Book Review


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Although this book is about the perennially popular typological topic of “property concepts” (PCs), and is freely available online and as a PDF, it probably won’t make it onto the top-ten reading list of those of us whose PC wisdom stems from monographs such as Locker (1951), Dixon (1982), Pustet (1989, 2003), Bhat (1994), Wetzer (1996), Stassen (1997, 2009), Beck (2002), Rijkhoff (2002), or Dixon & Aikhenvald (2004), not to mention the numerous articles in 21 years of *LT* dedicated to word classes in general and adjectives in particular. Francez and Koontz-Garboden’s (F&KG) general plan is to defend the position that, in the domain here investigated at any rate, morphosyntactic and lexical differences, across and within languages, are meaningful and no purely ornamental variations on one uniform core Universal Grammar. More particularly, a constraint is identified that appears to F&KG to importantly curb diversity of PC grammar. Now, wouldn’t most typologists sympathise and likewise put their money on a lot of diversity being systematic and motivated rather than random and pointless? Shouldn’t a newly discovered constraint on diversity be welcome news too, at least for those typologists who continue to have universals on their agenda? Why,
then, my dim view about the typological readership Semantics and morphosyntactic variation can look forward to?

F&KG argue that it is semantics which is responsible for the diversity of PC grammars as well as for that particular universal constraint of theirs. It’s not the appeal to semantics as such where the rub lies: it’s that F&KG are using model-theoretic semantics to analyse the lexicon and grammar of PCs. I’m afraid this will act as a deterrent for potential typological readers, who will suspect the book is not really addressed to them, but to fellow formal semanticists, a community widely perceived as far more enthusiastic about their own formalisms than the forms of languages, notwithstanding recent forays into languages in the plural, heralded by the once solitary landmark of Bach, Jelinek, Kratzer, & Partee (1995).

Backgrounding the formalism, which decidedly is no end in itself for F&KG, let me try to unravel the book’s bare typological substance, and you decide for yourselves whether a read that would inevitably be strenuous is worth your while.¹

F&KG’s point of departure is the observation that PCs can share the morphosyntax of possession, and do so more prominently in some languages, among them Ulwa and Hausa, than in others. Even English, whose canonical way of expressing PCs in predicative construction is supposed to be through adjectives and a copula verb (1a, 2a, 3a), has the possessive option (1b, 2b, 3b):

(1)  

| a. Our druid is very wise/powerful/proud (of) ... |
| b. Our druid possesses/has great wisdom/power/pride (in) (perhaps better takes great pride in – but then, take is also possessive) ... |

(2)  

| a. I am hungry. |
| b. I have hunger. (marginal, preferably with the verb feel, which isn’t possessive; but in German or French, for example, Ich habe Hunger and J’ai faim are impeccable) |

¹ To some extent the book assembles and updates previously published writings of F&KG’s. For Ulwa, a little-described Misumalpan language (or group of languages) of Nicaragua and Honduras, the data and analyses prominently included here come from F&KG’s own field research.
(3) a. These two claims are undeniably true/different
   b. There is undeniable truth to these two claims/There is an undeniable difference between these two claims

For me, there remain problems with possessive interpretations. One, does have/haben/avoir really retain its ancestral possessive sense in (2)? Two, given the well-known affinity between possession, accompaniment (comitative), location, and existence, where does one draw the line, and are existential constructions like (3) still on the possessive side? Further, concerning F&KG’s scope, predicative adjectives in copula constructions and abstract nouns in possessive constructions are obviously not the only two ways to express PCs: there are also non-abstract nouns – inherently personal or concrete nouns (1c, 2c) and abstract nouns with a concrete reading (1c, 3c, 4c)² – as well as stative verbs for that same purpose (1d, 2d, 3d, 4d):

(1) c. Our druid is a great sage/power/snob (the latter not quite equivalent, because too negative)
   d. Our druid knows and understands much/is able to do and get done much/values his qualities and achievements highly

