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# HISTORY OF SEMANTIC DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIVE ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH

Svetlana Vinogradova (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Murmansk Arctic State University, 15, Captain Yegorov Str., Murmansk, Russia, svetvin@mail.ru

### *Abstract*

The paper is devoted to the analysis of semantic processes of denominative relative adjectives in English, which show a varying degree of dependence on the semantics of the original noun. A typical model of semantic derivation of denominative adjectives is either the partial projection of the available secondary values of a noun into a semantic structure of a derivative adjective, or the development of latent semes from the implication of a source word. However, a different situation is possible where the relative denominative adjective acquires meanings that do not depend directly on the semantics of the original noun: secondary meanings develop on the basis of characteristics arising in combination with the word described. The study found that substantive models of semantic derivation are typical for argument-characteristic adjectives that in combination with the described noun represent an argument with a characteristic function: social research, parental care, pediatric congress. In this case, the metaphor is formed on the basis of the available secondary meaning of an adjective (metaphorical or metonymic), more qualitative than relative. The exception among the relative adjectives are substance-characteristic adjectives that in combination with the described noun denote the substance from which the described object is made: wooden cross, silken dress, icy mountain, woolen socks. In this phrase not two arguments but one with its characteristic, the material in this case, cannot be separated from the subject. This brings relative adjectives closer to qualitative ones and allows them sharing characteristic derivation models.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept “relative adjectives” is widely used in domestic linguistics, but as Raskin and Nierenburg (1995) rightly note, the term is mostly a stranger to English grammars because much, if not the majority, of what relative adjectives do in other languages is done by nouns standing in preposition to another noun. However, the adjectives in English were and still are the subject of serious attention by linguists (Pustet, 2006), and English relative adjectives are regarded by scholars as denominative (Coates, 1971; Levi, 1978), non-predicate (Aarts & Calbert, 1979, Carlson, 1984; Warren, 1984) denoting non-gradable, non-linguistic characteristic (Quirk et al., 1991) and even pseudo-adjectives.

## 2. Problem Statement

Considering relative denominative adjectives of English, many of the mentioned authors devoted their studies to identifying the relationship between the original noun and the derived adjective. At the same time, it is necessary to describe not only the process of transposition of one part of speech into another, but also the models of semantic modification of a word due to acquisition of the characteristic meaning. Besides, it is important to identify the regularities of updating the components of the value and direction of semantic processes. In this case, it makes sense to turn to the historical aspect of semantic development.

## 3. Research Questions

The study is based on the classification of adjectives by Nikitin (1988), who on the basis of denotative-significative characteristics along with qualitative ones identified the subclasses of relative adjectives: argument-predicate and substance-indicative adjectives. substance-indicative adjectives, being derived from nouns, denote the substance of which the denotation of the described noun is made (Cf.: *wooden cross, woolen socks and red dress, round table*). The argument-predicate in combination with the described noun presents an argument in attributive function: in this combination two objects are identified (*agricultural worker, presidential elevation, spatial autocorrelation*, etc.), one in respect of the other acts as the source of its characteristics.

The hypothesis of the study is that the argument-predicate adjectives depend on the substantive characteristics of the original words and rely on metaphorical and metonymic models of the original noun, whereas the substance-indicative adjectives, despite the derivational nature of their semantics, are able to form secondary meanings according to the predicate model typical for qualitative adjectives.

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify the specificity of models of semantic derivation of argument-predicate and substance-indicative relative adjectives of English language on the basis of diachronic analysis of their semantic structures.

## 5. Research Methods

The technique of generating a generalized lexicographic meaning (Sternin & Rudakova, 2011) is used on the basis of data of several dictionaries and corpora to analyze the semantics of linguistic units.

The analysis of adjective meaning patterns is mainly based on the Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles and the generalization of lexicographic data from online dictionaries of modern English. When necessary, data and typography of the Russian Oxford Dictionary and The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles were used, as well as the materials of the English Corpora.org: the Corpus of Contemporary American (Davies, 2008), the Corpus of Historical American (Davies, 2010), the British National Corpus (Davies, 2004). Over 100 most frequent (according to the data of the corpus) relative denominative polysemantic adjectives of modern English served the material of the study.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Semantic evolution of argument-predicate adjectives

The argument-predicate relative adjectives in combination with the described nouns represent two arguments, one of which is in predicate function to the other: *cerebral palsy* = cerebrum + palsy; *cerebral letters / sounds* = cerebrum + letters / sounds; *cerebral person* = cerebrum (brain) + person; *cerebral conclusion* = cerebrum (brain) + conclusion. As already noted, argument-predicate adjectives inherit metaphorical and metonymic meanings of the original nouns, which arose as actualization of the noun implicative characteristic: *flower* – a figure of speech, *flowery language* – language, full of figures of speech; *star* – an image or figure of a star, *starry flowers*, etc. Another scheme is possible when the adjective develops metaphorical meanings based on the properties of the original noun, which did not give metaphorical meanings at all (latent metaphorical seme) or implemented in phraseological words or complex words: *fishy story* – inspiring doubt or suspicion (probably from famous stories of fishermen), *tropical heat* – hot, like in the tropics, *seminal work* – fruitful.

