Adjectives in verb formation: some semantic issues

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Typically, verbs formed on adjectival bases are associated with a causative pattern of interpretation. Deadjectival verbs ending in -iser and -ifier in French, e.g. simplifier l’exercice (simplify the exercise) and électrifier la région (electrify the region), follow this general pattern, but also reveal the need for a finer characterisation. In this talk, we take a closer look at the relation between the quality that is expected to be contributed by the adjectival base and the entity, linked to the event by the thematic role of Theme/Patient, that is expected to bear such a quality. This line of analysis allows us to highlight a number of semantic issues.

Deadjectival verbs are built on predicative uses of adjectives. The verb-formation stem brings in a dynamic component of meaning that contrasts with the frequent use of adjectives in stative predication and that cannot be cancelled, because deadjectival verbs name a change. Such a dynamic step of acquisition may emphasize the transient aspect of the quality the Patient acquires ex novo or to a higher degree, triggering the inference that it is accidental.

The static and definitional vs dynamic and accidental opposition helps us explain the specialisation of adjective vs adjectival past participle pairs, cf. féminine (feminine) vs féminisé, (with a higher number of women) and in particular the ‘latent’ vs ‘in action’ attributes characterised by électrique (electric) vs électrifié (electrified).

The debate on the telic characterisation of degree achievement verbs can also be enriched by considerations on the dynamic step of acquisition proper to deadjectival verbs. Not all cases describe transitions from ¬P to P, some apply to changes between degrees of P. We discuss data attesting the impact of the internal structure of the denotation of the Patient on the aspectual properties of the sentence, when the Patient is a plural or collective entity.

Last, simple adjectives, e.g. simple, easily conform to the traditional causative pattern, but derived adjectives tend to be understood as expressing clusters of attributes whose components can exhibit i) elective affinities with modified nouns, e.g. industrial fishing vs industrial country, and Patients of verbs, e.g. industrialise the fishing vs industrialise a country, or ii) frozen/stereotypical/rigid selection, e.g. tropicalise.