(2) c. I am a starveling
   d. I hunger (?), but impeccable in German ich hungere, impersonal mich hungert, I’m starving

(3) c. The two claims are undeniable truths
   d. The two claims undeniably differ

(4) a. She is beautiful, he is young
   b. She has beauty, he has youth

² Svennung (1958) should be a classic on the topic of ABSTRACTUM PRO CONCRETO shifting: you wouldn’t guess from the title. The link is that people can be addressed (Your Honour, Eminence, Excellency, Happiness, Presence etc.; Spanish vuestra merced > uste(d), Dutch uwe edelheit > u 2SG.FORMAL pronoun) or indeed named (Honour, Hope, Grace, Clement etc.) by way of their attributes.
c. *She is a beauty, he is a youth*

d. *She pleases the senses, he has not far advanced in life*

But let’s put such questions and possible objections aside. F&KG’s exclusive focus is on possession, and their question here is an explanatory one: Why is it that PC sentences, prominently in some languages and marginally in others, feature possessive morphosyntax, of all semantic material? Naively, one would have thought (I would have) that it is not wildly imaginative to conceive of objects as possessing properties, especially if objects are conceived of as property bundles, with individual properties ascribed to them conceived of as to be included in that bundle: Aren’t whole-part relations sufficiently similar to possessor-possession relations to merit identical or similar expression? F&KG appear to be off on a different tangent, though: they suggest that the relevant PC expressions, like *wisdom, power, pride* etc. in English and their equivalents in Hausa, Ulwa etc., have a meaning which invites or indeed requires possessive morphosyntax. These (what I’ve called) abstract nouns are “quality-denoting”: they denote (“portions” of) “stuff”, essentially like mass nouns do. (There are certain differences, though, detailed in Chapter 6, to do with whether or not the mereologically structured stuff is pre-ordered by size: PC stuff is, mass-noun stuff isn’t.) Don’t be misled by what you think qualities are in your own everyday-life ontology or metaphysics: F&KG subscribe to the late Emmon Bach’s idea of a separate “natural-language metaphysics”, a framework taking its sole justification from its ability to model linguistic structures, and they stress that their “qualities” are “just mathematical objects used to model the meaning of certain expressions” (p. 50).

Combining these objects (and I don’t think much harm is done when I continue to naively think of them as quality-denoting in my German- and English-supported real-world metaphysics) with individual-denoting expressions in predication leads to incongruity: you get the general idea when you try to construe meanings for sentences such as *Our druid is wisdom*, but don’t get the same meaning as for *Our druid is wise*. These quality-denotations, on the other hand, can be congruously combined with individual-denotations using possessive connectors, such as verbs of possession(-accompaniment-existence-location) or also nominal possession markers as in Ulwa. By contrast, adjectives, such as *wise, powerful, proud* etc. in English are “individual-characterising”: regardless of their precise meaning (modelled in terms of stuff or of
scales or whatever – and this is among the most contentious issues in formal semantics\(^3\), it permits predication of such lexemes as in English predicative constructions, or also with a non-overt copula as in other languages.

This is meant to account for why PCs are combined with subjects in the two ways F&KG have singled out for in-depth analysis: individual-characterisations combine predicatively, quality-denotations combine possessively. The second, related question F&KG are now asking is this: Are the meanings of PCs – individual-characterising vs. quality-denoting – in any general way linked with the word class of their expressions? Their answer, which won’t please proponents of the variation-as-ornament approach: it’s not all random. Without going out of their way prospecting across the wide world of languages, F&KG find that individual-characterising PC lexemes can be adjectives (like wise, powerful, proud in English) as well as nouns (like sage, power, snob). Quality-denoting PC lexemes, on the other hand, can also be nouns (like wisdom, power, pride in English), or they can be pre-categorial roots (as is carefully argued for Ulwa); but apparently they cannot be adjectives – at least this is suggested to F&KG by languages with largish adjective classes such as English and Hebrew. (Verbal PC lexemes remain unexamined.) What calls for an explanation then is why there is such a gap – and F&KG are probably right that this question has not been posed before, let alone be answered. Their answer is that the essence of being a true adjective is to be able to serve the purpose of adnominal modification (or attribution), and the semantics of adnominal modification essentially is “subsective strengthening”. (Predicative-only and non-subsective adjectives are explained away as not seriously affecting this generalisation.) Now, if there were quality-denoting adjectives, they would fail to non-trivially strengthen their head nouns, because these, characterising sets of individuals, would by their modifiers be mapped onto the empty set by definition, with the domain of portions of qualities (denoted by PC possessive adjectives) and the domain of sets of individuals (denoted by their head nouns) being disjoint. The set-theoretic way meanings are explicated here, having quality-denoting PC adjectives would thus be useless for the core business of this word class; but languages (well, their speakers) prefer their lexicons and grammars to be useful, and

