Detecting the effects of a covert aP layer in polysynthetic words in Inuit

Claim: I argue that a subset of the predicates classified as verbs in the Eskimo-Aleut literature are in fact adjectives (or, acategorial roots merged with a little a categorizing head). While past research has claimed that these languages lack adjectives, evidence for the status of adjectives in Inuit is drawn from a number of syntactic phenomena across several dialects which converge on the same set of predicates. In particular, these adjectives exhibit distinct patterns of nominalization and mood marking that differentiate them from stative intransitive verbs.

This analysis provides a unified explanation for a variety of disparate syntactic phenomena across geographically distant dialects. Further, it supports Dixon’s (2004) and Baker’s (2004) claims that adjectives are universal. Moreover, this paper illustrates the danger of accepting surface variation at face value (contra Evans & Levinson 2009) (see Matthewson to appear, inter alia).

Background: The traditional description of Eskimo-Aleut languages in the literature divides words into three classes: nouns, verbs, and “particles” (see Bergsland 1997 for Aleut, Jacobson 1995 for Central Alaskan Yup’ik, de Reuse 1994 for Central Siberian Yupik, Lowe 1985, 2001 for Siglit, Dorais 2010 for Inuktitut, Sadock 2003 for West Greenlandic, inter alia). This classification corresponds to the distribution of inflectional morphology in the language: “noun words” take case and possessor marking, “verb words” inflect for tense, person, mood, negation, etc., and “particles” don’t inflect.

At a basic level, the noun-verb contrast is quite correct—the language clearly distinguishes between nouns and verbs, as argued by Sadock (1999:385), who shows that nouns can combine directly with case and possessor marking, but verbs cannot. Conversely, verbs can combine directly with mood marking, negation, modals, etc., while nouns cannot.

But the idea that nouns, verbs, and particles are the only lexical categories derives from the Lexicalist Hypothesis (Selkirk 1982, inter alia): essentially, that morphological rules build words and then syntax manipulates these fully-built words. For Inuit, however, this would mean that single-word utterances such as (1) are simply “verbs”:

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Evidence from nominalization: While verbs and adjectives pattern together in most respects, only adjectives may be nominalized by the participial mood and incorporated into the copula before combining with a verb-incorporating modal. Genuine verbs must combine directly with modals:

1Within a Distributed Morphology framework, if we assume that roots are category neutral, this is the claim that Inuit possesses a little a categorizing head that combines with roots.
Similarly, Dorais (1998:114-115) notes that in the Nunavik dialect of Arctic Quebec these same adjectival predicates (which he calls “qualifying name giving words”) cannot take 1st or 2nd person agreement or moods other than participial without first undergoing nominalisation:

(4) aupar-(*tu-u)-vu-q  
red-(*PART-COP)-INDIC-3SG  
‘is red’

(5) piu-(*ju-u)-ju-nga  
good-(*PART-COP)-PART-1SG  
‘I am good.’

Evidence from mood marking: Further evidence for distinguishing adjectives from verbs comes from the Siglit dialect where verbs—but not adjectives—take an alternative exponent of participial mood conditioned by 1st and 3rd person agreement: -jua/-tua- instead of the -ju/-tu- form that occurs on 2nd person verbs and with adjectives across all persons, Lowe (2001):

(6) pukta-jua-q  
float-PART-3SG  
‘is floating’

(7) sinik-tua-q  
leave-PART-3SG  
‘is sleeping’

(8) nakuu-ju-q  
good-PART-3SG  
‘is fine, good’

(9) ipik-tu-q  
sharp-PART-3SG  
‘is sharp’

Additional evidence (not shown) is drawn from compatibility of predicates with the comparative marker -tqi- in the Kangiryuarmiut dialect and the predicate negator -it- in the Aivilik dialect.

Discussion: Crucially, the phenomena presented above all converge on the same set of adjectival predicates, across dialects that are geographically disparate (i.e., across the Canadian Arctic). Equally important is that this patterning cannot be reduced to aspectual differences, as both verb and adjective classes contain stative predicates, and within the adjective class we find both stage level and individual level predicates. Thus, the language possesses adjectives, adding further evidence to their potential universality, but these adjectives are only found within larger polysynthetic words, explaining why they have always been lumped together with verbs.

I propose that Inuit employs a phonologically null a categorizing head that combines with roots to create adjectives, but which on its own cannot license a phonological word (following Compton & Pittman 2010 that Inuit DP and CP phases spell out as words). These aPs then merge with a little v or a phonologically null copula, thereby explaining their predominantly verbal behaviour. The inability of these adjectives to directly take particular mood and agreement morphology in some dialects can thus be attributed to this little v or null copula being defective or to selectional restrictions of higher functional projections. The existence of a null copula with adjectival predicates is supported by the fact that in the Siglit dialect the overt copula patterns with adjectives with respect to the exponent of participial mood, while other stative verbs do not.

Finally, this paper further supports the universality of adjectives proposed by Baker (2004) and Dixon (2004), but recasts this claim as the cross-linguistic presence of a little a categorizing head.