

ADJECTIVES AS ADJECTIVES IN SRANAN:  
A REPLY TO SEBBA

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In Seuren (1981), and also Seuren (1983), I defended the view that Sranan adjectives are indeed adjectives, with an underlying copula verb representable as an abstract semantic BE that manifests itself, as far as adjectives are concerned, as either  $\emptyset$  (a zero realization) or *de*. This view runs counter to what is more or less standardly accepted as the correct analysis for creole languages in general and Sranan in particular (Voorhoeve 1957, 1962), i.e., that, at least in predicative position, what we take to be adjectives are in fact verbs. The question has some theoretical importance in the light of what appears to be a general give-and-take relationship between verbs and adjectives in the languages of the world. Some languages are adjective-prone, whereas others are verb-prone (which may result in the total absence of any separate category of adjectives, as in Mandarin Chinese). Often, what is a verb in one language comes out as an adjective in another. Thus, the English verbs *limp* or *squint* are translated as adjectives in many other languages (though English is not all that verb-prone).<sup>1</sup>

Prima facie the standard analysis seems to have a lot going for it, since, on superficial inspection, adjectives seem to behave like stative verbs. In "normal" cases, there is no overt copula in Sranan, and predicate adjectives appear to follow the regularities, as regards tensing as well as modal and aspectual modification, that are observed for stative verbs. My point, in the publications mentioned, is that this parallelism breaks down when the facts are inspected more closely. For there are cases where an overt copula (mostly *de*) is found, without any semantic difference from other cases where *de* is not allowed or not obligatory. It must be mentioned first that in some cases a copula verb *de* may occur, but with a semantic difference (Arends 1985). Compare for example:

- (1) a. A bun. 'That/he is OK.'  
 b. A de bun. 'He is doing all right.'

But apart from such variations, which are few in number and not of a general nature, there are regular and predictable alternations without any semantic difference, as in:

- (2) a. Mi futu no bigi so.  
 b. Mi futu no de so bigi.

both meaning 'My feet are not so big.' We find, moreover, sentences like:

- (3) a. A liba bradi. 'The river is wide.'  
 b. O bradi a liba de? 'How wide is the river?'  
 c. O bradi a liba bradi? 'How wide is the river?'  
 d. A liba musu bradi. 'The river must be wide.'  
 e. A liba musu de bradi. 'The river must be wide.'

These observations made me formulate the principle that Sranan has an underlying stative copula predicate "BE" which manifests itself as a zero morpheme ( $\emptyset$ ) when it finds itself in the position of a finite verb form and is followed directly by an adjective, but as *na* or *de* otherwise, in the same position.<sup>2</sup> When BE is infinitival, the use of *de* is optional when it is directly followed by an adjective; otherwise it is obligatory. This rule seemed to me simple and adequate. In fact, I found it hard to imagine that any serious objections could be made.<sup>3</sup> It came as a surprise to me that most creolists I spoke to about this were distinctly reluctant to accept my analysis. I was, therefore, pleasantly surprised when I saw the manuscript of Mark Sebba's article before publication in this issue of *JPCL*, and I am happy to seize the opportunity for a reply, for which I thank the editors.

In his paper, Sebba supports the view expressed by Arends (1985), that whenever *de* occurs with what I prefer to call adjectives, the adjective "deviates from the rule for stative verbs," either because uncontroversial stative verbs, like *lobi* ('love'), do not allow for "how" questions of the form (3b), or because verbs, including stative verbs, require adverbial modifiers to follow them and do not allow them to precede. On this analysis, (2a) is regular, since *bigi* is analyzed as a verb ('to be big'), and its adverbial modifier *so* follows after *bigi*. This analysis, however, makes it inevitable to assume that in (2b) the main verb is *de*, and *bigi* is an adjective. Sebba takes this idea up and gives substance to it by casting it in the form of a grammatical analysis of sufficient explicitness and precision to be the object of discussion.

