

The Noun/Adjective Distinction in Kazakh

This paper bears on the long-debated question of whether every language has the familiar major word classes *noun*, *verb*, and *adjective*, focusing on the noun/adjective distinction in Kazakh (Turkic). Braun and Haig (2000), henceforth B&H, working in Turkish, argue against a noun/adjective distinction, proposing that adjectives and nouns are two ends along a smooth continuum of nominals. They argue that words that denote properties of humans, such as *genç* “young (person)”, sit in the middle of the continuum. Similarly, Kazakh words that denote properties of humans are at first difficult to classify as nouns or adjectives; however, we establish a number of morphosyntactic diagnostics that consistently distinguish nouns and adjectives. We argue that the prototype analysis that B&H suggest for Turkish is inappropriate for Kazakh, and that instead Kazakh adjectives can be categorically distinguished from nouns. Instances where the diagnostics provide ambiguous results can be explained by noun-noun compounding and nominal subdeletion. Therefore, this paper provides an explanation for the intuition behind classifying adjectives as a type of nominal, while ultimately rejecting that view in favor of dividing the non-verbal lexicon of Kazakh into the two familiar word classes, *noun* and *adjective*.

B&H show that a number of Turkish words that are intuitively adjectival, denoting property concepts that do not necessarily hold of humans, tend to pass morphosyntactic diagnostics for adjectivity, such as gradability and the ability to bear intensive reduplication of the first syllable. Words that are intuitively noun-like tend to fail those diagnostics, instead being able to appear with the suffix *-sIz* “without” and the possessive suffix *-I*. “Neutral” words, on the other hand, denoting properties held by humans, display variable behavior. Crucially, the diagnostics provide gradient results, showing that there is no ideal place at which to divide nouns from adjectives. B&H therefore argue for a continuum from prototypical noun to prototypical adjective, allowing for a large and indeterminate intermediate section. That section contains the “neutral” words that denote properties that hold of humans.

A basic problem for such an analysis concerns the “neutral” words; crosslinguistically, words denoting properties that hold of humans are often able to substantivize, appearing in nominal syntactic contexts (e.g., English *the poor*, *the bold*) (Borer & Roy, 2010). Another possibility is that nominal subdeletion allows a noun to be elided out of an NP, resulting in what appears to be an adjective in a nominal context (Giannakidou & Stavrou, 1999; Giannakidou & Merchant, 1997). Additionally, B&H argue that the ability of a word to modify a clear noun provides evidence that that word is more adjectival; however, Turkish noun-noun compounding is productive (Yükseker, 1987), suggesting that this diagnostic is problematic. These issues suggest that it may still be possible to separate nouns from adjectives.

Kazakh similarly has a number of words that at first seem difficult to classify as nouns or adjectives. Among them, again, are words that denote properties of humans. For example, *yerkek* “man” and *ayel* “woman” both readily modify clear nouns, as in (1), but they are also readily modifiable by clear adjectives, as in (2).

- (1) a. *yerkek adam* “male person; man”
b. *ayel adam* “female person; woman”
- (2) a. *ädemi yerkek* “beautiful man”
b. *ädemi ayel* “beautiful woman”

To determine whether Kazakh nouns and adjectives should also be analyzed along a continuum, we identified ten words denoting property concepts, six words denoting concrete, time-stable objects, and nine words denoting properties that hold of humans, and subjected them to seven morphosyntactic diagnostics designed to distinguish nouns from adjectives. Tests for adjectiveness include intensive reduplication of the first syllable, gradability with *wöte* “very”, suffixation with the deintensifiers *-şE* and *-law* “somewhat”, and the ability to appear between the indefinite article *bir* and a canonical noun. Tests for nounhood include suffixation with *-sIz* “without”, the appearance with the possessive suffix *-I* when preceding a clear noun, and the appearance with the plural suffix *-Ier*. We found that these tests distinguish canonical nouns from canonical adjectives, as in (3) and (5), and that words that denote human properties can similarly be split categorically into two classes, as in (4) and (6).

