

# The Dynamicity of the Transformation ‘Nouns to Adjectives’\*

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The contradiction between the unlimited cognitive needs and limited means of expression of human beings caused the phenomenon of lexical decategorization. There are many examples of nouns that are used as adjectives in Chinese. The evolution of languages is undying and it occurs at anytime. The phenomenon of ‘nouns to adjectives’ has dynamicity. There is a big difference in the completeness within this phenomenon and it performs as a unidirectional continuum.

*Keywords:* noun, adjective, completeness, continuum

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of lexical decategorization is common among the languages in the world. Hopper and Thompson (1984) put forward the definition of “decategorization” to explain the dynamicity in words’ category attribute. In Chinese, there are three directions for the “decategorization” of nouns: to adjectives, to prepositional phrase and to verbs. As a result, the dynamicity increases together with the transformation from reference to predication, thus it is also regarded as “predication”.

Some nouns can transformation to adjectives under certain circumstances, Liu Runqing, Liu Zhengguang (2004), Peng Shang, Liu Zhengguang (2008) and so on hold the view that the common functions of nouns’ “decategorization” are the functions of adjectives. The phenomenon of ‘nouns to adjectives’ was once included in the framework of “adverb-noun structure” and therefore became research focus. However, one the other hand, the differences between transformation from nouns to verbs and from nouns to adjectives are not classified or there are arguments on whether the word class of nouns has changed because of that. We believe the phenomena of “‘nouns to adjectives’” abound and are worth studying. Zhang Bojiang (1994), Zheng Li (2006), Peng Shang, Liu Zhengguang (2008), Liu Danqing (2010) and so all have mentioned the “‘nouns to adjectives’”, Tan Jingchun (1998), Shi Chunhong (2001), Song Peijie (2003), Shao Jingmin, Wu Lihong (2005), Yang Yiming, XuYizhong (2003) and so on have made specialized study. I have analyzed the semantic basic of the “‘nouns to adjectives’”, syntactic context and pragmatic effect of the transformation from ‘nouns to adjectives’ in another paper. On this basis, this paper will further elaborate the dynamicity of the transformation from ‘nouns to adjectives’ to make inner discrepancy and developing tendency clear.

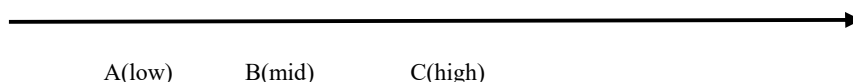
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## 2. The Completeness Continuum

From the perspective of diachronic study, the evolution of languages is undying and it occurs at anytime, so does the phenomenon of ‘nouns to adjectives’. In reference to *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (sixth edition), some distinctions inside the phenomenon of ‘nouns to adjectives’ are discovered and there is a completeness continuum of transforming with the highest completeness at C (with explicit adjective sense), the lowest completeness at A (with flexible adjective sense) and the middle completeness at B (with attributive sense).



### 2.1 Type A (with Flexible Adjective Sense)

As the lowest completeness type of ‘nouns to adjectives’, the adjective sense of these nouns hasn’t been recorded in dictionaries, however, the nouns are often used as adjectives in actual use. They mostly occur in dialogues, network literature, TV interviews, literary criticism on magazines and newspapers. The relatively low completeness of these nouns is reflected in the lack of authentication from dictionaries and the instability of the adjectives’ sense. Moreover, the acceptability may vary due to the influences of communication objects, social and cultural backgrounds, regions of dialects and so on. For example:

#### Example (1)

favorite: (~r) **【noun】** : things that attract others

In the market of electron microscope, SEM accounts half and among them, the environmental scanning electron microscopes (ESEM), which are designed to examine organic samples, are the hottest. (*Press Select*, 1994, quoted from CCL)

#### Example (2)

Real heart: **【noun】** the real heart

He truly hope that Li Ao could have a visit to Fa Yuan Temple in person. (*Li Ao Dialogue*, quoted from CCL)

#### Example (3)

thing: ①(~r) **【noun】** things ②(~r) **【noun】** accidents ③(~r) **【noun】** vocation, job  
④ **【noun】** relation or responsibility ⑤<written language>to serve ⑥ to take up

What a troublesome person he is!