In fact, Sebba defends the view that Sranan, unlike Chinese for example,

does have a separate category “Adjective,” but that this category is limited to certain structural positions in the sentence, excluding the position of predicate nominal. Only when used attributively, as in *den bigi futu* (‘the big feet’), or when preceded by (or as Sebba has it, as part of) an extent phrase (EP), as in *tu meter hey* (‘two meters high’), can they occur as adjectives. Otherwise they are verbs. According to Arends and Sebba, *bigi* is a verb in (2a) but an adjective in (2b); or *bradi* is a verb in (3a) and (3d), and the second occurrence in (3c), but it is an adjective in (3b), (3e), and the first occurrence of (3c). In order to support this analysis (which I find highly counterintuitive), Sebba posits that Sranan has the following rules (adapted from his 37 and 38):

(4) a.  $VP \rightarrow V + EP (= \text{Extent Phrase})$

b.  $EP \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{(pikinmoro)} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{someni (leysi)} \\ \text{numeral measurement} \end{array} \right\} \text{(moro)} \\ \text{so} \end{array} \right\} \text{ADJ}^4$

The second expansion, (4b), is an attempt to capture the phrase-structure properties of the Sranan Extent Phrase. This attempt may not be complete or may be otherwise inadequate, but we shall consider such details as irrelevant here. The main point of Sebba’s analysis is that the EP contains an adjective, and that this adjective occurs at the far right. If V, as expanded from VP according to (4a), is identical with ADJ of (4b), then ADJ may be deleted. Thus (assuming that the proper place of the negation *no* is just to the left of V), *bigi* in (2a) is a verb, and the sentence has an underlying (but ungrammatical)

(5) \*Mi futu no bigi so bigi.

with the second *bigi* deleted. And in (2b) the main verb is *de*, with *bigi* as the adjective of the EP *so bigi*.

This analysis makes it possible to posit that EPs are always to the right of V, but to the left of ADJ, or rather, in Sebba’s formulation, with ADJ as their rightmost member. Sebba himself admits that *moro* (‘more’) can also occur to the left of V (in his analysis), as appears from (Sebba’s ([29]):

(6) A dagu moro bigi leki a trawan.  
 the dog more bigger than the other  
 ‘The dog is bigger than the other one.’

Yet he fails to provide a proper grammatical analysis for this case.

The arguments in favor of Sebba’s analysis can be summarized as fol-

lows. He stresses the fact that the analysis rules out, correctly:

- (7) a. \*Mi futu no de bigi so.  
 b. \*Mi futu no so bigi.  
 c. \*Mi futu no de bigi.

Moreover, he claims that the following pairs are all grammatical and that the members of each pair are semantically equivalent:

- (8) a. A liba bradi someni moro bradi leki a trawan.  
       the river wide so much more wide than the other one  
 b. A liba bradi someni more leki a trawan.  
       the river wide so much more than the other one  
 (9) a. A liba disi bradi feyfitentin meter bradi.  
       the river this wide fifty meters wide  
 b. A liba disi bradi feyfitentin meter.  
       the river this wide fifty meters

It is implied that further alternatives for (8) and (9) are provided by replacing the first occurrence of *bradi* in (8a) and (9a) by *de*.

Sebba finds further support for his analysis in what he calls “an obvious similarity in the syntactic behavior of Sranan stative verbs like *lobo* ‘like, love’ and predicate adjectives like *tranga* ‘strong’.” This “similarity” is illustrated by the fact that both allow for postposed EPs:

- (10) a. Rudi lobi dagu so.  
        Rudy love dogs so  
 b. Rudy tranga so.  
        Rudy strong so

Then, there is the well-known fact, mentioned at the outset, that predicate adjectives follow, by and large, the rules for tensing, aspects, and modalities found for stative verbs. Thirdly, both adjectives and stative verbs allow for inchoative uses where they become non-stative verbs (*e lobi* ‘begin to love’; *e tranga* ‘begin to be strong’).

Let me reply to the latter threefold argument straight away. The postposing of EPs is a privilege not so much of stative verbs as of verbs in general, as is claimed by Sebba himself in rule (4a), and as appears from cases like:

- (11) Rudi e bari so. (‘Rudy shouts/is shouting so hard.’)  
       Rudy PRES shout so

Moreover, in Sebba’s analysis an adjective must have been deleted after *so* in

(10a), in spite of the fact that there is no underlying form where ADJ after *so* is identical with *lobi*. Sebba fails entirely to provide even the slightest hint as to what might be taken to determine the deleting conditions in such cases. Of course, he may now claim that *so* in (10a) is not an EP, but then the point of the analogy is lost. This matter will be taken up again below.

The second parallel is, of course, well-known; it prompted the very idea that Sranan adjectives are verbs. My analysis is meant to override, in particular, the argument derived from this observation. The third parallel is, in fact, defective, and thus loses most if not all of its force. As is observed in Seuren (1981:1048), adjectives, but not stative verbs, allow for *causative* uses as well, for which reason they become, likewise, non-stative verbs, as appears from the use of *e*:

- (12) a. Alen e tranga yu.  
rain PRES strong you  
'Rain makes you strong.'
- b. \*Sopi e lobi yu a uma dati.  
booze PRES love you the woman that  
'Booze makes you love that woman.'

