

VARIATION IN REFERENCE TO AND VIA PROPERTIES

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(TALK BASED ON WORK WITH H. DE SWART AND V. RICHTARCIKOVA)

Cross-linguistically, there is a very strong statistical generalization that nouns contribute the core descriptive content for phrases that are used for reference (“table”, “meeting”, “happiness”), and that adjectives do the same for phrases that are used for property ascription (“very happy”, “sweet”). Nonetheless, we also find examples in which what looks like an adjective contributes the core descriptive content of a phrase that is used for reference, such as the following Dutch examples from McNally & de Swart 2015:

- (1) a. Ze moeten wennen aan ... al het vreemde dat dit land hen biedt.
they must get-used to ... all the strange[+e] that this land them offer
‘They must get used to ... everything strange that this land offers them.’
- b. Het bittere van het bier is een mooi contrast met het zoete van de
the bitter[+e] of the beer is a nice contrast with the sweet[+e] of the
mout.
malt
‘The bitterness of the beer is a nice contrast with the sweetness of the malt.’

McNally & de Swart argue that, despite being formed with the neuter definite determiner “het” and an inflected adjective (glossed with [+e]), the bold phrases in (1) are two distinct constructions: (1a), which they call the abstract object construction, has a semantics similar to that of a free relative, roughly paraphraseable as ‘that which is Adj’; while (1b), which they call the relational inflected adjective construction, denotes what they refer to as a particular aspect (similar to a trope, see e.g. Moltmann 2004) of the entity contributed by the obligatory “van” phrase that accompanies the adjective. The two can be distinguished, *inter alia*, by the impossibility of adding “al” ‘all’ to either of the *het* phrases in (1b), or by considering that “all the strangeness” would be an inappropriate translation for the “*het*”-phrase in (1a). Interestingly, in addition to (but, as we will show, not synonymous with) the construction in (1b), Dutch also has productive deadjectival noun formation via “-heid” (similar to English “-ness”) suffixation, as in “de bitterheid van witlof” ‘the bitterness of Belgian endive’.

When we turn to other languages, we find considerable variation in the constructions used to refer to properties, such as “bitterness”, and via properties, such as when we identify (concrete or abstract) entities not by their sortal name, but rather by some characteristic they manifest, as in (1a). The goal of this talk is to contribute to a systematic description of this variation and to explore its theoretical relevance. We show how independent variation in other morphosyntactic properties of the languages we consider - for example,

the properties of the definite determiner inventory, the syntax of free relatives, the number features of the phrase, and the productivity of noun-forming derivational morphology - sheds light on the patterns we find in the counterparts of the phrases in (1) across various languages.