A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF ADJECTIVES IN NEWAR

KAZUYUKI KIRYU*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with adjectives in Newar, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Republic of Nepal. In previous studies, adjectives in Newar have been loosely defined based on semantic aspects of words without any rigorous criteria clearly distinguishing them from nouns and verbs. Since many words that may be identified as adjectives in Newar show similarities with verbs in that they inflect for tense/aspect, some scholars consider Newar to have no adjectives (Kölver 1977, Shakya 1999).

According to the national census of 2001, the number of speakers of Newar is around 840,000, and the majority of the speakers are located in the Kathmandu Valley. The genetic affiliation of the language continues to be disputed. There are a few varieties of the language other than the one spoken in Kathmandu City, although this is usually regarded as the standard variety. Within the Kathmandu Valley, there are two dialectal variations: Kathmandu/Patan dialects and Bhaktapur dialect. Another well-documented variety is Dolakha Newar, studied by Genetti (1994, 2007). Genetti (2006) recently reported another variety spoken in the Thautali area, close to Dolakha. She regards the Dolakha and Thautali varieties as consisting a linguistic subgroup of ‘Newaric’. Newaric also includes the Kathmandu Valley dialects as a peer subgroup.

* This is a revised and extended version of my paper presented at the 11th Himalayan Language Symposium held at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand in 2005. I’d like to express my gratitude to my two Newar consultants, Manik R. Shakya and Latā Shakya, from Patan. In the process of revising the draft of this paper, I received valuable comments and suggestions from Mark Turin and Bettina Zeisler. My special thanks to them. It goes without saying that any remaining mistakes are mine.

1 This language has been called ‘Newari’ in the literature, although this is now regarded as inappropriate since the denomination is based on the Nepali word. At present, many scholars use the term ‘Newar’ instead, although the formal denomination of the language is Nepāl Bhāṣā and the local denomination in the language is newā: bhāe. My transliteration of Newar basically follows the traditional transliteration scheme for the devanagari script, except that nasalisations are phonetically represented and that ae and ōe represent the sounds /eː/ and /æː/ respectively.
Typologically speaking, Newar is a head-final language with dependent-marking: the basic word order is SOV and modifiers precede heads. The case system is of the ergative-absolutive type and verbs agree with the subject, showing a conjunct and disjunct dichotomy (Hale 1980).

The main purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to establish clear criteria for verbs, nouns and adjective classes in Newar, arguing for a class for adjectives and proposing three distinct sub-classes based on morphosyntactic criteria along the lines proposed by Dixon (2004); second, to provide a detailed morphosyntactical and semantic description of these adjectives. The data used in the analysis were elicited from two consultants living in Patan, and are all drawn from my Newar story database.

2. ADJECTIVE CLASS

Unlike nouns and verbs, it is sometimes difficult to define a prototype for adjectives. Typologically speaking, adjectives are apt to formally share properties found in either nouns or verbs, constituting an ambivalent category between the two. This gives rise to the naming of types of adjectives based on how much they resemble nouns or verbs, such as ‘adjectival nouns’, ‘adjectival verbs’ and so forth. Some scholars even dispute the existence of an adjective class. Furthermore, it has been said that some languages lack adjectives at all, and that the concepts that adjectives convey, for example, those in English, are lexicalised as verbs or nouns.

However, Dixon (1982, 2004) argues for a distinct class of adjectives in every language. He suggests that ‘there are always some grammatical criteria—sometimes rather subtle—for distinguishing the adjective class from other word classes’ (Dixon 2004: 1). He goes on to discuss the primary divisions of adjectives in terms of grammatical properties, as in (1) below. The first parameter relates to the possibility of functioning as a predicate itself (I/II). The second parameter relates to the morphological possibilities of adjectives within a NP (A/B).

(1) Types of adjectives by grammatical properties
   (Dixon 2004: 14-15)

   I. Adjectives which can function as intransitive predicate. These take some or all of the morphological processes and/or syntac-