

THE SYNTAX OF MODAL ADJECTIVES: MOVEMENT AND REANALYSIS

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I examine the structure of adjectival phrases in English containing modal adjectives such as *potential*, *alleged*, *possible*, cf. taxonomy of Partee (*Privative Adjectives: Subjective plus Coercion*, 2009). I propose that the distinctive behavior of these adjectives results from the underlying structure of the adjectival phrases.

Modal adjectives are non-intersective: *John is a probable winner* does not entail that *John is probable* and *John is a winner*, but that the event JOHN IS A WINNER is probable. The adjective *probable* being predicated of the event, not of the entity JOHN, such adjectives cannot be used in predicative position to qualify entities: *alleged murderer* vs. **John is alleged*. I explain this behavior by the fact that modal adjectives combine with events, not entities, and are of semantic type *st*: $\llbracket \text{alleged} \rrbracket = \lambda e_s[e \text{ is alleged}]$. This suggests that such adjectives have event arguments (complement CPs), therefore underlyingly AdjP is not an adjunct of NP; in this case, the adjectives combine not by predicate modification, but by function application (as defined by Heim & Kratzer: *Semantics in Generative Grammar*, 1997).

A clue to the structure of the adjectival phrases is provided by the history of these adjectives: In English, they started to be used to describe entities no earlier than the 18th-19th centuries (*possible*: 1736; *probable*: 1868, etc.); before then, the modal adjectives described only events, e.g. *probable victory*. The use of modal adjectives with entities appears to reflect a historically late phenomenon of movement of the DP denoting an entity out of the complement CP to check Case, followed by reanalysis. In the pre-movement period, all sentences with modal adjectives were like (1); once movement was allowed sentences like (2) became possible as well:

- (1) *It is probable that John will be a/the winner.*
 $[_{TP} \text{it is } [_{AdjP} \text{probable } [_{CP} \text{that } [_{IP} \text{John will be a/the winner}]]]]]$
- (2) *John is a/the probable winner.*
 $[_{TP} \dots [_{AdjP} \text{probable } [_{CP} [_{IP} \text{John } [_{DP} \text{(the) winner}]]]]]] \gg [_{TP} \text{John is } [_{DP} \text{a/the probable winner}]]]$

In (2), reanalysis is followed by word-order change (*probable-the* > *the-probable* in the DP), as discussed by Harris & Campbell (*Historical Syntax in Cross-Linguistic Perspective*, 1995) and occurs synchronically, with the semantic compositionality operating on the underlying structure, prior to reanalysis. Semantically vacuous words (here, the copula and the indefinite article) are inserted at PF.

Many other languages do not allow the movement in (2). The Latin etymological counterpart of the English modal adjective in (1) and (2), *probabilis*, was used with entities only in the meaning ‘worthy of approval, commendable, acceptable’, or (with persons) ‘praiseworthy, admirable’, while its primary meaning ‘which can be proved’ (from the verbal stem *probā-* ‘prove’) was used only with events such as described in reports or accusations. In Latin, as in English before the 18th century, movement of the entity-denoting DP as in (2) was not possible, and the adjectives qualified events – whether CPs, as in (3), or NPs, as in (4) –, but not entities (5):

- (3) *Possibile est* $[_{CP} \text{Caesarem victorem fuisse}]$.
 possible is Caesar winner have-been
 ‘Caesar may have won.’ (lit. ‘It is possible for Caesar to have been victorious.’)
- (4) *Adventus eius haud possibilis est.*
 arrival his not possible is
 ‘He cannot possibly come.’ (lit. ‘His arrival is not possible.’)
- (5) **Caesar possibilis victor est.*
 Caesar possible winner is
 ‘Caesar is a possible winner.’

The movement-plus-reanalysis mechanism proposed in (2), if correct, suggests that it is worth exploring the possibility for other types of non-intersective adjectives (*skillful*, *former*, *counterfeit*, etc.) to have event arguments underlyingly, rather than being adjuncts of NPs, and thus for the underlying structure to reflect the historical source of these constructions. Correspondingly in semantics, predicate modification will be replaced by function application in such contexts.