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\(^3\) It is only the idea, entertained in some circles, that plain basic adjectives themselves are derived from possessive structures that F&KG are not prepared to countenance.
they therefore avoid meaning-word class matchings that would only produce semantic garbage in attribution.

To the extent that it was their model-theoretic way of doing semantics that led F&KG on a path where two findings were beckoning as a prize – (i) PCs, if conceptualised as quality-denoting, must be expressed through possessive rather than predicative morphosyntax; (ii) unlike individual-characterising PCs, occurring in ordinary predicative as well as in attributive construction and free to join all major word classes, quality-denoting PCs will not be members of the word class of adjectives – presumably success can be claimed for this approach to semantics: it can analytically deal with and arguably make some kind of sense of a particular issue of structural diversity and unity across languages. But does this also mean progress in typology? Here one would have to ask, first, whether the findings presented by F&KG are true and their arguments are valid, and second, whether their questions and answers are interesting or even important (presupposing they are novel: (ii) probably is, in essence; (i) probably isn’t). I suspect neither answer is unquestionably affirmative.

On the truth and validity side, I would for instance question whether being quality-denoting as such really condemns PC expressions to incongruity when modifying nouns and therefore to uselessness. Is the semantic function of modifiers in compounds not equally that of subsective strengthening? And do quality-denoting nouns (5a) not serve this function just like individual-characterising PC adjectives do (5b)?

(5) a. wisdom tooth, power hierarchy, pride parade (sense of pride, if this is a head-initial compound)
   b. wise man (‘sage’), [-ful derivatives like powerful don’t compound], Proud Boys (far-right US men’s organisation)

Which seems to me to throw doubt on F&KG’s rationale, semantic in nature, for the non-existence of quality-denoting adjectives.

Further, I’d like to see the evidence broadened and the argument strengthened that possessive morphosyntax is categorically precluded for individual-characterising PC adjectives. Notice that in languages which have a BE/HAVE contrast among auxiliaries and the selection between them is a matter of the semantics of the predicate
volitionality, unaccusative/unergative, telicity etc.), predicative adjectives indeed pick BE, while participles have a choice depending on meaning. Nonetheless, there are instances of adjectives and similar predicates that, often like corresponding resultative participles, also permit HAVE; German is a language where this can be observed:

(6) a.  
\[ \textit{Die Gallier haben genug} \]
the Gauls have enough (in both senses: ‘to have enough of something’ and ‘to be fed up’)

b.  
\[ \textit{Der Laden hat noch offen/auf} \] (cf. ... hat noch geöffnet)
the shop has still open/up (cf. ... has still opened)

c.  
\[ \textit{Die Angestellten haben heute frei} \]
the employees have today free (‘have a day off’)

d.  
\[ \textit{Die Angestellten haben (es) weit ins Büro} \]
the employees have (it) far to the office

e.  
\[ \textit{Wie spät hat Opa (es) auf seiner Taschenuhr?} \]
how late does granddad have (it) on his pocket watch?

f.  
\[ \textit{Die Gallier haben *(es) satt/eilig/gemütlich} \]
the Gauls have it sated (‘are fed up with it’)/urgent (‘are rushing something’)/cosy

