

## A Comparative Study of the Syntactic Function Distribution of English and Chinese Adjectives

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**Abstract:** According to different theories and standards, word classes have different methods of division. The generative grammar takes English as the research object, and divides the words into lexical category and functional category. The adjectives are content words and belong to lexical category. Chinese adjectives, the same as nouns, verbs, adverbs, and numerals, belong to content words. Therefore, adjectives are lexical words in the English and Chinese languages, and they have both surface and deep connections. Analysis of the differences in the distribution of syntactic functions is not only conducive to deepening our understanding of English and Chinese adjectives, enriching the theory of comparative study of English and Chinese adjectives, but also contributing to the smooth progress of cross-language communication.

### 1. Introduction

The existence adjectives and the positioning of adjectives have always been controversial. Compared with Old English, there is very little morphological change in the vocabulary of contemporary English. It can be said that contemporary English vocabulary is farther and farther away on the road of de-grammaticalization. It is impossible to classify the word classes completely by relying on the form means. Therefore, English word classification is mainly by grammatical function and secondarily by form. Based on the syntactic function distribution and morphological characteristics, the generative grammar divides the contemporary English words into two types: lexical category and functional category. The adjectives are content words and belong to lexical category.

Compared with contemporary English adjectives, the problem of adjectives in modern Chinese is relatively complicated. I don't want to talk about how adjectives are positioned. So far, there are no consistent idea about if there are adjectives in Chinese. For example, James D Mc Cawley (1992) believes that, based on universal characteristics, adjectives as predicates need to be verb-linked, while adjectives in Chinese can directly act as predicates, so there are no adjectives in Chinese. Shen Jiaxuan (1997) believes that the lexicographic or untagged syntactic function of Chinese adjectives is used as an attributive. However, Shen Jiaxuan (2009) also proposed that the Chinese noun, verb, and adjective are inclusive. Adjectives are included as a subclass in the verb class, and verbs are included as a subclass in the noun class. Cheng Gong (1998) demonstrated that the adjectives in Chinese are independent words from the perspective of cross-language, and that there is no difference between Chinese adjectives and adjectives in other languages in the world. The differences existing at present are only superficial phenomena, and have nothing to do with or without adjectives, the differences is caused by other reasons. We agree with Mr. Cheng Gong's point of view that there are adjectives in Chinese, and they are different from the verbs, not a subclass of verbs. In the development of Chinese, the economic principle has always played a vital role, so that Chinese tends to be simplified in form. Taking modern Chinese Mandarin as an example, word order and function word are the main means of expressing grammatical meaning. There is no morphological change in the main lexical category. Therefore, the standard for classifying word classes is the syntactic function distribution. Based on this, there are five kinds of

the content word class of Mandarin Chinese: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and numerals. There are typical differences between adjectives and major content-word nouns, verbs, adverbs and numerals.

English adjectives are words that describes a person or thing, for example big, red and clever, in a big house, red wine and a clever idea. It is descriptive in nature. In Mandarin Chinese, we use the division of the word class in Peking University's Modern Chinese, and think that the adjective represents attribute, such as “da(big), xiao(small), hao(good), huai(bad), congming(clever)...”, Such as “xuebai(snow-white), bizhi(straight), huohong(red as fire), molu(blackish green), luyouyou(bright green)...” State adjective of class is classified as a status word. The categories “gong(male), mu(female), nan(male), nv(female), ci(female), xiong(male)...” are called distinguishing words. It seems that English adjectives intersect with Chinese adjectives, status words, and distinct words. Here we need to clarify what is discussed in this article. We used to compared with English adjectives is the Chinese adjectives defined by Peking University's Modern Chinese.

This paper mainly adopts the comparative method, puts English and Chinese adjectives into the whole vocabulary system, determines the status and characteristics of adjectives in the combination relationship, and then compares the syntactic differences between English and Chinese adjectives, so that the English and Chinese adjectives are essentially the same. The personality differences between English and Chinese adjectives expressed in language facts are caused by different expressions of tense and aspect.

## **2. The characteristics of English adjectives**

### **2.1 The classification of English adjectives**

For English adjectives, different scholars have different classifications. We synthesize various discussions and roughly divide English adjectives into 2.1.1. Quality adjectives; 2.1.2 Generic adjectives; 2.1.3. Color adjectives. (We believe that the classification criteria of English adjectives are different and the results are different. The classifications in the text include but are not limited to the three categories listed in the text.)

#### **2.1.1 Quality adjectives**

There are a large number of adjectives in English that fall into this category, which means the quality of people or things. Such as: cheap, expensive, clean, dirty, clever, smart, small, big, long, short, slow, fast...these adjectives can generally be used at comparative levels, such as cheaper, smaller, longer, and so on.

#### **2.1.2 Generic adjectives**

A generic adjective indicates which category the modified noun belongs to. Such as: social, daily, educational, external, historical, positive, political, urban...these adjectives generally cannot be compared in English.

#### **2.1.3 Color adjectives**

There are a few adjectives in English that represent color. Such as: black, white, blue, green, red, pink, yellow, grey, purple, brown, orange...These color words can be modified with words such as light, pale, dark, and deep. Such as light brown hair; a deep blue skirt and so on. Sometimes these words can also add the ending - ish: yellowish, reddish, etc.