#### Example (4)

Smell: ①(~r) **【noun】** the property of materials for the tongue to taste certain gestation ② to distinguish flavors  
③ some dishes ④(~r) **【noun】** the property of materials for the nose to get certain smell ⑤(~r) **【noun】**  
implication、 interest ⑥ **【amount】** used in medicine

The toilet is so odorous.

## Example (5)

ice: ① **【noun】** the solid congealed by water in and below 0° C ② **【verb】** the feeling of chill due to the touch of cold things ③ **【verb】** to make something cold by putting them with cold water or ice ④ things like ice ⑤ **【noun】** family name

However, please take care, it may be cold! (*The Lord of the Rings*(3), quoted from CCL)

## Example (6)

official: **【noun】** some aspects concerning the government

It is easy and may official to say, however, it is a startling transforming for an old and traditional industry to be modern enterprise if we manage to do it. (*People's Daily*, 1998, quoted from CCL)

## Example (7)

violence: **【noun】** ① the power of the force; force ② especially the power of the force of a nation

I am sorry that I can't describe further, otherwise it would be really pornographic, violent and disgusted. (Blog of Yang Hengjun, quoted from CCL)

## 2.2 Type B (with Attributive Sense)

These nouns have walked further in the process of “nouns to adjectives” and in *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (sixth edition), there are the original nominal sense together with the sense of “property word” which are actually the “non-predicate adjectives” and they are also called “distinguishing words”. But the nouns were universally used as qualitative adjectives in practice and we regard this period as the transitory stage from A to C. In pragmatics, these nouns have prepared fully for transforming to adjectives and there are just a few steps to the type of C. For example:

## Example (8)

yellow: ① **【noun】** the color of yellow ② **【adjective】** (qualitative word) pornographic

The movie is so pornographic.

## Example (9)

rational: ① **【adjective】** (qualitative word) associated with activities like: judges and reasoning (opposite to “perceptual”) ② **【noun】** ability to control one's behaviors from intellect

The actors can't be too rational and too rational actors can't be call good actors. (*Writer's Digest*, 1993A, quoted from CCL)

What we need to point out is that some words in *Modern Chinese Dictionary* are only given the sense of “qualitative word”, however, they should be regarded as the phenomenon of ‘nouns to adjectives’ as the syntactic functions of these words are located between nouns and adjectives. There are three different opinions on the division of word-class: nominals, adjectives or to list separately. We agree with Zhang Bojiang (1994) “Non-predicate adjectives are of great value in observing the shift of nouns’ functions and a large part of them are obviously transformationed from nouns. Thus, we can suggest that non-predicate adjectives are the breakthrough

to the shift of nouns’ functions” (Zhang, 1994, pp. 342-343). So these words are included in our study and they are in half completeness of “nouns to adjectives”. For example:

Example (10)

amateur: **【adjective】** (qualitative word)①outside of work hours ②unprofessional

She sings of an unprofessional level.

Example (11)

perceptual: **【adjective】** (qualitative word)associated with psychological interactions like feelings and consciousness (opposite to “rational”)

That person is very perceptual.

Example (12)

neutral: ① **【noun】** properties which are neither acidic nor alkaline in chemistry ② **【noun】** to distinguish masculine、feminine、neuter nouns (together with pronouns and adjectives) in some languages③ **【adjective】** (qualitative word)the meanings are neither positive nor negative

He wears neutrally.

### 2.3 Type C (with Explicit Sense)

As the lowest completeness type of ‘nouns to adjectives’, both the nominal and adjective sense of these nouns are recorded in the dictionary. Among them, there are two subcategories: one’s adjective sense is almost the same as it’s nominal sense except the differences in syntactic positions and functions and the adjective sense can be explained with the structure “have + nouns”. For example:

Example (13)

rule: ① **【noun】** the inner and intrinsic connections among things; they occur repeatedly and under certain conditions they often work and determine the inevitable development toward certain tendency and they are also called: rules.

