The Experiencer Constraint Revisited

Aya Meltzer
Tel Aviv University
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What led some researchers (Borer 1990) to claim that all present participles can be adjectival is the fact that they all appear prenominally (1).

(1)   a. an interesting / surprising / amusing / amazing boy
      b. a flourishing town / a glimmering diamond / a lasting sensation
      c. a jumping / crying / growing / sitting boy

However, all other adjectival contexts allow only participles such as those in (1a,b).

Brekke (1988) suggested the Experiencer Constraint: only participles of verbs that have an internal Experiencer θ-role can be adjectival. However, this generalization does not predict the adjectival status of the participles in (1b), and does not explain why it is the case that only participles of object-Experiencer verbs can be adjectival.

I suggest the following constraint: only present participles of stative verbs can be adjectival. The constraint is natural, since stative participles denote states, and are therefore suitable for becoming adjectives. In contrast, participles like 'jumping' denote an event, and can become adjectives only as a result of a morphologically visible operation that turns this event into a property ('jumpy').

How can non-adjectival participles appear prenominally (1c)? I suggest that what appears here is a reduced relative clause. This suggestion solves another puzzle: it is well-known that post-nominal reduced relatives cannot be one-word constituents (2a).

An independently known phenomenon is the requirement for adjacency between a modified and a modifying head. According to my analysis, all reduced relatives are generated prenominally (2b). Only when the adjacency requirement is violated, does extraposition take place (2c).

(2)   a. ??The boy jumping is my cousin.
      b. The [jumping (*in the yard)] boy is my cousin.
      c. The boy jumping in the yard is my cousin.

References