- (3) Canonical Noun: *ağaş* “tree”
a. **ap-ağaş* “very tree-like”
b. **wöte ağaş* “very tree-like”
c. **ağaş-şal-taw* “like a tree”
d. *bir ağaş orman* “a woody forest”
e. *ağaş-sız* “without a tree”
f. *yeki ağaş-tı üy* “a house with two trees”
g. *ağaş-tar* “trees”
- (4) Human Property Noun: *yerkek* “man”
a. **yep-yerkek* “very male”
b. **wöte yerkek* “very male”
c. *yerkek-şe* “like a man”
d. *bir yerkek adam* “a man”
e. *yerkek-siz* “without a man”
f. *yerkek-ti adam* “a person with a man”
g. *yerkek-ter* “men”

- (5) Canonical Adjective: *qızıl* “red”
- qıp-qızıl* “very red”
 - wöte qızıl* “very red”
 - qızıl-şa* “somewhat red”
 - bir qızıl kitap* “a red book”
 - **qızıl-sız* “without a red one”
 - **qızıl-dı üy* “a house with redness/a red one”
 - **qızıl-dar* “red ones”
- (6) Human Property Adjective: *jas* “young”
- jap-jas* “very young”
 - wöte jas* “very young”
 - jas-taw* “somewhat young”
 - bir jas adam* “a young person”
 - **jas-sız* “without a young person”
 - **jas-tı adam* “a person with youth/a young person”
 - jas-tar* “young people”

Interestingly, despite the fact that five out of the seven diagnostics reliably split all of the words tested into two distinct classes, two diagnostics produced ambiguous results. First, almost all words were able to appear between an indefinite determiner and a canonical noun head, as in the (d) examples. On this basis, we conclude that this construction cannot be considered a good diagnostic for adjectivehood. Instead, the fact that even canonical nouns appear in this construction suggests that noun-noun compounding is productive in Kazakh. Additional evidence from stress patterns suggests that when a human property noun like *yerkek* “man” or *ayel* “woman” modifies a clear noun, as in (1), the result is a noun-noun compound.

Second, all nouns and almost all human property adjectives were able to take the plural suffix *-Ier*, as in the (g) examples. We suggest that the appearance of *-Ier* on adjectives is due to nominal subdeletion, or ellipsis of an N out of an NP (Giannakidou & Stavrou, 1999; Giannakidou & Merchant, 1997). In Kazakh, nominal subdeletion of adjectives is possible when an adjective appears with overt case morphology, as in (7) and (8). It does not appear to be possible when there is no overt nominal morphology on the adjective, as in (9).

- (7) *qızıl-dı qızıl de-me*
red-ACC red call.IMP-NEG
 “Do not call a red thing red.”
- (8) *men jaman-dı jaqsı-ğa iter-di-m*
 I **bad-ACC good-DAT push-PST-1SG**
 “I pushed the bad one to the good one.”
- (9) *jas adam-men qart adam birge tur-di. jas *(adam) söyle-di.*
 young person-with old person together stand-PST **young (person) speak-PST**
 “An old person and a young person were standing together. The young *(person) spoke.”

Like case morphology, plural morphology on adjectives also enables nominal subdeletion. Both compounding and nominal subdeletion make it somewhat difficult to distinguish nouns and adjectives; however, we argue that the division is a meaningful one.

Unlike B&H, we do not find that words denoting properties of humans were somewhat adjectival and somewhat nominal, sitting in the middle of a smooth continuum from canonical nouns to canonical adjectives. Instead, we find that it is possible to divide the words denoting properties of humans categorically into nouns and adjectives. Based on this study, then, we conclude that a prototype analysis of nouns and adjectives is inappropriate for Kazakh. Instead, we argue that the Kazakh non-verbal lexicon is divided into the familiar categories *adjective* and *noun*.

References

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