Ask a linguist: "Are there constructions that are grammatically describable in different ways? How absolute are the categories of grammar?"

Document Version
Final published version

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Citing this paper
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester’s Takedown Procedures [http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.
Languages are wonderfully complex, and so it is not always possible for linguists to describe them all in only one way. Different theories, approaches and traditions sometimes use different words to describe the same idea, and sometimes a construction can be interpreted in different ways.

Let’s look at some examples. If we consider phrases such as ‘the elected president’ or ‘the crying baby’, how would we describe the role of ‘elected’ and ‘crying’? Are these words adjectives or verbs, or could they be both? The words in themselves are verb forms: ‘elected’ is a form (the past participle) of the verb ‘elect’, and ‘crying’ is a form (the present participle) of the verb ‘cry’. However, in ‘the elected president’ and ‘the crying baby’, they are used like adjectives.

One indicator for this is the fact that you can replace them with other adjectives: ‘the new president’, ‘the little baby’. You can also modify them using an adverb, for example in ‘the newly elected president or ‘the loudly crying baby’. This suggests that the words are adjectives in this context. Therefore, you could say that in terms of their form, these words could be seen as verbs, but in terms of their function, they are adjectives.

Another interesting case is that of the words ‘my’, ‘your’, ‘his’, ‘her’, ‘its’, ‘our’ and ‘their’, which are used with nouns to express possession. Some people call them ‘possessive determiners’, but others call them ‘possessive adjectives’. Who is right? As you may have guessed already, neither group is wrong, depending on how you look at it: words like ‘my’, ‘your’, etc. have features of determiners and are similar to the definite article (‘the’). In English, you cannot combine them with another determiner (‘the my book’), which suggests that they are determiners themselves. However, there are other languages in which they are combined with determiners and behave more like adjectives. In Italian, for example, ‘my book’ is il mio libro (literally ‘the my book’). Therefore, this is another example of a feature of grammar that can be described in different ways.

As you can see from the examples above, grammatical categories are often not absolute. In fact, there can be different ways of describing them, depending, for example, on whether you want to focus on their form or their function, or depending on the language that you are analysing, or the theory or tradition that you are working with.

If we consider phrases such as ‘the elected president’ or ‘the crying baby’, how would we describe the role of ‘elected’ and ‘crying’? Are these words adjectives or verbs, or could they be both?”

Sascha Stollhans is a PhD researcher and teaching assistant in Linguistics at the University of Manchester, working on Germanic and Romance Linguistics as well as Second Language Acquisition. He tweets as @SaschaStollhans.