Compound Adjectives at the Morphology-Syntax Interface

Adjectival compound expressions where an adjective is morphologically combined within a noun are abundant in Japanese. Among them, a set of complex adjectives formed by combining a noun with *nai* 'null' (or 'not' when functioning as a negator) shows a peculiar property, in that case marking can (optionally) appear inside the complex expression, which is not normally allowed.

(1) a. ta'ai(-ga)-nai   b. darasi(-ga)-nai   c. toritome(-ga)-nai
     sense-NOM-null   tidy-NOM-null   stop-NOM-null
     'childish'   'untidy'   'rambling'

In (1) the component nouns are bound elements that can occur only in combination with *nai* (despite their glosses). Thus, the adjectives serve as single words and show some behavior consonant with lexical integrity; e.g. their component nouns cannot be modified, nor can they be separated from the adjectival base, and the like.

(2) a. *[sonna ta'ai-ga]-nai   b. [sonna genki-ga]   nai
     such   sense-NOM-null   such   cheer-NOM null
     'such childish'   'there is no such cheer'

Nevertheless, the component nouns can occur with nominative case, behaving as if they are independent words by themselves. Furthermore, the nouns with nominative case must be visible to the syntax, despite the lexical (or word) status of the entire compound adjectives, because they can undergo nominative-genitive conversion.

(3) a. [ta'ai-ga/-no-nai]   hito   b. [genki-ga/-no nai]   hito
     sense-NOM/-GEN-null man   cheer-NOM/-GEN null   man
     'a childish man'   'a man with no cheer'

Nominative-genitive conversion is syntactically conditioned, and can freely apply when a nominative argument is embedded under a noun complement or a relative clause. Notwithstanding this fact, the case marking appearing on the noun part still cannot contribute to fixing the well-formedness of the clause in which the adjective appears.

(4) a. John-ga/*-ni   ta'ai-ga-nai.   b. John-ni/-ga   genki-ga nai.
     John-NOM/-DAT sense-NOM-null   John-NOM/-DAT cheer-NOM null
     'John is childish.'   'John is not cheerful.'

In Japanese, a clause must have at least one nominative argument. Transitive adjectives take either dative-nominative or nominative-nominative case pattern, as (4b), but the former pattern fails in (4a). This shows that the nominative noun inside the compound adjective is not visible (as an argument), and cannot fulfill the nominative requirement.

The data show that the compound adjectives in (1) display paradoxical properties, since their component nouns are transparent to the syntax in one respect, but they are not in another respect. I argue that the puzzling properties emerge as a natural consequence of incorporating the dependent noun to the adjective, as depicted in (5).

(5) [$_S$ ~~Noun-*ga*~~   [$_{Adj}$ Noun-*ga-nai*]]

I propose that the pre-incorporation as well as the post-incorporation structure is viable in the case of the compound adjectives, so that syntactic operations can apply to the unincorporated noun only when they do not violate morphological constraints imposed on the incorporated one. It is shown that the partial visibility of the components of the compound adjectives to the syntax naturally follows from the interactions of the morphological and syntactic constraints applying to them.

References

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