Kobe University Repository : Kernel

PDF issue: 2026-11-10

# Keeping the syntax of predication and modification distinct: The view from Tamil

Venkatesan, Madhusmitha

(Citation)
Papers from the International Workshop on the Syntax of Predication and Modification 2024:159-175

(Issue Date)
2025-02-15

(Resource Type)
conference paper

(Version)
Version of Record

(JaLCDOI)
https://doi.org/10.24546/0100492873

(URL)
https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/0100492873

KOBE UNIVERSITY

# Keeping the syntax of predication and modification distinct: The view from Tamil*

Madhusmitha Venkatesan

Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

**Abstract**: There is a prevalent tendency in grammars to keep the syntax of modification and predication distinct – a tendency particularly relevant to adjectives, which are present in both domains. This paper presents the case of Tamil (Dravidian) where adjectives do not have independent categorial status in the lexicon; they are derived using relative clauses in the syntactic component. This paper provides an analysis of the process by which adjectives are formed, while highlighting the role of relative clauses in the structure. Adjectives thus derived can occur in the attributive (modificational) as well as the predicative domains, with agreement and finiteness being the structural facts that keep the two distinct.

**Keywords**: derived adjectives, relative clauses, attributive, predicative domains

## 1. Introduction

Natural language syntax generally makes a distinction between predication and (attributive) modification. This distinction is often reflected in terms of structural or morpho-phonemic differences between the two. The current paper covers the case of a language where both, attributive as well as predicative, modifiers are derived using similar strategies, and yet, the grammar strives to make a distinction between the two. The empirical core of the paper is formed by a Dravidian language – Tamil. Tamil is particularly relevant to discussions on attributive modifiers, because the status of adjectives in Tamil has been greatly debated. Section 2 of the paper covers existing literature which claims that Tamil does not have adjectives at all. In section 3, this claim is revised: Tamil does not have adjectives in the lexicon, but the syntactic component recognises them as a distinct category. The structural representation of these derived adjectives is provided in Section 4, with Section 5 focussing on the differences between the attributive (modificational) and predicative versions of the adjective.

## 2. Existing literature: There are no adjectives in Tamil

There is a consensus within the generative literature that Tamil (among other Dravidian languages) does not recognise adjectives as a distinct category. In this section, we shall review certain accounts which adopt such a position, and then provide an alternate analysis.

* This paper was presented at International Workshop on the Syntax of Predication and Modification 2024 held on November 16-17, 2024.

Menon (2013, 2014) adopts the stance that adjectives do not constitute a separate lexical category in Dravidian languages. While the primary empirical support for this claim comes from Malayalam, (a language with close genealogical ties to Tamil), the argument made here spans all major Dravidian languages. Because of this, we consider Menon's account an important one while studying adjectives in Tamil. Menon's analysis of adjectives is framed by the strong claim that adjectives do not form an independent class in Dravidian languages, neither lexically nor in the syntactic component. Such a lack of adjectives forces these languages to create "*ad hoc*" adjective-like structures for the purposes of modification and predication. It is important to note that Menon's account is built on the premise of Distributed Morphology (DM) according to which the lexicon is simply a container of unlabelled roots devoid of any identifying information.

Within this architecture, adjectives (nouns and verbs too) are formed when roots take up certain position in the derivational spine.[1] For instance, merging with the nominaliser *n* results in a root being interpreted as a noun, and merging with the verbaliser *v* leads to the creation of a verb. So, the primary question for Menon is: How are adjectival modifiers formed?

To answer this question, Menon posits that roots come in two kinds: native (to Dravidian) and borrowed (from Indo-Aryan languages at an earlier point in the diachrony). This bifurcation is central to Menon's analysis, as the derivational process by which adjectives are formed out of roots differs significantly for these two types of roots.

Using examples from Malayalam Menon shows that "native" roots, when adjectivalised, contain a relativiser, as shown below in (1). The roots in (1a), (1b) and (1c) are all understood to be native to Dravidian, and adjectives can be formed out of them using a relativiser**.**

(1) Malayalam

| a. ceriy-a | b. pudiy-a | c. pacc-a |
|---|---|---|
| √small-REL | √new-REL | √green-REL |
| 'small' | 'new' | 'green' |

On the other hand, "borrowed" roots fare differently. Here, the roots are first nominalised. They are then attached to a copula, and finally relativised to form adjectives. This strategy is exemplified in (2) where the nominalised 'happiness' and 'height' have to be attached to a verbal element in order to become adjectives.

(2) Malayalam

| a. sandosham-uLL-a | b. pokkam-uLL-a |
|---|---|
| happiness-COP-REL | height-COP-REL |
| 'happy' | 'tall' |

Essentially, according to Menon, the idea that adjectives are not an independent category in Dravidian languages is quite appealing, given how there are clearly nominal and verbal elements involved in their formation. Thus, there seems to be no incentive to prop them as a separate category.

[1] For the purposes of this paper, we shall set aside the formation of nouns, verbs, etc., and focus solely on adjectives.

