

Adjectives as subjects and objects in modern German

1. Introduction

The canonical function of adjectives is to occur attributively or predicatively in order to ascribe a property to a noun referent. However, in modern German we observe that adjectives also occur as uninflected adjectives in NP-positions e.g. as the subject (*Teuer schützt vor Gift nicht*¹ (lit.) ‘Expensive does not protect against poison’), object (*Wir hassen teuer* (lit.) ‘We hate expensive’) or complement of a preposition (*Der Verbraucher verlangt nach billig* (lit.) ‘The consumer demands for cheap’). Here, the hearer is presented with a situation in which a property is of particular importance – without this property having been mentioned in the preceding discourse. The adjective does not ascribe a property to a noun referent, nor is it used adverbially. This particular use of adjectives is well-known from colour adjectives (*Petra trägt immer rot* ‘Petra always wears red’), but it appears to be new with quality adjectives such as *teuer* ‘expensive’ and *billig* ‘cheap’, which also occur as adverbials of manner.

The use of uninflected adjectives in NP-positions is sometimes referred to as “object language” (Jørgensen 1976, I, p. 137) or the “simple mentioning of an adjective” (Duden 2008, p. 356), but it is not exactly clear what this means and how it relates to other syntactic peculiarities of uninflected adjectives in NP-positions, e.g. their lack of prepositional modifiers (**Der Verbraucher verlangt nach sauber im Hotel* (lit.) ‘The consumer demands for clean in the hotel’).

2. Uninflected adjectives as NPs vs. deadjectival nouns

It is common for adjectives to occur in NP-positions as deadjectival nominalizations. As a first approximation, we need to compare the uninflected adjectives in these positions with nominalized adjectives. The uninflected adjective (*Wir lieben sauber* (lit.) ‘We love clean’) is remarkably different from the nominalized adjective (*Wir lieben das Saubere* (lit.) ‘We love the clean (ones)’). The uninflected adjective denotes the property “clean”, while the nominalized adjective denotes a set of entities characterized by the property of being clean. Therefore it is possible to ascribe further entity-related properties in a following clause (*Wir lieben das Saubere. Das riecht so gut.* (lit.) ‘We love the clean (ones). They smell so good.’). This is not possible with the property-denoting adjective (**Wir lieben sauber. Das riecht so gut* (lit.) ‘We love clean. It smells so good’).

The uninflected adjective is more similar to the suffix-nominalization with *-heit/-keit* (*Wir lieben Sauberkeit* ‘We love cleanliness’). Both denote the property “clean” but the difference between them appears to be stylistic in nature with the uninflected adjective having a more modern and unexpected flavour. Moreover, not all adjectives allow for suffix-nominalization: we do not find *Teuerkeit* ‘expensiveness’ and the nominalization *Billigkeit* has the additional meaning ‘equitableness’.

¹ Sources for the predominantly authentic examples can be found in the main article.

Finally, we also find nominalizations with adjectives and the infinitive *sein* ‘to be’ (*Wir lieben das Saubersein* (lit.) ‘We love the clean.being’). Here, the nominalization denotes a property holding of a noun referent (the referent of the subject *Wir* ‘We’). In the case of the uninflected adjective, the subject referent is not understood to be clean, rather the subject referent appreciates cleanliness in general.

3. Ruling out an interpretation of the adjective in NP-position as an ellipsis

Since adjectives canonically apply to nouns, we could speculate that this is an ellipsis with the uninflected adjective applying to an elided noun. Uninflected adjectives occur as attributes in fixed expressions (*Auf gut Glück* (lit.) ‘In good chance’). However, this construction neither constitutes a fixed expression, nor does it have any archaic flavour (on the contrary). We also find uninflected adjectives that apply to nouns as postnominal attributes (*Wir essen Ente kross* (lit.) ‘We are eating duck roasted’) and as depictives (*Peter isst das Fleisch roh* (lit.) ‘Peter is eating the meat raw’). But these cannot be the source of the construction, since corresponding versions with manifest nouns are impossible: (**Wir hassen Waren teuer* (lit.) ‘We hate goods expensive’) and (**Der Verbraucher verlangt nach Waren billig* (lit.) ‘The consumer demands for goods cheap’). This last example is especially telling since depictives cannot apply to nouns as complements of prepositions, but we do find the uninflected adjective after a preposition (*Der Verbraucher verlangt nach billig* (lit.) ‘The consumer demands for cheap’). Thus, it cannot be a depictive.