This phenomenon of lexical category switch would thus show that there is a difference between predicate adjectives and (stative) verbs, and would thereby speak against Sebba, instead of supporting him.

Further support is also sought in the well-known multifunctionality of Sranan words, and, more generally, of words in creole languages. By this is meant the phenomenon that adjectives also occur as nouns, verbs also as prepositions, etc. However, Sebba fails to mention the fact that when in a creole language, an adjective is used, say, as a noun of a certain class, or a verb as a preposition, the noun or the preposition are free to occupy the structural positions generally reserved for them. But in Sebba's analysis of adjectives/verbs, what he considers to be adjectives are barred from the predicate nominal position, although that is a normal position for adjectives: in that position they become verbs (but if the adjectival verb is infinitival, then it may be verbal, but also adjectival). It thus seems that the appeal to multifunctionality is both specious and spurious.

Then, Sebba claims, following Bailey (1966), that in Jamaican Creole adjectives are also verbs in predicate position. He quotes Labov (1982) who relies on Bailey to support his own argument regarding the proper analysis of the Black English Vernacular (BEV) copula. Labov observes that in BEV

there is “a very strong tendency to delete the copula before an adjective, coupled with a weak tendency to contract it in the same context” (in Sebba’s own words). This, says Labov, “apparently reflects the Creole origin of the dialect.” He quotes Bailey (1966) to the effect that “adjectives never show a copula, since they are basically intransitive stative verbs” in Jamaican Creole.

This argument is curious, since at the beginning of his paper Sebba criticizes me on grounds of “a more fundamental theoretical objection . . . that rules which obligatorily delete an underlying element in all but a specified subset of cases should be valued less highly than rules which do not involve such obligatory deletions.” Apparently, Sebba is quite content with Labov’s *optional* deletion (or contraction) of the copula in all but a specified subset of cases, but fundamentally unhappy with what he considers to be my *obligatory* deletion rule, in all but a specified subset of cases. I wonder what theory Sebba has in mind when he speaks of a fundamental theoretical objection in this context.

Apart from this, it must be noted that Sebba misrepresents my position. First, in my “spelling rule” for BE there is no question of *deletion* of the copula, but of a zero realization, which is quite a different matter. Moreover, the “spelling” *de* is presented (Seuren 1981:1064) as the *default* case: In all cases where BE is not realized as either zero or *na*, *de* is used. Thus, the “specified subset of cases” is formulated for the zero realization and for the realization as *na*, but not for *de*.

I am not aware of any serious universal theory of human language that would rule out an analysis of the type presented by me for the Sranan copula. It must be noted that it is common for zero realizations to alternate, under certain specified conditions, with overt realizations. For the copula I found a parallel case in Mauritian Creole, where the copula is realized as zero when it is not VP-final, except when followed by embedded VP or S; otherwise, i.e., in the default case, it is realized as *ete*.<sup>5</sup> Here, the conditions for zero realization are very different from those found for the Sranan copula; yet the rule structure is the same.

Sebba’s whole analysis seems characterized by a desire to maintain as much as possible a verbal definition for adjectives, but why such a definition should be so desirable does not become clear. Let us inspect further details. First, according to Sebba (and Arends), adjectives with the copula *de* are “real” adjectives but without *de* they are verbs. They find support for this in the absence of WH-questions of the form:

- (13) \*O lobi a de yu?  
 how love he PRES you.  
 'How does he love you?'

The relevance of this argument escapes me, since, as is observed by both Arends and Sebba, (13) is equally ungrammatical without *de*. Moreover, although in (3c) the second *bradi* is a verb, in Sebba's analysis, one still does not find:

- (14) \*O lobi a lobi yu?  
 how love he love you  
 'How does he love you?'

This observation simply reinforces the case against verbal status for predicate adjectives. Adjectives, as a class, deviate from verbs in that they allow, if gradable, for WH-modification in the degree adverbial: 'how big?', 'how rich?', in Sranan as well as in most or all other languages.

