Why would anybody take long?

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**Introduction**

**Word class problem**
- Draft revisions of *long* in *Oxford English Dictionary*
- Problem examples include
  - I won't be long.
  - I won’t take long.
- *OED* layout requires PoS labels.
- But do we?
  - as SP/W or AD/R
  - as linguists

**Structure of talk**
- Review straightforward uses of *long*
- Discuss two possible boundaries/changes:
  - Adj – Adv
  - Adj – N / Pron
- Discuss theoretical status of word class and word class vagueness
- Sketch Construction Grammar account

**Headwords for *long* in *OED²***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headword</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>long adj. and n.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>long adj.²</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>long n.</td>
<td>[entries first published 1903, not yet fully updated]</td>
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<tr>
<td>long n.²</td>
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<tr>
<td>long adv.</td>
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<tr>
<td>long prep.</td>
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<td>-long suffix</td>
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<tr>
<td>length n.</td>
<td>'length'</td>
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long adj. in OED – selected senses

1. Great in spatial measurement OE-
   long low rowing boats
2. Having a certain spatial extension OE-
   about a quarter of an inch long
3. Great in serial extent or duration (OE) ME-
   long letters
4. Having a great extent or duration OE-
   her long twilight of decrepitude and decay
5. Too long, lengthy, tedious ME-
   He is apt to be long in his descriptions.

long adv. in OED – selected senses

1. For or during a long time OE-
   et ic mei longe libben; We have long been expecting a packet.
2. a. The suppression of the qualified adj., adv., or phrase, in expressions
   like to be long about one’s work, causes the adv. long to assume
   the character of an adj. compl. = ‘occupying a long time’; ‘delaying long’. c1290-
   b. not to be long for this world 1822-
3. At/from/to a far distant time a1400-
   long since; long after (X); but he cut his teeth long before me
4. Throughout the period specified (ME) eModE-
   the whole summer long; all day long

Adverb > Adjective?

Problem 1

c1275 þe king sende his sonde after Brien þa wes to longe.
c1300 Sumdel þe pope was anuyd þat he hadde i-beo so
longe [rhyme onder-fonge].
a1425 Lunet þare stode in þe thang, Until Sir Ywaine
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2008 I have to go out, … but I won’t be very long.

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Penn Treebank

• The PennParsed Corpora from ME onwards tag long as
   Adjective regardless of context, sometimes within NP-MSR
   brackets:
   LONG is always treated as an adjective. See NP measure phrases
   for the conventions concerning adjectives used as measure
   phrases.
   a long_ADJ story_N
   five_NUM feet_NS long_ADJ
   not_NEG long_ADJ behind_ADV
   to_TO have_HV dwelled_VBN here_ADV the_D longest_ADJS
Adj, ‘function’ = measure NP

but did not last long

([IP-MAT (CONJ but)
  (NP-SBJ *con*)
  (DOD did)
  (NEG not)
  (VB last)
  (NP-MSR (ADJ long)) ...
  (ID AUSTEN-180X,175.333)])

Why Adj in Penn Parsed corpora?

- Most measure phrases of time are NPs (all night) or PPs (for ten years), but function of PPs not labelled.
- Long in measure NPs varies with the NP (a) long time, therefore treat as elliptical with missing Noun head, whether the actual noun time or an abstract placeholder noun with that general meaning.
- But e.g. briefly is parsed as (ADVP (ADV briefly))

Adj or Adv?

- What is the evidence for Adj vs. Adv, and has the PoS changed over time?
- OED implies that original Adv long was adjunct modifying such constructions as be about one’s work, be at a task.
- Ellipsis of (usually) a PP left long as complement of be.
- This slot is more often filled by AdjP than by AdvP.
- If long is here an Adj, it is a predlicative-only Adj.
  - Predicate-only adjectives recognised in English linguistics as a subclass, though in Hengeveld’s typological classification, only attributive use is criterial for a class of adjectives.

Semantics

- Long = a long time, but the latter is less a predicative complement than an adverbial. The sentence
  Person X will be a long time (at this task)
  doesn’t mean that X is themself a period of time: it means that X will be at the task for a long time.
- Rough semantic equivalence may suggest a similar grammatical function but needn’t mean the same word class (cf. He’s miserable/a misery).
- On those grounds, both long and a long time would be adverbials in clause structure, and hence long (by itself) an Adv.

Vagueness in PoS assignment

- I have argued that there are now dozens of former nouns which in some contexts and for some speakers cannot be assigned a unique word class.
- For speakers who have both N and Adj entries in their lexicon for the underlined words, a powerhouse song
  This is rubbish.
  the word classes here are underdetermined.
- Neither speaker/writer nor addressee/reader needs to worry, and the linguist cannot decide in non-arbitrary way.
Adj ~ Adv vagueness with long?

- The morphology doesn’t help after eME
- In some cases it is a moot point whether long is predicated of an NP (like Adj) or modifies the verb (like Adv).
- Because relevant uses of long are post-verbal, word class of long affects the phrasal projection but arguably not the tree structure (of non-abstract Cambridge Grammar type).