### **2.2 The syntactic function and distribution of English adjectives**

(1) Be an attributive, it is generally placed before the modified noun, and modified it. Such as:

1) He is a very handsome boy.

2) He is a heavy smoker.

3) The father to sell a little food, dragging a small scooters, also carrying our sister.

In the above three examples handsome; heavy; small in italics are adjectives as attributives, modifying the people or objects behind them, indicating their traits, characteristics, and so on.

(2) Be a predicative, adjectives are more fixed when they are used as expressions, usually after the Copulas, and occupy a syntactic position. Such as:

4) The Duke was old and boring, but his wife was young and beautiful, and not very sensible.

5) By contrast, the area is small, the yield is low.

6) The probability of abortion during pregnant time always is large, the reason causing miscarriage mostly is rolling down from the staircase.

In the example 4), 5), 6), old, boring, young, beautiful, sensible, small, low, and large are all cases where adjectives are used as expressions. They have no other sentence components behind them, occupying separate syntactic positions.

(3) As the complement of the object, when the adjective is used as the complement of the object, it usually follows the object and sometimes is separated by other words. The root form of adjectives as object complements is usually not adjectives, but is transformed into adjectives through the form of words. The use of adjectives in object complements belongs to the use of marked adjectives. Such as:

7) I wish you well.

8) Sit down and make yourself comfortable.

9) He could not understand what she found wrong with him.

(4) Adverbial. adjectives as adverbial, sometimes in front of the sentence, sometimes after the sentence, usually need to change the ending, belonging to the use of marked adjectives. Such as:

10) Much interested, he agreed it a try.

11) He arrived home, hungry and tired.

12) He said nothing but sat silent smoking.

Based on the above discussion and the criteria of generating grammar [+/-N] and [+/-V], we summarize the part-of-speech features of English adjectives and the other three main content words as follows:

Table 1 Characteristic distribution of four kinds of content words in English

part of speech	Nominal feature	Predicate feature
N	[+N]	[-V]
V	[-N]	[+V]
ADJ	[+N]	[-V]
ADV	[-N]	[-V]

As can be seen from the above table, in English, both nouns and adjectives are [+N], that is, nouns are preferred, so nouns and adjectives in English can be used as expressions, while adverbs lack both nouns and verbs. Adverbs placed in the position of adverbial and complement. It is worth noting here that the -ing form, the -ed form, and the -en form of the verb are essentially equivalent to the adjective, which is a special group in the adjective, which is not discussed in the text.

### 3. Characteristics of Chinese adjectives

In modern Chinese, nouns, verbs, and adjectives have great differences in grammatical functions. Here we only discuss the similarities and differences between verbs and adjectives in modern Chinese directly related to this article from the perspective of syntactic function.

#### 3.1 The similarities between verbs and adjectives in modern Chinese

(1) Verbs and adjectives can be used as predicate centers, such as “ni shuo(you say), ni kan(you see)” (verbs are the core of predicate) and “ta gao(He is tall), tianleng(It is cold)” (adjectives are the core of predicate).

(2) Adverbials can be put after verbs and adjectives, such as “gangchi (wan)( Just finished eating), caikan (jian)(just see)” and “henhong(very red), feichanghao(very good)”.

(3) Verbs and adjectives can generally be used to describe the complement of the structure, i.e. can be followed by complements, such as “kanqingchu(look clearly), xiangmingbai(think clear)”

and “haodehen(very good), gaojile(very tall)” and so on.

(4) Verbs cannot be used as the subject object. They cannot directly modify another noun as an attribute or directly modified by other nouns. Although adjectives can directly modify nouns, such as “haoshu(good book), xiaopingguo(small apple)...”, they cannot be directly modified by nouns.

(5) Verbs and adjectives can be preceded by the negative word “bu(not)”, such as “bukan(not to see), bushuo(not to say)” and “bugao(not tall), buhao(not good)”.

(6) Verbs and adjectives can be followed by the dynamic auxiliary word “le(already done)”, such as “du le yi ben shu(have read a book), xie le yi pian baogao(have written a report)” and “da le yidian(much bigger), zhai le haoduo(much narrower)”.

### 3.2 The difference between verbs and adjectives in modern Chinese

(1) Verbs can usually take objects, such as “chifan(have dinner), kanshu(read books)”, adjectives can't.

(2) Adjectives can be modified by the degree adverb “hen”, such as “henxiao(very small), henhong(very red)”; verbs generally can't.

(3) Adjectives can be directly used as attributives, such as “xiao zhuzi(small table), da taiyang(hot sun)”, etc.; verbs generally can't.

(4) The overlapping forms of verbs and adjectives are different. The overlapping form of monosyllabic verbs is AA, the second word reads light, such as “zouzou(have a walk), Kankan(have a look)”, etc. The overlapping form of monosyllabic adjectives is AA-er, the second word is followed by -er, and the tone is flat, if not, read the original tone. Such as “manman (er)(slow), hao hao (er)(good), zaozao (er)(early)” and so on. The overlapping form of two-syllable verbs is ABAB, such as “taoluntaolun(discuss), shangliangshangliang(discuss)”, and the overlapping form of two-syllable adjectives is AABB, such as “gaogaoxingxing(happy), ganganjingjing(clean)”. Here, after the verbs overlap, they are still verbs in the part of speech, and the adjectives become state words after overlapping in general.