Uninflected adjectives also occur as the sole complement of a subordinating conjunction where they are interpreted as a kind of shortened copular clause with the modification target in the matrix clause (*Weil feige, bestellte er sich übers Internet* (lit.) ‘Since a coward he ordered over the net’ – the modification target is *er* ‘he’ in the matrix clause). We would thus have to assume omission of the subordinating conjunction (*Dass teuer schützt vor Gift nicht* (lit.) ‘That expensive does not protect against poison’). Such a structure cannot, however, be the source: the adjective *teuer* ‘expensive’ lacks a modification target and adjectives are marginal as the complement of *dass* (*??Dass teuer, bedeutet nicht, dass die Waren hochwertig sind* (lit.) ‘That expensive does not mean that the goods are of high quality’). Finally, the adjective cannot be clausal at all. Clausal complements cannot occur after prepositions in German (**Der Verbraucher verlangt nach dass es billig ist* (lit.) ‘The consumer demands for that it is cheap’). As shown, the adjective occurs after prepositions.

4. The nominal and adjectival properties of the adjective

So is it a noun after all? Syntactically, the adjective does behave like a noun complement: it can be promoted to the subject in a passive (*Billig wird bevorzugt* (lit.) ‘Cheap is preferred’). Still it fails to exhibit crucial noun properties: it allows no article (**Das billig wird gehasst* (lit.) ‘The cheap is hated’), no adjectival attributes (**Wir hassen extremes teuer* (lit.) ‘We hate extreme expensive’), and no prepositional attributes (**Wir hassen teuer von den Edelläden* (lit.) ‘We hate expensive of the luxury stores’). Actually, it behaves like an adjective by allowing comparison and adverbial modifiers (*Der Markt verlangt nach billig und noch billiger* (lit.) ‘The market demands for cheap and even cheaper’). These data suggest the following syntactic structure for an uninflected adjective in the NP-positions: [_{NP} [_{AP} *Teuer*]] *schützt vor Gift nicht*. This dual nature of the adjective may also be the rea-

son why the adjective is sometimes capitalized similar to other German nouns (*Schluss mit Lustig*).

The adjective is reanalyzed as a noun in this particular construction, but not in the lexicon. Colour adjectives on the other hand also occur as nouns (*Ich liebe das Rot* (lit.) ‘I love the red’).

5. Adjectives reanalyzed as names of unexpressed class designations

An uninflected adjective in the NP-positions behaves like the name of an omitted noun such as “colour”, “property” or “quality”. Thus, the adjective acts as a restrictive modifier of a noun that must be contextually inferred.

Colour adjectives occurring as complements can be paraphrased as an explicative (close) apposition (*Petra trägt immer rot* ‘Petra always wears red’ → *Petra trägt immer die Farbe rot* ‘Petra always wears the colour red’). In a similar vein, quality adjectives occurring as complements can also be paraphrased as explicative appositions (*Wir hassen teuer* (lit.) ‘We hate expensive’ → *Wir hassen die Eigenschaft teuer* (lit.) ‘We hate the property expensive’). Explicative appositions canonically consist of two nouns: a class designation (here: “the property”) and a name restricting the denotation of the head noun (here: “expensive”). A further characteristic of explicative appositions is that the class designation can be omitted. The second part of the apposition can replace the whole apposition. This means that a resulting clause with a full explicative apposition implies a clause where the class designation is missing (*She sang in the opera Carmen* → *She sang in Carmen*). This is exactly what we find here: *We hate the property expensive* → *We hate expensive*. Keizer (2005) describes the discourse function of explicative appositions such as „the property expensive” as functionally identifying. It signals that the second part is used non-canonically. Here the adjective is used as a name instead of predicating a property of a noun referent. The fact that this non-canonical use is not made explicit (the head noun being omitted) gives the construction the flavour of a new coinage.