Noun? Pronoun?

long n. (s.v. Adj.¹ headword)

1. Phrases with prepositions variously OE/ME/ModE-umbe long; before long; for long; at the longest
2. a. Without prep. ‘much time’ 1488-
   Der sone, this lang quar has thow beyne?
   I do not think it will take long to …
   b. It was/is/will be long before/until/etc. (OE) ME-
   As it was long before he could be persuaded to
4-8. long ‘long note, long syllable, long block’ (masonry), etc. – routine elliptical formations

Problem 2

- The following patterns are treated by OED s.v. long n.
  B.1-2:
  before long
  for long
  this/that long
  it will be long before
- Why label them as nouns?

Against a noun analysis

- Morphology is like Adj/Adv and unlike N
  - Inflects for comparison in these constructions, but not for plural:
    before any/much longer
    at the longest
    it will be longer before
  - Syntax is like Adj/Adv and unlike N
    - Allows premodification by so, how, very, too, this/that ‘very’:
      before very long
      after too long
      How long will it be?

Against a noun analysis

- Long doesn’t have normal noun distribution.
- Complements of a preposition can be any XP, even if NP is the default expectation:
  before the game NP
  for real; as new AdjP
  before now; until very recently AdvP
  from beyond the grave PP
  by trying harder VP
Against a noun analysis

- Long doesn’t have either morphology or syntax of a noun.
- (nor the semantics)
- Most parsimonious analysis of before long is as PP containing AdvP:
  \[ PP \text{ before}_P [\text{AdvP} \longlonglonglong P] \]
  with long as Adverb.
- So also Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 569).

Against a pronoun analysis

- Note at beginning of draft OED entry for long n. says:
  It may perhaps be analysable as a pronoun which always stands for the noun phrase ‘a long time’; cf. similar constructions at more pron.
- But more can be a Determiner.
- All D (except a, the, every) have predictable alternative role as head of NP (traditionally, Pronoun).
- And long is never a Determiner.
- NP a long time is functionally an adverbial. Sharing a function (if true) doesn’t imply sharing same word class.

Further claims of nounhood

- The verb take is normally transitive, with NP object. Does this make long a noun in won’t take long?

long n. in OED

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But ...

- Some V + long idioms do marginally allow a passive:
  - ?Longest was taken by the form-filling.
  - How long was spent filling in forms?
- how long = AdvP internally but behaving a bit like NP externally
- Because this only occurs in relation to these idioms, probably no need to argue for a mixed category.
- Cf. also
  - Tomorrow never comes;
  - When shall we meet? Tomorrow should be OK
- Functional slot of subject most often and readily filled by NPs, but can sometimes be filled by another class.

Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 569)
Further evidence of PoS

- PPs can occur in the same slot as the alleged NP:
  
  Will it take long?
  
  It should only take until next Thursday.

  This too argues against a noun analysis of *long*.

- Parallel Danish data suggests that *long* is an adverb:
  
  Hvor længe tog det at komme igennem det?

  how long took it to come through it

  Umlauted *længe* adv. is clearly distinct from *lang* adj.

- (Thanks to Sten Vikner, in comments at SHES and later communication.)

Danish going the same way?

- Both trans. and intr. verbs occur with period of time as NP:
  
  *Det vil ikke vare/tage lang tid* 'It won’t last/take a long time'

- Intr. verb also fine + *længe* adv.¹:
  
  *Det vil ikke vare/længe* 'It won’t last long'

- Trans vb. with inanimate subjects starting to appear + *længe*, but odd:
  
  *?Det vil ikke tage længe* 'It won’t take long'

- Corpus examples all show reduced salience of adverb as ‘object’, either
  through fronting of *hvor længe* ‘how long’ or by indirect object
  intervening. (Cf. English data on previous slide; corpus work needed!)

- Only *tage ‘take’* found so far in corpus, and never with human subject,
  but *bruge ‘use’* (i.e. ‘spend time’) with human subject sounds possible.

  ¹Native umlauted form of adv., but Ger. *Länge* n. ?secondary source.

Constructions

Further work and observations

- Only sketched possible diachronic derivation. Need
  series of synchronic networks, if enough data
  available.

- The *long* material demonstrates (i) partial
  recategorisation, (ii) vagueness.

- Clear decategorisation in *take long*, but not in a
  grammaticalisation context.

- Word classes are not primitives, merely a useful
  heuristic (both for users and for linguists).

- Is there good psycholinguistic evidence for word classes
  in mental lexicon / constructicon?
Questions

- What is added value of CxG?
  - Focus on construction rather than words allows for underspecification of word classes [?]
  - Network model with multiple inheritance. Psychologically more plausible than algorithmic model designed for elegance and parsimony
- Valid to use 21C Danish data to corroborate early English developments?
  - NB. usage-based model of English

References


Presentation available

- slides online at
  - [http://tinyurl.com/DD-download](http://tinyurl.com/DD-download)
- work-in-progress
- comments very welcome, but please don't quote

Thank you!