This is not necessarily an objection to F&KG, but more something of a hint. In German and probably other languages, there are not many such PC adjectives (in English there seem to be none),\(^4\) and at least one, genug (probably also auf in (6b)), is dubiously adjectival and perhaps more of an adverb. In cases like (6f), a productive group, the adjectives are predicated not of the subject, but of an object (non-specific es, but specific object NPs are also possible), suggesting some kind of small-clause and zero-copula analysis; in other cases, such as (6d) and (6e), non-specific es is optional. With

\(^4\)\textit{Fertig} ‘finished, ready’ is not one of them. When Giovanni Trapattoni, about to be sacked as coach of Bayern München, once famously concluded a furious press conference after another lost football match with the sentence \textit{Ich habe fertig}, he was misled by the way he would have put it in his native Italian, \textit{Ho finito} – but unlike \textit{finito} German \textit{fertig} isn’t a participle, and there is in fact no good verbal way of putting it at all in German.
most of these predicates the BE copula is also possible – but such HAVE/BE contrasts come with semantic contrasts, sometimes subtle and sometimes stark:

(7)  
\begin{itemize}
  \item a. *Die Gallier sind genug*  
      the Gauls are enough  
  \item b. *Der Laden ist noch offen/auf* (cf. *... ist noch geöffnet*)  
      the shop is still open/up (cf. *... is still opened*)  
  \item c. *Die Geiseln sind wieder frei*  
      the hostages are free again  
  \item d. *Der Weg ins Büro ist weit*  
      the way to the office is long  
  \item e. *Wie spät ist es?*  
      how late is it?  
  \item f. *Die Gallier sind satt/eilig/gemütlich*  
      the Gauls are sated/in a hurry/cheerful
\end{itemize}

Intriguingly, it is only the predicative meanings activated by the BE copula which recur when the same PC words are used attributively:

(8)  
\begin{itemize}
  \item a. *Es waren Gallier genug/genug Gallier da*  
      there were Gauls enough there  
  \item b. *der offene Laden, das offene Fenster*  
      the open shop, the open window  
      *das Fenster hat offen* is completely out  
  \item c. *die freien Geiseln/*Angestellten*  
      the free hostages/*employees*  
  \item d. *der weite Weg; *die weiten Angestellten*  
      the long way; *the far employees*  
  \item e. *die späte Stunde; der späte Opa*  
      the late hour; the late-coming granddad/someone having become a granddad late in life  
  \item f. *die satten/eiligen/gemütlichen Gallier*  
      the sated/hasty/cheerful Gauls
\end{itemize}
Thus, even though haben isn’t synchronically the most transparently and pervasively possessive of verbs, there is a pattern here, roughly as sensed by F&KG, of attribution being indeed inconsistent with even a whiff of possessive potential in PC lexemes.

Parenthetically, I’ve in vain been checking grammars of German for enlightenment on haben-adjectives; so, F&KG may have a point when they emphasise (p. 35) that their two typological explananda – possessive morphosyntax for certain PCs; distributional and word-class restriction on these same PCs – have only emerged from their particular theoretical approach: there are limits on what can be gotten out of reference grammars (even combined with linguistically-informed native head-scratching) in our quest for typological generalisations.

As their explananda were born from theory, however, what could have been gotten out of the typological discourse for F&KG is a warning not to reify labels such as “adjective”. Word class labels abbreviate morphosyntactic (perhaps even including phonological) repertoires of lexemes, and at least since Locker (1951) there has been a growing awareness that PCs are never wholly sui generis. They always share parts of their repertoires with non-PC lexemes, labelled “nouns” (thing concepts) and “verbs” (action and state concepts), with either the one share or the other predominant in individual languages. The word class label “adjective” is meaningfully employed only when there is something, some very few and small things perhaps, about their grammar that is distinctive. What is subject to variation, within and across languages, are these elementary grammatical traits and the ways they are interconnected (perhaps implicationally, ensuring predictability) as parts of whole repertoires. Perhaps as a result of their way of doing semantics, F&KG seem determined to always go for categorical higher-level distinctions even when the data they examine suggest considerable non-discreteness. Bantu languages are well-known for their PC words, coming in several subclasses of adjectives, being generally on the nouny side; but in Basaá there is one subclass which is especially nouny, having its own inherent noun class just like thing-concepts do and actually taking precedence over thing-concepts in controlling noun class agreement (Hyman, Jenks, & Makasso 2013):

