannot combine directly with nouns in what is called the *attributive construction*, independently of order:

- (3) *xar réy (lit. ‘sheep big’) / *réy xar (lit. ‘big sheep’)

B. As is normally the case in adjective-deficient languages (Bhat 1994, Baker 2003), Wolof uses relative constructions with an interpretation akin to that of attributive adjectives:

- (4) xaj b-u ñuul b-i
dog C:Cl-Indef. black D:Cl-Def.Prox. ‘the black dog’

Torrence (2005) argues extensively that constructions like (4) involve a relative clause. Thus, *bu* is a complementizer that agrees in class (*b-*) with the head *xaj* ‘dog’ and *bi* is a (definite) determiner showing the same class agreement. Relative clauses usually exhibit “definiteness agreement” between the complementizer (C) and the determiner (D) (5):

- (5) garab g-i ma gis (g-i) (Torrence 2005: 194)
tree C:Cl-Def 1sg see D:Cl-Def ‘the tree that I saw’

By contrast, the type illustrated in (4) involves a mismatch: C is marked for indefiniteness (*-u*) and D is marked for definiteness (*-i*). Interestingly, both McLaughlin (2004) and Torrence (2005) indicate that PEs, but not run of the mill eventive verbs like *xool* ‘look at’, are the only predicates admitted by the “mismatched” relative (MisR) illustrated in (4):

- (6) *garab g-u ma xool g-i (Torrence 2005: 195)
tree C:Cl-Indef 1sg look_at Cl-Def ‘the tree that I looked at’

Following Baker (2003) on other “verb-instead-of-adjective” languages, we scrutinize MisRs in Wolof to show that they indeed must embed an adjective, used attributively. Our evidence is semantic. First, PEs only licensing a non-intersective reading in MisRs (7a), also cannot be used in matrix clauses (7b) (cf., *main ideal*/**the idea is main*):

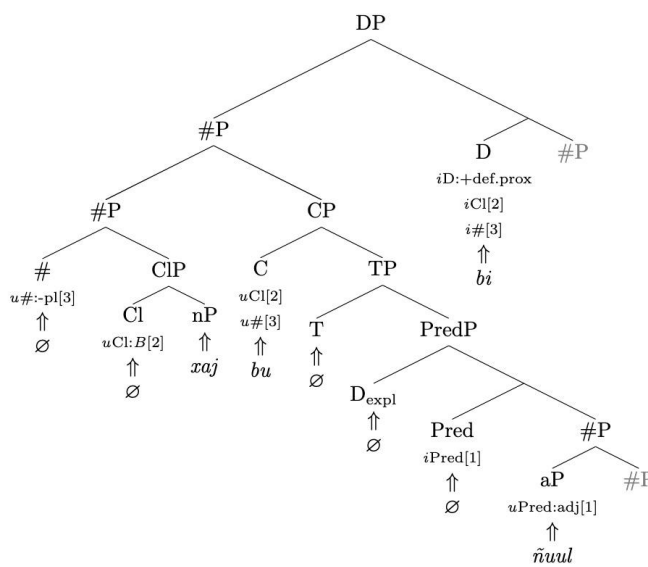
- (7) a. xarit b-u yàgg b-i. (MisR)
friend C:Cl-Indef old D:Cl-Def.Prox
intersective: ‘the friend is old’; ✓ non-intersective: ‘the friendship is old’
b. *Xarit b-i dafa yàgg.
friend C:Cl-Def.Prox 3Sg.VFoc old

Second, the PE in MisRs does not exhibit a contrastive interpretation (8a), whereas when set in a matched *i...i* relative, it does, obligatorily (8b):

- (8) a. *xaj bu ñuul bi* ‘the black dog’ (*no other dogs invoked in the context*)
 b. *xaj bi ñuul (bi)* ‘the dog that is black’ (*other (non-black) dogs invoked*)

Importantly, non-intersective readings are properties of *attributive* adjectives, not of predicates (Siegel 1980). The same restriction holds, we argue, for non-contrastive interpretations (cross-linguistically). Assuming Torrence’s (2005, 2013) and Fong’s (2021) analyses of relatives in Wolof and following Baker’s (2003) approach to similar constructions in Choctaw and Mohawk, we propose that the interpretive properties of the PE verb in MisR are best explained if it originates as an attributive adjective adjoined to the head noun:

- (9) *xaj bu ñuul bi*, ‘the black dog’



The lexical item *ñuul* ‘black’, together with little *a*, forms an aP that is first merged as an adjunct to the #P nominal *xaj* ‘dog’, forming an attributive construction and accounting for the abovementioned semantic effects. This construction is the complement of Pred, articulating the predicative relation (Bowers 1993, Roy 2013). The subject of Pred is a null expletive (Kihm 1999), a reduced DP with a featureless D head and no nominal component. The relativized #P *xaj* merges to CP and values the class and number features of C. This

structure is then merged with the external D head, which carries an interpretable, valued D feature (here *+def.prox*). The definite feature on D triggers the raising of D’s complement, yielding the surface word order. At Vocabulary Insertion (VI), the external D receives the exponent *bi*, as per its values of definite proximal, singular, and of class *b-*. We assume that the (in)definiteness features on C are not triggered by Agree, but are a mere allomorphic effect. In (9), C is assigned the default exponent *bu*, based on its Cl and # features and the fact that it is not adjacent to a *+def* feature. The different valuation of C and D accounts for the mismatch. Pred, whose *iPred[]* feature is valued by the *uPred:adj* feature of *a*, is exponed as null, giving the impression that all PEs are verbs. The MisR (9) has a paraphrase akin to “the dog such that it is a black dog”.

C. Wolof illustrates a language where *a* is featurally specified to be embedded under Pred, which itself receives a null exponent at VI. T selects for PredP, yielding the impression that the adjective can take Tense. Depending on the features of *a* and the null/non-null nature of Pred, three other language types are predicted, which we will present, time permitting.

Selected references: Baker, M. 2003. *Lexical categories*. CUP. Kihm, A. 1999. ‘A study of what morphology may do to syntax: Focus in Wolof’. <https://doi.org/10.1075/la.24.09kih>. Roy, I. 2013. *Nonverbal predication*. OUP. Torrence, H. 2013. *The clause structure of Wolof*. JB.