The argument-predicate adjective *flowery* is taken for analysis as having a developed semantic structure and exhibiting the projectivity of its semantics. The generalized lexicographic meaning of the modern adjective *flowery* can be represented as follows:

1. relating to or covered with flowers; composed of, proceeding from flowers;
2. smelling or tasting of flowers;
3. ornamented with figures of flowers;
4. ornate and florid (of speech); inclined to the use of flowery language.

As various dictionaries show, the original noun in its semantics, in addition to its direct non-derivative meaning, has metaphorical and metonymic meanings. The generalized lexicographic meaning of the noun *flower* is represented as follows:

1. the colored part of a plant from which the seed or fruit develops, a plant with flowers, a flower with a stem;
2. the best, freshest, choicest part of smth.; the finest individuals out of a number of people or things.

3. the state or time of bloom; season;
4. an ornamental representation of a flower, etc.
5. embellishment or ornament of speech; a figure of speech.

The corresponding adjective historically first records the direct relational meaning <related to> with respect to the direct non-derivative meaning of a noun, specified in different discursive options as, for example, <abounding in or covered with flowers>; <producing flowers>

The floury 3er (orig. florifer annus) (1374).

Come, sit thee downe vpon this flowry bed (1590).

The flowery May, who from her green lap throws The yellow cowslip (1630) (OED, 2016).

The following outdated meaning of an adjective was registered by a dictionary during the Middle English era – <†flourishing, vigorous> – and corresponded to metonymical meaning of a noun *flower* <the state or time of bloom; season>, respectively presenting the substantive model of metonymy inherited by the semantic structure of an adjective, and developing further into a metaphorical meaning:

Now age unorne away puttethe favour, That floury youthe in his cesoun conquered (1420) (OED, 2016).

In modern English, as electronic dictionaries and corpus show, this meaning is expressed by French borrowings *flourishing*, *efflorescent*, *floriferous*, as well as *bloomy*, *flowering*, and others. Thus, this metaphorical meaning of the adjective *flowery* is lost and, as we can see, does not give further development of semantics.

Discursive options of <composed of flowers>; <having the nature of flowers>; <proceedings from or characteristic of flowers> extend the relational meaning of the adjective <related to flower(s)> in the New English period without transforming its meaning:

Neighbring Hermon sweated flowry dew (1635).

She viewed the flowery luxuriance of the turf (1671) (OED, 2016).

Historically, the meaning of the adjective *flowery* <ornamented with figures of flowers> is recorded as follows; <of floral design>, which also relates to the semantic structure of the original noun developing a characteristic function from the metonymic meaning (symbolic type of substance metonymy) of the noun *flower* <an ornamental representation of a flower, etc.>, registered as early as 1230:

As a flourie verge, to binde The skirts of that same watrie Cloud (1667) (OED, 2016)

The development of the substance metaphor is the metaphorical meaning of the adjective *flowery* <abounding in flowers of speech; full of fine words and showy expressions> is also projected into the semantic structure of an adjective from the semantics of the original word *flower*, where a given meaning <figure of speech> is registered by a historical dictionary in 1508.

Thinke you I can a resolution fetch from flowrie tendernesse? (1603).

Certain flowery gentlemen, who told us, in very pretty language that (etc.) (1784).

The answer was plain and practical; not flowery (1824) (OED, 2016).

The adjective in this meaning is represented by some bodies (COCA, BNC) as one of the most frequent. The dictionaries of modern English have a mark “disapproving”, i.e. the meaning of a word was narrowed to ‘saturated’, ‘vitiating’.

Directly following his paeon to Darwin from his English monograph (quoted earlier), and as an excuse for such flowery generality, he wrote... (1996) (BNC).

The meaning marked by modern English dictionaries <smelling or tasting of a flower> is not registered by the historic Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2016), and in the historical corpus appears only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since the corpus includes texts since 1810:

Catching no flowery scent from fields elysian, Weak, grovelling, and blind! 1854 (COHA).

When a gust of flowery fragrance comes to me, as when I walk by a blossoming bean-field or a field of lucerne, it is always like a new and wonderful experience, a delightful surprise (1922) (COHA).

It can be concluded that the adjective has a later occurrence of this meaning, which is today one of the most frequent, according to the evidence of the corpus of modern American language.

In exploring the development of the semantic structure of the adjective *flowery*, we come to the conclusion of such a characteristic of its semantics typical for argument-predicate adjectives as the projection of a substantive model of metaphorical and metonymic transformations. The characteristic nature of the adjective provides for the development of a variety of discursive meanings differently implementing the relations of denotations of the original name and the word described.

