Title: Non-intersective adjectives as intersective non-adjectives

Abstract:

Sometimes things are named accurately; other times, not so much. I argue that so-called non-intersective adjectives such as *former* and *prospective* actually constitute a different class than adjectives and that they combine with nouns by intersecting with the complement of the noun set. For these reasons, I argue that the term set-complement noun modifiers (SCNMs) is a more accurate characterization of such words. I then discuss what this model predicts about the distribution of SCNMs, and finally discuss *fake*, a counterargument to this view, arguing that it is actually highly compatible with the SCNM model.

SCNMs famously do not appear predicatively (with the exception of *fake*), so I first discuss how SCNMs combine with nouns, arguing that SCNMs have a category of N/N, combining with nouns to create nouns. How do they combine with the sets denoted by nouns? It would seem that they don't simply intersect with nouns like adjectives, as a former mayor is by definition not in the mayor set. I propose that SCNMs combine with nouns through intersection with the complement of the noun set. Examining the case of *former*, for example, it seems that *former* takes in a set X and returns the intersection of the complement of X with the set of things that were in X at some earlier time i. Having argued that SCNMs are in fact intersective, I then use SCNM's inability to conjoin with adjectives to argue that SCNMs are not adjectives.

How might these facts help explain why SCNMs, unlike adjectives, do not appear in predicative position? It seems that, if SCNMs were able to appear predicatively and contribute a semantic meaning in such an environment, they would inherently create a contradiction and thus not contribute information. For example, take the sentence *the mayor is former*; this sentence would seemingly be by definition false, since *the mayor* is a member of the mayor set and thus

not a member of the former-mayor set. It does not make much sense for a language to evolve a grammatical structure whose basic form always returns the same truth value, so it makes sense that SCNMs in predicative position did not develop in English. For this reason, SCNMs' characteristic of contributing meaning through intersection with the complement of the noun set helps explain why SCNMs do not appear predicatively.

That is all well and good, but there is an obvious counterexample to the idea that SCNMs do not appear predicatively: what about *fake*? Sentences like *the gun is fake* are completely well-formed—clearly *fake* can appear in predicative position, yet it seems to be an SCNM, since a fake gun is not a gun. Based on ambiguous phrases such as *the fake painting* (in which the item in question may be a forged painting or a non-painting), I argue that one must posit two homophonous versions of *fake*; the predicatively-appearing *fake* then falls nicely out of this homophony without requiring that an SCNM appear in predicative position.

Though *fake* might at first seem to provide evidence against the SCNM model, upon closer inspection it would seem that the model helps explain its varied meanings neatly, and may in fact be necessary machinery to do so. For these reasons, I propose the set-complement noun modifier model as a simple, effective, and wide-ranging method for treating so-called non-intersective adjectives.

References:

Jacobson, P. I. (2014). *Compositional semantics: An introduction to the syntax/semantics interface*. Oxford University Press.