

# The semantic space for adjectives

Jingting Ye<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fudan University, yejingting@fudan.edu.cn, <sup>2</sup> MPI-EVA, jingting\_ye@eva.mpg.de

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The adjective is a heterogeneous category and displays a great cross-linguistic variation. This study attempts to identify the semantic space of adjectives using Neighbor-net Analysis (Bryant & Moulton, 2004) based on a systematic large-scale typological study. More specifically, this paper focuses on the phenomenon of differential coding of adjectives, which is also known as “split adjectives” (Wetzer 1992, 1996, Stassen 1997) or “adjective classes” (Dixon 2004b). The differential coding phenomenon is typically shown by either structural coding (e.g. relativizer, copula) or inflectional potential (e.g. gender, case). For instance, in Jarawara *bit* ‘small’ occurs with a gender marker, but *botee* ‘old’ occurs without a gender marker, as illustrated in (1).

- (1) Jarawara (Arawan, South America)
- a. o-tati       kone bit-**e**  
1SG-head hair small-FEM  
‘my little head hears’ (Dixon, 2004a, 338)
  - b. jobe         bit-**i**  
house.MASC small-MASC  
‘small house’ (Dixon, 2004a, 452)
  - c. Jara         botee  
Branco.MASC old  
‘the old Branco’ (Dixon, 2004a, 338)

In particular, I have chosen 28 property concepts as semantic targets and investigated their morpho-syntactic behaviour in attributive and predicative functions by consulting grammatical descriptions and dictionaries. The sample consists of 80 geographically and genealogically diverse languages from all continents.

The result is presented in Figure 1, which shows the semantic space of adjectives. Interestingly, property concepts cluster into smaller groups on the Figure and these clusters to some extent coincide with the six traditional semantic types proposed by Dixon (1982): age, dimension, colour, value, physical property and human propensity. Furthermore, the six semantic types are different in their degree of internal coherence, represented by different shapes in the semantic space.

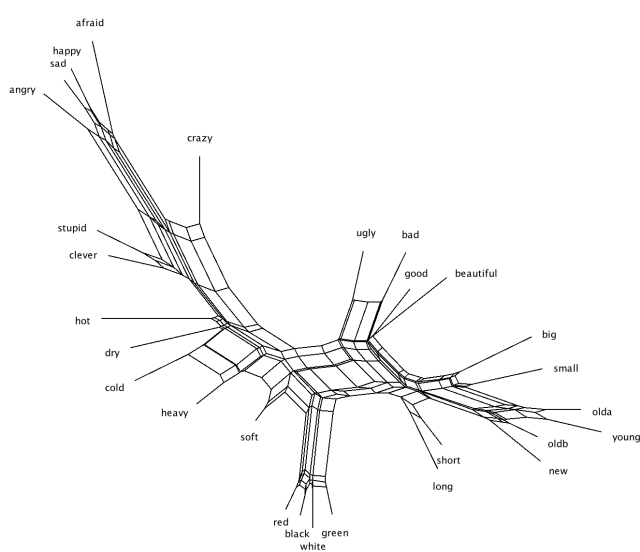


Fig. 1: The Neighbournet analysis of property concepts

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