② **【adjective】** “have + rule” regular

Example (14)

etiquette: ① **【noun】** modest actions in communication and behave with etiquette

② **【adjective】** “have + etiquette” polite

Example (15)

reason: ① **【noun】** the ability to tell the right and the wrong, the stake and to control one’s behaviors② **【adjective】** “have + reason” reasonable

Example (16)

prestige: ① **【noun】** awesome prestige and style ② **【adjective】** “have + prestige” imposing

enthusiasm: ① **【noun】** enthusiastic emotions② **【adjective】** “have + enthusiasm” enthusiastic

sincere: ① **【noun】** sincere intentions② **【adjective】** sincere

- power: ① **【noun】** power and influence ② **【adjective】** powerful and strong  
 warm-hearted: ① **【noun】** enthusiastic and positive characters and warm-hearted people  
 ② **【adjective】** enthusiastic and positive  
 sexy: ① **【noun】** the obvious feelings of gender from figures and clothing  
 ② **【adjective】** obvious features of gender from figures and clothing, tempting

These words are similar to the “adnoun” suggested by Zhu Dexi (1982, p. 76) and Mr. Zhu regarded them as the subordinate concept of adjectives. He has remarked “They can be modified by ‘very’ and the objects of ‘have’ and there are no differences in lexical meaning.” For example:

Example (17)

- very dangerous; have (very big) danger  
 very difficult; have (very big) difficulty  
 very contradicted; have (very big) contradiction

In spite of the differences between the two from the perspective of semantics or pragmatics, Mr. Zhu has informed us a long time ago that these words’ adjective sense is developed from their nominal sense as they can be the objects of “have”. Otherwise, if the adjective sense is intrinsic, the usage of “have×” would not exist according to “blocking effect” (Dong, 2004, p. 13). So, these words belong to the discussion of “‘nouns to adjectives’” with high completeness.

In the other type, words’ adjective sense is the extension and development of the connotation meaning in their nominal sense except for the differences in syntactic positions and functions, for example:

Example (18)

- axis: ① **【noun】** cylindrical form element, wheel or other rotating parts run around or with it together ② **【noun】** the line to cut the flat or solid into symmetric parts ③ (~r) **【noun】** cylindrical form object for coiling ④ **【amount】** line used to tie up on the axis, and the mounted calligraphy and painting with the axis ⑤ <dialect> **【adjective】** stubborn; pigheaded
- machine: ① **【noun】** the settings combined according to mechanical principle like: lever, pulley, machine and guns ② **【adjective】** stiff; unchangeable; not dialectical
- idea: ① **【noun】** imagination or hope for the future (valid and reasonable, not like fancy and fantasy) ② **【adjective】** hopeful; satisfied
- iron: ① **【noun】** metallic element with the symbol “Fe” ② weapons and so on ③ **【adjective】** hard; strong; solid ④ violent and selected ⑤ **【adjective】** determined ⑥ **【verb】** keep a straight face (an austere expression)

### 3. Unidirectional Development

We have noticed that the explanations and class of the same words are given differently in the sixth and fifth edition of *Modern Chinese Dictionary*: some words of type A in the fifth edition of *Modern Chinese Dictionary* are moved to type B in the sixth edition or belong to type C directly and some words in type B from the fifth edition of *Modern Chinese Dictionary* move to type C in the sixth edition. It has confirmed that the development of “‘nouns to adjectives’” from A to C is unidirectional and it means if a noun starts to transformation to an adjective, the completeness would be higher and higher till the occurrence of the adjective sense, for example:

## Example (19)

major: ① **【noun】** the categories of course study divided according to the division of labor in subjects or production departments in a department of institution of higher learning or trade schools ② **【noun】** the service parts divided from industrial sector according to the different process in production ③ **【adjective】** (qualitative word) specialized in certain jobs or vocation (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the fifth edition)

major: ① **【noun】** the categories of course study divided according to the division of labor in subjects or production departments in a department of institution of higher learning or trade schools ② **【noun】** the service parts divided from industrial sector according to the different process in production ③ **【adjective】** (qualitative word) specialized in certain jobs or vocation ④ **【adjective】** With professional level and knowledge (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the sixth edition)

## Example (20)

rule: **【noun】** the inner and intrinsic connections among things; they occur repeatedly and under certain conditions they often work and determine the inevitable development toward certain tendency; they are subjective and can't be transferred by people's will, however, people can get to know and use them by practice, they are also called: rules. (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the fifth edition)

rule: ① **【noun】** the inner and intrinsic connections among things; they occur repeatedly and under certain conditions they often work and determine the inevitable development toward certain tendency and they are also called: rules.