We raise two objections to Menon's theory of adjective formation: a conceptual and an empirical one. Conceptually, a system such as Distributed Morphology assumes roots in the lexicon to lack any identifying information; they are not labelled in any way whatsoever. However, Menon's theory crucially hinges on roots being labelled as "native" or "borrowed", which is incongruent with the principle of Distributed Morphology. The empirical objection comes from the fact that this analysis cannot be extended to Tamil, another Dravidian language. In Tamil, as we shall see, there is no distinction between native and borrowed adjectives. There are indeed two processes of adjective formation, but these are not sensitive to the native or non-native status of the root. Because of these two reasons we do not accept Menon's account for adjectives in Tamil.

Before going deeper into adjective formation in Tamil, let us review a few other existing accounts of adjectives in Dravidian languages. Another set of arguments against positing adjectives as a distinct category comes from Jayaseelan and Amritavalli (2017). The position adopted here, however, is not as strong as that of Menon's. Jayaseelan and Amritavalli claim that adjectives are not lexically distinct categories in Dravidian languages; applying some derivational processes to nouns is what results in modificational structures in syntax. However, there is still some reluctance to label these structures definitively as adjectives. Jayaseelan and Amritavalli base their position on the fact that most putative adjectives in Dravidian can be traced back to nominal roots, and that the number of indisputable adjectives in these languages is a very low number, approximately 30.

This line of argumentation is further developed by Amritavalli (2019). Amritavalli states that given the paucity of adjectives in Dravidian languages, nouns often take on the role of these modifiers. It is a very productive strategy to "adjectivalise" a noun by adding a suffix to it. This process is illustrated in (3) below, where the noun in (3a) and (3b) becomes a modifier (3c) with the addition of a suffix *-aa*.

(3) Tamil
a. kastam
'difficulty'
b. id-oda kastam
it-GEN difficulty
'it's difficulty'
c. idu kastam-aa irukku
this difficulty-aa be.PRS.3SG
'This is difficult'

Amritavalli's position, too, is that modifiers can be productively derived from nouns and other elements, consequently obviating the need for having a separate category for adjectives in this set of languages. Thus, we see that a conventional understanding of adjectives is rooted in them not being a standalone category. In the next section, I provide empirical and conceptual arguments in favour of revising this position. I agree with the existing claim that the lexicon does not recognise adjectives independently in Tamil; derivational operations are crucially needed for their realisation. Nevertheless, the current claim is that the derived structures are indeed adjectives. When we consider the internal syntax of the derived modifiers in Tamil, and the positional/distributional constraints obeyed by them, it becomes evident that they should be analysed as adjectives.

## 3. The Current proposal: Distinct adjectives in the syntax

Having provided the backdrop on Tamil adjectives, I now proceed to evidence my claim that there are indeed adjectives in Tamil. Essentially, the claim made here is that adjectives may not be defined as a category in the lexicon in Tamil, but they are recognized distinctly by the derivational component. In other words, I agree with the existing claims that adjectives do not form a lexical class, but I disagree with them in terms of whether syntax recognizes them as an independent category. Here I provide the empirical facts that form the basis of my claim.

### 3.1. Empirical evidence – Krishnamurthy (2003)

Krishnamurthy (2003) provides a comprehensive account of adjectives of Dravidian languages. Krishnamurthy's claim is that there can be some parts of speech that are afforded an independent existence only in the domain of syntax. In the lexicon, they are indistinguishable. Adjectives, adverbs, clitics, etc. belong to this category of items. The empirical evidence for Krishnamurthy's claim is formed by the examples in (4). The lexical items in (4) cannot be traced back to nominal or verbal roots. They are modifiers, or property concepts. A caveat here is that these lexical items are not morphological words. They are concepts/roots that await certain derivational procedures before they can be used in a sentence.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (4) | a. *karu* | 'black' | b. *mun* | 'forward' |
| | c. *cem* | 'red' | d. *mutu* | 'old' |
| | e. *veL* | 'white' | f. *pudu* | 'new' |
| | g. *vata* | 'north' | h. *iLa* | 'young' |
| | i. *pin* | 'behind' | j. *ini* | 'sweet' |

These examples further strengthen the idea that adjectives ought to be recognized as a separate category. While it is true that nominal and verbal elements productively lend themselves to "adjectivisation", there are also certain modifiers in the language (4) that cannot be traced back to these categories. They are modifiers and must be recognized as such.

### 3.2. Diagnostic tests

In this section, I present further argumentation to strengthen the claim that modifiers in Tamil should be analysed as adjectives. Essentially, I show that modifiers in Tamil obey all the characteristics of adjectives seen cross-linguistically. There are four major properties that adjectives have: (i) They have a fixed position in the DP; (ii) They can co-occur with other modifiers; (iii) They can be modified by intensifiers; and (iv) They allow for gradability.

(i) **Fixed position in the DP:** Adjectives have a fixed position in the DP. Languages vary in terms of whether the adjective precedes (A - N) or follows (N - A) the noun. Once the order has been decided, it remains fixed. In (5) we can see that the modifiers in Tamil, too, have a fixed pre-nominal position (5a, 5c). It is ungrammatical to move it post-nominally (5b, 5d).