Sebba's examples as given here in (8a) and (9a), with double occurrence of the adjective and an extent adverbial in between, are crucial to his analysis. Yet all such cases, including also, for example

- (15) Yu futu bigi so bigi.  
 Your feet big so big  
 'Your feet are só lárge.'

distinguish themselves in various ways from their counterparts with the second occurrence deleted or the first occurrence replaced by *de*. First, the double occurrence cases do not allow for ordinary sentence negation:

- (16) a. \*A liba no bradi someni moro bradi leki a trawan.  
 b. \*A liba disi no bradi feyfitentin meter bradi.  
 c. \*Yu futu no bigi so bigi. (compare [5] above)

Likewise, although Sranan has echo-questions like (17), it lacks any like (18):

- (17) A liba de o bradi?  
 The river BE how wide  
 'The river is hów wide?'
- (18) \*A liba bradi o bradi?

There seems, moreover, to be a semantic difference as well, although I have not been able to check this out systematically with informants. If I am right, there is a semantic difference between sentences like (8a) and (8b), or

(9a) and (9b), or between (15) and (19a, b):

- (19) a. Yu futu bigi so. } ('Your feet are {that } large')  
 b. Yu futu de so bigi. }

In (8b), (9b), (19a, b), the adjective can be used in what is often called a "neutral or "non-oriented" way. That is, in (8b) or (9b) there is no necessary suggestion that the river in question is, in fact, wide by normal standards. And in (19a, b) there is no necessary implication that the addressee's feet are, in fact, big as feet go. These sentences can be used simply to indicate a measure or an extent, without any evaluation. They can, of course, also be used to express a positive evaluation of width or size, with an appropriate intonation, but they need not be. When they are negated, as in:

- (20) A liba disi no bradi feyfitentin meter.

only the non-oriented meaning is preserved: 'This river isn't fifty meters wide', without any possible implication, or denial of such, that the river is, in fact, wide. Likewise, the sentences

- (21) a. Yu futu no bigi so.  
 b. Yu futu no de so bigi.

can only be a denial of size indication. There is no implication, nor any denial of such an implication, that the addressee's feet are, in fact, big. In the same way, when a "how-adj." question is asked, only the neutral meaning can be activated. Now, in those sentences where there is a double occurrence of the adjective, as in (8a), (9a), (15), apparently, only the positively oriented meaning is possible: 'Your feet are só (terribly) large.' And here no negation seems possible. To make sure that these observations are correct, one would have to get a sufficiently uniform reply from informants that (22a) is coherent but (22b) incoherent or illogical:

- (22) a. Yu futu bigi so, ma a no bigi den bigi.  
           your feet big so but is not big they big  
 b. !Yu futu bigi so bigi, ma a no bigi den bigi.

The former means: 'That is the size of your feet, but they are not really large,' whereas the (b)-sentence yields: 'Your feet are só (terribly) large, but they are not really large.'

Note that this interpretation, which is necessarily positively oriented, does not occur with "how-adj." questions of the type (3c): there, the second adjective is simply a copy left behind of the original, which has been moved



to front position, as is common in many West African languages. This phenomenon is similar to the typical Caribbean Creole way of forming cleft sentences with either the verb or the adjective clefted (probably due to substrate influences from Kwa languages):

- (23) a. Na fufuru a boy fufuru en.  
           is steal the boy steal it  
           'The boy has **STOLEN** it!'
- b. A no fufuru a boy fufuru en.  
           is not steal the boy steal it  
           'The boy hasn't stolen it.'
- c. Na bigi yu futu bigi.  
           is big your feet big  
           'Big is what your feet are!'
- d. A no bigi yu futu bigi.  
           is not big your feet big  
           'It isn't big what your feet are.'

In all these cases the simplest analysis is to say that the constituent that has been clefted out has left a copy behind--or, if a different perspective is taken, that the clefted constituent has inserted a copy into the WH-clause.

At any rate, it does not seem to be a good idea to let a rule generate an adjective at the end of an Extent Phrase, as (4b) does, and to allow such Extent Phrases to follow verbally used adjectives as well as other verbs, including *de*, with the possibility of deleting the (second) adjective under certain conditions of identity with the verb. We have already seen that such deletion is problematic in cases like (10a) or (11). An immediate answer might be to posit a uniformly underlying semantic element "much" for such cases. And indeed, next to (10a) and (11) we find:

- (24) a. Rudi lobi dagu someni.  
           Rudy love dogs somuch
- b. Rudi e bari someni.  
           Rudy PRES shout somuch

But, in Sebba's analysis, there must still have been an adjective at the end, since *someni* is part of the adverbial extent modification of ADJ in rule (4b). And now it is really impossible to specify an adjective in any non-arbitrary way.

Notice also that the following is ungrammatical, though admitted by Sebba's rules:

(25) \*A liba bradi someni bradi.

