

Direct and Indirect Modificational Adjectives in Coptic

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1. INTRODUCTION. Crosslinguistically, adjectives represent an elusive part of speech category. Dixon's (1982) study *“Where Have All the Adjectives Gone?”* was the first to argue that not all language may have adjectives as a major word class. At first blush, Coptic Egyptian (Ancient Egyptian [Afroasiatic], ca. 3rd–12th c. CE) looks like Igbo [Niger–Congo], which has an exceedingly small but distinctive adjectival class. However, the picture is blurred by the fact Coptic massively borrowed adjectives from Greek and with it the open class character of adjectival property concepts. In my talk, the question of adjectival categoryhood will be approached from a slightly different angle, to wit, the morphosyntax of adjectival modification.

2. DIRECT MODIFICATIONAL ADJECTIVES. Sproat and Shih (1988) propose a basic division in attributive syntax between directly and indirectly modifying adjectives. Direct modification adjectives are juxtaposed to the modified head noun and underlie strict ordering restrictions. Indirect modification adjectives are morphologically marked as such by a special linkage morpheme and demonstrate a greater syntactic freedom. With particular reference to Mandarin Chinese, Sproat and Shih (1988: 466, 474) analyze direct modification structures as noun–adjective compounds with a single word stress. In Coptic, word-level noun–adjective compounds are distinguished from phrase-level noun–adjective combinations on a morpho-syntactic basis. Morphologically speaking, noun–adjective compounds like **sti=nú:fe** ‘good smell, perfume’ (< **stói** ‘smell’ + **nú:fe** ‘good’) have a special construct state morphology, in which the compound-initial head noun **sti=** ‘smell’ is phonologically reduced in terms of its segmental material and prosodic prominence and behaves, as a result, like a bound morpheme. The annexed adjective **nú:fe** ‘good’ thus carries the primary stress of the entire compound. Contrast this with phrase-level noun–adjective combinations, such as **pə-fé:re fé:m** ‘the little boy’ in (1), in which the definite NP **pə-fé:re** ‘the boy’ and the single-word adjective **fé:m** ‘small’ are fully-fledged autonomous syntactic phrases. For this reason, it is possible for a second-position functional clitic like the Greek discourse particle **dé** to intervene between the modified definite NP and the direct modification adjectival.

(1) Direct modification adjectival with intervening second-position particle **dé**

<u>pə-fé:re</u>	dé	<u>fé:m</u>	?a	=f	aʒzane
DEF.M.SG–boy	PCL	small	PERF	=CL.3M.SG	grow.ABS

“The little boy grew up.” (Luke 1:80, ed. Quecke)

3. INDIRECT MODIFICATIONAL ADJECTIVES. The dependent-making syntax of this noun modification pattern is morphologically marked by a special linkage clitic **ən=**, which is left attached to the indirectly modifying adjective. This is the standard syntactic frame for attributive modification, which freely admits Greek loan adjectives that are banned from direct modification contexts. A garden-variety example is **tə-fé?ere ən=saβé:** ‘the prudent girl’.

(2) Indirect modification adjectival with dependent-marking linker clitic **ən=**

<u>tə-fé?ere</u>	<u>ən=saβé:</u>	na	kle:ronomi	əm-pe=s-hai
DEF.F.SG–girl	LINK=wise	FUT	inherit.ABS	PREP–DEF.M.SG=POSS.3M.SG–husband

“The prudent girl shall inherit her husband.” (Sirach 22: 4, ed. Thompson)

4. AN ANALYTIC CHALLENGE. Indirectly modifying adjectives are difficult to tease apart from plain possessives. But close examination of attributive and possessive modification reveals that they differ from each other considerably in syntactic and semantic terms. Accordingly, indirect attributive modification cannot be subsumed under quality possession—a situation that is unexpected from Nikolaeva and Spencer's (2020) possession–attribution continuum.

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