② **【adjective】** regular (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the sixth edition)

## Example (21)

modern times: **【noun】** the era we are in at present and it usually refers to the period from May Fourth Movement to nowadays in our nation's historical stage. (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the fifth edition)

modern times: ① **【noun】** the era we are in at present and it usually refers to the period from May Fourth Movement to nowadays in our nation's historical stage.

② **【adjective】** meet the trend; fashionable (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the sixth edition)

## Example (22)

gentleman: **【noun】** people with honor and power in old time, landlord or resigned bureaucrat. (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the fifth edition)

gentleman: ① **【noun】** people with honor and power in old time, landlord or resigned bureaucrat.

② **【noun】** a man with Modern civilization ③ **【adjective】** gentle and civilized (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the sixth edition)

#### 4. The Diverging Development of Semantics

The dynamicity are also presented in the fact that nouns which have derivational adjective sense can derive other adjective sense by further “nouns to adjectives”, for example:

## Example (23)

oil: ① **【noun】** liquid fat or the mineral mixture of hydrocarbon liquids contained in the body of plants and animals; solid animal fat ② **【verb】** paint with Tung oil or oil ③ **【verb】** polluted by oil ④ **【adjective】** slippery ⑤ **【noun】** family name

In spite of the adjective sense of “slippery”, the word “oil” is also used as “greasy” in actual use. For example:

## Example (24)

The Chinese dishes are too greasy.  
Don't make the dishes greasy when you cook.

thief: ① **【noun】** people who steal things ② people who have done something bad (especially people who bring damage to the nation and people) ③ evil; uncomely ④ **【adjective】** foxy ⑤ <dialect> **【adverb】** pretty, very

In spite of the adjective sense of “foxy”, the word “thief” is also used as “thievish-looking” in actual use. For example:

## Example (25)

The person looks thievish-looking.  
His eyes look thievish-looking.

## 5. The Instability of Semantics

When used to refer to something, the semantics of nouns are stable and are not influenced by factors like: cultural and educational background and so on. However, after transforming to adjectives, the semantics may tend to be temporary and instable due to the influences of cultural literacy, traditional views and historical background. For example:

## Example (26)

Sorghum is a rugged food, but the fittest way to eat is elegant and that is to make dessert. (*Luminous Complexion by Eating*, Ji Xiao'an, quoted from CCL)

“petty bourgeoisie” in Cultural Revolution was definitely regarded as the Right and its adjective sense was absolutely negative. However, after “‘nouns to adjectives’”, the word turn to be positive in the recent years which means “pursue the taste of life, understand life, have emotional appeal and enjoy with not too much money”. The word's emotional color and range of usage all have changed. “‘nouns to adjectives’” of “*Huang Shiren, Chen Shimei, Grandet*” and some other words depend on the speakers knowledge of relative literature and the application may be temporary due to the possible gaps.

## Conclusion

In Chinese, it's a longstanding but burgeoning language phenomenon that nouns transform to adjectives under certain conditions. The phenomenon of ‘nouns to adjectives’ verifies what Jespersen has remarked (1988, p. 20): “On every specific occasion (except simple idioms), speakers must handle the new occasion with the

application of the language's customs to fully express what they have never expressed before and during the process, some new expressions and customs would be produced.” And it matches ‘the maximum utilization principle of language inventory’ suggested by Liu Danqing (2014). Thus, The phenomenon of ‘nouns to adjectives’ is dynamic with an inner completeness continuum which is unidirectional; some other adjective sense can be derived after the noun's developing of one adjective sense; meanwhile, the developed adjective sense presents a certain degree of instability and temporality. If there is one kind of “‘nouns to adjectives’”, which canstand the test of time and gain certain range of using, it may be recorded in dictionary and the usage would be solidified, otherwise, it can only be used in spoken language or some certain regions and contexts.

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