In summary, we can get the characteristic distribution of the four kinds of content words in Chinese as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Characteristic distribution of four kinds of content words in Chinese

part of speech	Nominal feature	Predicate feature
N	[+N]	[-V]
V	[-N]	[+V]
ADJ	[-N]	[+V]
ADV	[-N]	[-V]

It can be seen from the above table that in Chinese, both verbs and adjectives are [+V], that is, predicate precedence, nominal is behind, and both verbs and adjectives in Chinese can be directly used as predicates, so many scholars will use Chinese in this way. The adjective is classified as a small class of verbs. The biggest difference between these and English adjectives is actually the appearance, not the essence.

## 4. The Differences and Causes of the Distribution of English Adjectives and Chinese Adjectives in Syntactic Function

### 4.1 Differences in the Syntactic Functions of English and Chinese Adjectives

It can be seen from the above that the English adjectives are nominally strong and are generally biased towards nouns; while the Chinese adjectives are predicate first, preferring verbs as a whole. At the same time, the distribution of the two syntactic functions is also different, as shown in the Fig 1.

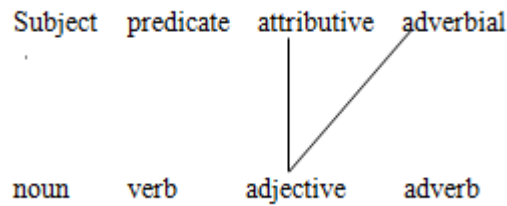


Fig.1 Schematic diagram of the syntactic function distribution of English adjectives

In fact, the most typical use of English adjectives is occupying position in the syntactic alone to make a predicative. The use of subject objects and adverbials is not the English adjectives occupying positions alone, independent of the use of sentence components, but as a noun or other component of the modifiers and nouns appear in the corresponding position in the sentence, the adjectives in English are not necessarily can't be a predicate, but can't directly do predicate like a Chinese adjective without any mark.

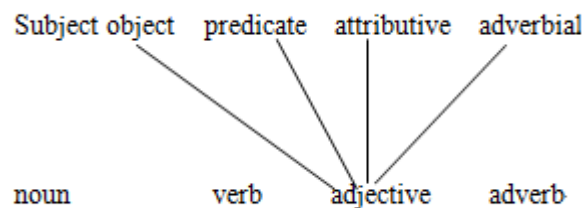


Fig.2 Schematic diagram of the distribution of syntactic functions of Chinese adjectives

Chinese adjectives have no morphological changes, so on the surface it seems that adjectives can act as any component of the sentence, but in fact it is not the case. It's most basic, unmarked usage is the same as English, as the attributive modifier restricts nouns, and secondly as predicates.

#### 4.2 Reasons for the Differences in Syntactic Functions of English and Chinese Adjectives

From the perspective of morphological classification, English and Chinese are divided into two forms of inflection and isolated language. Therefore, there must be differences in morphology and syntax between English and Chinese adjectives. Specifically, adjectives in Chinese are very similar to verbs, which has led many scholars to classify Chinese adjectives as a subclass of verbs. In English, adjectives (when used alone in sentences) can only be used as predicative, but not predicate, which is quite different from the use of Chinese adjectives. From these phenomena alone, it seems that there are obvious differences between English and Chinese adjectives, but in fact, these differences do not reflect the essential difference. In English, there must be a dominant and consistent relationship between the subject and the predicate to reflect tense, so in order to maintain the subject-verb agreement, "be" must be added between the subject and the adjective predicate; On the contrary, there is no morphological tense in Chinese, and there is no need for some form to support tense, so the adjective predicate can directly follow the subject. In fact, Chinese is also a language that expresses the tense and aspect of predicate by the auxiliary words. Therefore, neither the use of "be" in English nor the use of auxiliary words such as "zhe(being), le(already done), guo(have been), zhengzai(being)" in Chinese has not changed the part of the speech of adjective, which is to meet the requirements of tense and aspect. It can be seen that the difference between the nouns-orientation and the verbs-orientation in English and Chinese adjectives is not essential, which is an inevitable reflection of the subject-verb agreement.

### 5. Conclusion

There seem to be a lot of similarities and differences between English and Chinese adjectives,

which is unreasonable in the general grammar. From the perspective of universal grammar, this is only a superficial phenomenon. In fact, English and Chinese adjectives have the same function. Both can be used as an attributive modifier to modify nouns. They can be used as predicate components in sentences, but because of the explicit tense in English. It is required that when English adjectives are used as predicate components in sentences, they must use “be” to reflect the consistent relationship between subject and predicate. However, as a typical example of isolated language, there is no such explicit morphological requirement, so it seems English and Chinese adjectives are very different, but in reality it is the inevitable embodiment of the subject-verb agreement.

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