Analyzing a significant number of argument-predicate adjectives in a similar manner it can be concluded that this subclass of relative denominative derivatives shows a direct dependence of its meanings, both primary and secondary, on semantic structures of original nouns.

## 6.2. Dynamics of semantic development of substance-indicative adjectives

The study of semantic processes of substance-indicative adjectives shows the uniqueness of semantics of this group of relative adjectives. These adjectives denote the substance (material, substance) and, in combination with nouns, like qualitative ones, represent the argument-predicate unity: *icy stalactites, flinty spire, crystal cup*, where the relation <consisting of> or <made of> is implicitly implied.

It is interesting to analyze the adjective *brassy*, which although has the most frequent qualitative meanings ‘yellow’, ‘brazen’, the presence in its semantic structure of the meaning ‘copper, brass’ allows attributing it to substance-indicative adjectives. Besides, it was the substance meaning that was the first to be registered by a dictionary:

These stayrs brassye grises stately presented (1583).

That dreamed of Imagery, whose head was gold, brest siluer, brassie thigh (1599) (OED).

*brassy stairs* < consisting of or covered with brass>:

Metaphorical meanings of the adjective develop based on the similarity of a matter which in terms of its hardness can be compared to copper. The meaning <hard as brass> with respect to humans, their behavior, leads to the formation of another synesthetic metaphor <pitiless, unfeeling>:

To make them blush were they never so brassie and impudent (1576)

*brassy face* <unblushing, impudent>

And plucke commiseration of his state from brassie bosomes (1596) (OED).

*brassy bosom* <pitiless, unfeeling>

Another metaphorical meaning arises in the adjective *brassy* on the basis of the similarity of copper and brass with gold in color and the possibility of forgeries, which gave rise to an associative course of thought in combination with names allowing qualitative evaluation:

This present age, which is growne so harde and brassy, for the golden dayes are long sithence ouer-passed (1586) (OED).

*brassy age* < debased yet pretentious >

This meaning creates the basis for the deployment of a further metaphorical process, for the emergence of the most frequent meaning in modern English < tastefully showy > ‘tasteless bright, noisy’, especially with regard to a woman: ‘*her brassy, audacious exterior*’ or:

She is brassy, voluptuous, flirtatious and fun-loving (OED).

Those looks were the sing of *brassy girls* and hussies without shame.

*brassy girls* < shameless >

Besides, the analogy with brass musical instrument causes another metaphorical meaning:

That hard, brassy, over-stretched style (1865).

Brassy style < harsh and feelingless in tone, like a brass instrument >;

Aretino proved his originality by creating a new manner, brassy and meretricious (1884) (OED).

*brassy manner* < having a strident artificial tone >

A metaphor based on the analogy with copper color (red):

Of a pale brassy colour (1803).

The sky is brassy green (1857) (OED).

Circling slowly in the brass sky, it (the aircraft) transmitted no signal (1972) (COHA).

The metonymic meaning of the adjective < of the nature of brass > is based on the co-occurrence of features in one item (simple adjective metonymy): the taste of a copper item (spoon):

(It) left a brassy taste in my mouth for a whole day (1789) (OED).

Everything had suddenly gone sour. Even the world’s most expensive vintage left a brassy taste in his mouth (2003) (BNC).

Thus, the analysis shows that the adjective *brassy* has common features of the substance-indicative adjectives, namely, builds its secondary meanings by predicate models based on a prototypical link with a noun denoting the form the substance takes in a particular case (brass musical instrument, copper coin, etc.). This leads to metonymic and metaphorical meanings of an adjective. It is these values, according to the corpus, that are the most frequent, often the direct primary meaning of the substance disappears from use and the adjective becomes qualitative.

The analysis of semantic transformations of this group of words was also presented earlier on the example of the adjectives *wooden* and *silken* (Vinogradova, 2017).

Thus, the semantic analysis of substance-indicative adjectives makes it possible to conclude that these adjectives, on the one hand, rely in their semantics on semantic structures of the original word, on the other – reveal the ability to develop semantic processes according to the characteristic model typical for qualitative adjectives.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of historical semantics of two subclasses of relative denominative adjectives – argument- and substance- predicate – confirms the difference in their semantic nature and semantic processes. Semantic derivation of the former is based on processes of projecting secondary meanings of original nouns into semantic structures of derived adjectives.

The subclass of substance-indicative adjectives, on the other hand, relies in its semantic processes on the described noun: the property, on the basis of which the meaning shifts, is found in the prototypical binding of the adjective to the *described* noun. Thus, characteristic models of metaphor and metonymy similar to models of semantic derivation of qualitative adjectives are realized. This small lexical-semantic subclass can be considered intermediate between relative and qualitative adjectives.

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