(9)  

\[
\begin{array}{lllll}
\text{min-langá} & \text{mí} & \text{di-nuni} & \text{mini} & / \; *\text{tíní} \\
\text{CL4-black} & \text{CL}4 & \text{CL13-birds} & \text{CL4.these} & / \; \text{CL13.these}
\end{array}
\]
On F&KG’s analysis (pp. 78–80), these PC lexemes have individual-characterising semantics, with the contrast to quality-denotation a categorical one, and by word class they are nouns – but it’s only their wholesale labels that are forcing such a categorical choice, while their source, Hyman et al. (2013), is more nuanced and refers to colour and other PC lexemes in constructions like (9) as “nominal adjectives”, which have undergone a syntactic operation of “predicate reversal” to gain them syntactic headhood. Such reversals are also common in other languages (e.g., Malchukov 2000, Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2003), with word class distinctions usually more marked than in Basáá, and derivational morphology underlining reversals of values depending on the syntactic construal of a PC:

(10) a. a beauti-ful girl, a profligate man, a monstrous painting, a hell-ish mess
    b. a beauty of a girl, a profligac-y of a man, a monstros-ity of a painting,
       a hell of a mess

It will depend on your own typological interests just how interesting or even important you’ll find F&KG’s findings. There has been typological work on semantic contrasts motivating word class choice for PCs between adjective and verb: Wierzbicka (1995) and Pustet (2000) come to mind. It would be interesting to see how formal semantics is leading us on a path forward here; but you won’t see it in the book under review. Also, realising that not all PCs are lexically and grammatically alike, typologists have long been facing the challenge to make sense of the differential behaviour of subsets of PC in word class affinity. Thus, some PCs are more likely to show distinctive adjectival grammar (PCs for size and dimensions and for age, in particular) than others (such PC for human propensities or material, prone to side with action/state-or thing-concepts). Some are more likely than others to be expressed through basic, non-derived lexical items, sometimes with identical and sometimes with different directions of derivation across languages:5 cf. English beauti-ful, courage-ous,

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5 If basic lexical representations are categorically un(der)specified, a possibility one should perhaps envisage even for languages where most PCs lexemes are specified, there won’t be such derivational asymmetries.
adjectives derived from basic abstract nouns *beauty, courage, German Schön-heit, Tapfer-heit*, abstract nouns derived from basic adjectives *schön, tapfer*, with adjective *mut-ig* from abstract noun *Mut* going the other direction despite near-synonymy; English adjective *coward-ly* and abstract noun *coward-ice* derived from basic concrete noun *coward*, German concrete and abstract nouns *Feig-ling* and *Feig-heit* derived from basic adjective *feig*; with PCs for size and dimensions and for age apparently showing less language-internal and crosslinguistic variability in this respect than subjective-evaluation and especially human-propensity PCs. However limited current typological success here, to explain which particular semantic subsets of PCs will receive which particular lexical and grammatical treatment in which particular languages is a challenge formal semantics has yet to recognise and embrace. Perhaps these drudges of typologists will be forgiven when they aren’t thrilled to bits to learn that quality-denoting PCs, of type <p,t>, can never and nowhere be adjectives.

Acknowledgement

I’d like to register my indebtedness in adjectival and related thinking to friends and acquaintances mentioned here: Emmon Bach (†), D. N. S. Bhat, Larry Hyman, Masha Koptjevskaja-Tamm, Andrej Malchukov, Regina Pustet (†), Jan Rijkhoff, and Leon Stassen.

References