With this analysis, an uninflected adjective can be reanalyzed as a noun when it occurs as the name of a contextually inferable class designation, i.e. as an implication of an explicative apposition. This suggests the following syntactic structures: *Wir hassen* [_{NP} *die* [_N *Eigenschaft*] [_N [_{AP} *teuer*]]] → *Wir hassen* [_{NP} [_N [_{AP} *teuer*]]].

This analysis has the advantage of explaining the syntactic peculiarities of the construction. The second part of an explicative apposition does not allow for articles or modifiers and this is exactly what we find with the uninflected adjectives in the NP-positions (**Wir lieben die Eigenschaft das sauber* (lit.) ‘We love the property the clean’/ **Wir lieben das sauber* (lit.) ‘We love the clean’) (**Wir lieben die Eigenschaft sauber im Hotel* (lit.) ‘We love the property clean in the hotel’/ **Wir lieben sauber im Hotel* (lit.) ‘We love clean in the hotel’).

This analysis also explains why the construction only occurs with certain kinds of verbs, namely the verbs that semantically allow for properties and qualities as complements. A verb such as *lesen* ‘to read’ does not allow for an uninflected adjective as an object, since a quality cannot be the object of reading (**Wir lesen spannend* (lit.) ‘We read exciting’ / **Wir lesen die Qualität spannend* (lit.) ‘We read the quality exciting’).

The analysis may further be expanded to cater for other cases of unexpected syntactic behaviours. We also find examples with the preposition *für* ‘for’ occurring with a nominative complement instead of a canonical accusative complement. Again, the nominative behaves like the second part of an explicative apposition (*Mehr Zeit für chinesischer Astronaut mit 8 Buchstaben / Mehr Zeit für [das Rätsel] chinesischer Astronaut mit 8 Buchstaben* (lit.) ‘More time for [the puzzle] Chinese.NOM astronaut.NOM in 8 letters’).

6. Adjectives as complements of modal verbs

Not only do quality adjectives occur in NP-positions, they also appear as complements of modal verbs (*Jeder kann billig. Schneiden will gelernt sein* (lit.) ‘Everyone can cheap. To cut hair is a profession’). Instead of a bare infinitive as the complement of the modal verb *kann* ‘can’, we find an adjective in the function of an adverbial of manner denoting a property characteristic of an (unexpressed) activity performed by the subject referent. Here the activity is to cut hair or – more generally – to perform a profession in a cheap (and sloppy) way. The proposed analysis for adjectives in the NP-positions does not, however, carry over to these cases with modal verbs. The modal verb does not license an explicative apposition (*??/*Jeder kann die Qualität billig* (lit.) ‘Everyone can the quality cheap’). Furthermore, modal verbs are different from lexical verbs such as *lieben* ‘to love’ and *nach etw. verlangen* ‘to demand for sth.’, occurring with adjectives as complements. Modal verbs such as *können* ‘could.INF’ allow for almost any kind of complement including adverbs of manner (*Ich kann nicht so schnell auf diesen Absätzen* (lit.) ‘I cannot so quickly on these heels’). Such adverbials of manner are re-interpreted as activities (in a broad sense), here for example “to walk or run quickly”. Given that modal verbs independently allow for manner adverbials (and other adverbials such as directional adverbs) as complements, the cases with quality adjectives such as *billig* ‘cheap’ appear to be an extension of the semantic range of adverbials permitted for use with modal verbs.

7. Conclusion

The paper has shown that uninflected adjectives in NP-positions can be analyzed as “shortened” explicative appositions – appositions where the adjective acts as a name of an unexpressed head noun. The analysis explains their syntactic behaviour as nouns and at the same time, provides an explanation for their special properties namely their inability to occur with articles and modifiers. This use is similar to the well-known use of colour adjectives in NP-positions with the difference that colour adjectives also occur as nouns with corresponding articles and modifiers. This seemingly novel construction is thus a generalization of an already existing construction: not only colour adjectives, but also quality adjectives are allowed in NP-positions. Quality adjectives occurring as the complement of modal verbs are different in that they do not behave as “shortened” explicative constructions. However, modal verbs independently allow for adverbials of manner as complements while we also find that a previously existing construction is generalized to new semantic classes of adverbials here.