Also, one would expect to find

(26) \*O a liba bradi?

from the equally ungrammatical

(27) \*A liba bradi o?

It is true that we find *Fa a liba bradi?* (Sebba's [7]), where *fa* could conceivably be seen as a morphophonemic variant for *o* in this position, but then such a construction fits in equally well with my analysis.<sup>6</sup>

More importantly, Sebba's analysis fails to account for cases like (3d, e) above, where we find an optional *de* in infinitival position preceding the adjective *bradi*. In order to account for such cases, Sebba would have to say that adjectives do not occur in predicate position, where they are "transformed" into verbs, except when the predicate position is infinitival, in which case it is either adjective or verb. But if the category switch were to be defined in this way, it would not only be strange, it would also still fail to account for sentences like

(28) A man musu de langa tu meter.  
the man must be tall two meters

which, in Sebba's analysis, must be derived from

(29) ?A man musu de langa tu meter langa.

In order to remedy this defect, a rule must be invented allowing adjectives to be followed by an EP of the sort specified in rule (4b), but only for adjectives following *de* in infinitival position. Such a rule is clearly ad hoc, invented solely for the purpose of patching up a leaking analysis.

A further serious problem is posed by comparatives like (6) above (Sebba's [29]), where *moro bigi* occurs without *de*. If this is to be accommodated in Sebba's analysis, it must either be postulated that *moro* may occur before V, if V has an adjectival alternative, or it must be stipulated that (6) is derived from underlying

(30) A dagu <sub>v</sub>[moro bigi] leki a trawan <sub>Adj</sub>[moro bigi]

with <sub>Adj</sub>[moro bigi] optionally deleted, just as is stipulated for "ordinary" adjectives in Sebba's analysis. But the former solution is a prototype of adhocery, and the latter is factually incorrect since, as a Sranan sentence, (30) is grossly ungrammatical. In my analysis there is no problem: we simply

stipulate that *moro* followed by an adjective yields, again, an adjective. In Sebba's analysis it yields factual incorrectness, as we have just seen, but in my analysis such complications do not arise.

This is an interesting case since, as Arends informs me, in older variants of Sranan *moro* + Adjective is regularly preceded by *de*, just as my analysis predicts if we do not stipulate that *moro* + Adjective yields, once again, an adjective, and *moro* is taken as an adverb. What seems to be happening is, apparently, the beginning of a process of morphologization, where *moro* is developing into a comparative prefix, comparable to the comparative suffix *-er* in English, yielding a comparative adjective. By the simple postulation of this incipient form of morphology, both the modern and the ancient variety of Sranan are effortlessly accommodated in my analysis, a property which Sebba's proposal clearly lacks.

The upshot is that the alleged parallel between predicate adjectives and stative verbs breaks down on closer inspection. The analysis is greatly simplified by giving up the idea, first, that some superficial resemblances are indicative of categorical identity, and by stipulating that adjectives are adjectives whenever they occur in adjectival positions, including the post-copula position; second, that the copula, when in finite verb position, is obligatorily realized as zero when immediately followed, in surface structure, by an adjective, and optionally realized as zero, in such an environment, when it is in infinitival position; and third, that extent modifiers, by and large, follow verbs, but either follow or precede adjectives (except *o* 'how?', which must precede its adjective). Set against this, Sebba's analysis not only strikes one as tortuous, but it also fails to account for the facts and does not seem to allow for satisfactory repair in this respect, as we have just seen. Given all this, I see as yet little merit in his proposal.

## NOTES

1) Note that English *limp*, besides being a verb, is also an adjective. The classic study for the interaction between adjectives and verbs is Dixon (1977).

2) *Na* as a copula only occurs as a finite verb in the present tense, when followed by NP (or by a clefted constituent). In non-finite positions, or in non-present tenses, it is replaced by *de*. Since we concentrate only on copula + Adjective constructions, we shall leave *na* out of consideration here.

3) I have been accused, in discussions about this topic, of taking a Eurocentric view and not letting "the language speak for itself." Since I am not aware of any typically European linguistic features in my argument, nor of any European language that follows the principles manifested by Sranan, I cannot take that criticism seriously.

- 4) *Pikinmoro* means 'almost'; *someni* is 'so much' or 'so many'; *leysi* is 'times'; *moro* is 'more'.
- 5) See my unpublished MS (1985) on Mauritian Creole.
- 6) Compare Italian *Quanto è largo il fiume?* 'How (much) wide is the river?', where the indubitably adjectival *largo* 'wide' is separated from the adverbial extent modification *quanto* 'how (much)'.

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