Distinguishing Inuit verb-like adjectives from genuine stative intransitive verbs

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Claim: I argue that a subset of predicates classified as verbs in Eskimoan languages are in fact adjectives. Evidence for the status of adjectives in Inuit is drawn from a number of phenomena across several dialects which converge on the same set of predicates. In particular, they exhibit distinct patterns of nominalization and mood marking. This analysis supports Dixon’s (2004) and Baker’s (2004) claims that adjectives are universal. Further, it illustrates the danger of accepting surface variation at face value (contra Evans & Levinson 2009).

Evidence from nominalization: While verbs and adjectives pattern together in most respects, only adjectives may be nominalized and incorporated into the copula before combining with a verb-incorporating modal. Genuine verbs must combine directly with modal:

(1) taki-ju-u-qu-guviuk taki-ju-u-gunnaq-tu-q (South Baffin)
    tall-DECL-COP-want-COND.2SG.3SG tall-DECL-COP-can-DECL-3SG
    ‘If you’d like it to be tall, it can be tall.’

(2) pukta-(*ju-u)-qu-guviuk pukta-(*ju-u)-gunnaq-tu-q
    float-(*DECL-COP)-want-COND.2SG.3SG float-(*DECL-COP)-can-DECL-3SG
    ‘If you want it to float, it can float.’

Similarly, Dorais (1988:114-115) notes that in the Nunavik dialect these same adjectival predicates (which he calls “qualifying name giving words”) cannot take 1st or 2nd person agreement or moods other than declarative without first undergoing nominalisation.

(3) aupar-(*tu-u)-vu-q (4) piu-(*ju-u)-ju-nga (Nunavik)
    red-(*DECL-COP)-indic-3SG good-(*DECL-COP)-DECL-1SG
    ‘is red’ ‘I am good.’

Evidence from mood marking: Further evidence for distinguishing adjectives from verbs comes from the Siglit dialect where verbs—but not adjectives—take an alternative exponent of declarative mood conditioned by 1st and 3rd person agreement: -jua/-tua- instead of the -ju/-tu- form that occurs with 2nd person and adjectives across all persons, Lowe (2001):

(5) pukta-jua-q (6) sinik-tua-q (7) nakuu-ju-q (8) ipik-tu-q
    float-DECL-3SG leave-DECL-3SG good-DECL-3SG sharp-DECL-3SG
    ‘is floating’ ‘is sleeping’ ‘is fine, good’ ‘is sharp’

Additional evidence (not shown) is drawn from compatibility with the comparative marker -tqi- in the Kangiryuarmiut dialect and the predicate negator -it- in Aivilingmiut.

Discussion: Crucially, these phenomena converge on the same set of predicates, across geographically disparate dialects. Equally important is that the patterning cannot be reduced to aspecual differences, as both verb and adjective classes contain stative predicates, and among adjectives we find both stage and individual level predicates. Thus, the language possessives adjectives, adding further evidence to their potential universality, in the sense of a phonologically null a categorizing head made available by UG. The verb-like nature of adjectives is argued to be due to a null copula, with evidence drawn from the Siglit copula.
References