(5) a. *anda nall-a paiyan*
that √good-REL boy
'that good boy'

b. **anda paiyan nall-a*
that boy √good-REL

c. *anda uyaram-aa-na paiyan*
that height-v-REL boy
'that tall boy'

d. **anda paiyan uyaram-aa-na*
that boy height-v-REL

(ii) **Co-occurrence with other modifiers:** Another key hallmark of adjectives is that cross-linguistically, they can co-occur with other modifiers such as numerals and quantifiers, iteratively modifying the head noun. The modifiers in Tamil too follow this pattern as (6).

(6) a. *anda naalu nall-a pasanga*
that four √good-REL boys
'those four good boys'

b. *neraya nall-a pasanga*
many √good-REL boys
'many good boys'

c. *anda anju uyaram-aa-na pasanga*
that five height-v-REL boys
'those five tall boys'

d. *neraya uyaram-aa-na pasanga*
many height-v-REL boys
'many tall boys'

(iii) **Modification by Intensifiers:** Adjectives are the only parts of speech that can be modified by intensifiers such as 'very'. This property does not extend to nominal and verbal entities. (7) shows that the modifiers in Tamil behave in this exact way. Intensifiers can be applied to derived adjectives (7a, 7c) but not to nominals (7b, 7d).

(7) a. *anda romba nall-a paiyan*
that INTF √good-REL boy
'that very good boy'

b. **anda romba paiyan*
that INTF boy
Intended: 'that very boy'

c. *anda romba uyaram-aa-na paiyan*
that INTF height-v-REL boy
'that very tall boy'

d. **anda romba uyaram*
that INTF height
Intended: 'that very height'

(iv) **Degrees of Comparison**: Adjectives are typically gradable: they can be expressed in comparative and superlative terms. The modifiers in Tamil (8) also occur in these forms.

(8) a. *john peter-a* *vida* *nall-a-van*
John Peter-ACC than √good-REL-MSG
'John is better than Peter.'
b. *john ellarayum* *vida* *nall-a-van*
John everyone than √good-REL-MSG
'John is better than everyone.'
c. *mary lisa-va* *vida* *uyaram-aa* *iruk-aa*
Mary Lisa-ACC than height-V be-3FSG
'Mary is taller than Lisa.'
d. *mary ellarayum* *vida* *uyaram-aa* *iruk-aa*
Mary everyone than height-V be-3FSG
'Mary is taller than everyone.'

### 3.3. Interim summary: What can we say about Tamil adjectives?

To summarise, what we can say about adjectives in Tamil is that while they may not form lexical primitives in the language, syntax does recognise them as a distinct category. The examples provided above (5-8) clearly demonstrate that modifiers in Tamil follow all the prototypical characteristics of adjectives. They behave exactly the way designated adjectives behave in other languages.

Three other properties of Tamil adjectives become evident from the examples given above:

a. The internal syntax of adjectives in Tamil is complex. These units are not unary; they are composite and obtained derivationally.
b. Adjectives in Tamil occur in the attributive as well as the predicative domains.
c. There are at least two routes to deriving adjectives in Tamil: the examples in (5c-5d), (6c, 6d), (7c, 7d), and (8c, 8d) have a nominal flavour that is absent in (5a-5b), (6a-6b), (7a-7b), and (8a-8b).

## 4. The structure of adjectives in Tamil

### 4.1. A two-way distinction in Tamil adjectives

By looking at the morphological shape of the adjectives in Tamil, we can infer that there are two different ways of composing adjectives in Tamil; there must be two strategies of derivational adjective formation.

The first strategy, termed as the 'Root + Relativiser Strategy' begins from uncategorised roots/property-denoting concepts, which attach to a relativiser. The resultant complex is interpreted as an adjective: (9). In (9), the root √good cannot be realised independently; it requires affixation in order to become a morphological word. In the case of property-denoting concepts in Tamil, the crucial affix in this process is the relativising morpheme. Attaching a relativiser to a property-denoting concept renders it an adjective. The adjective thus derived can be used in the attributive (9b) as well as the predicative (9c) positions.

(9) a. *nall-a*
√good-REL
'good'
b. *nall-a* *paiyan*
√good-REL boy
'good boy'
c. *anda* *paiyan* *nall-a-van*
that boy √good-REL-MSG
'That boy is good.'

The second strategy to form adjectives in Tamil is termed as the 'N + V + Relativiser Strategy'. In this case, a lexical noun is first verbalised, and then relativised to form an adjective. Adjectives formed via this strategy can be clearly traced back to nominal origins. In (10a) the noun[2] 'height' is first verbalised, then relativised to form the adjective 'tall'. Similar to the previous strategy, the derived adjective can be used attributively (10b) as well as predicatively.

(10) a. *uyaram-aa-na*
height-V-REL
'tall'
b. *uyaram-aa-na* *paiyan*
height-V-REL boy
'tall boy'
c. *anda paiyan* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-aan*
that boy height-V(-REL) be-PRS-3MSG
'That boy is tall.'

The verbal element in (10) merits further explanation. In Tamil, the lexical verb *aa* 'to happen' is crucial to the formation of adjectives from nouns. (11) contains examples of regular occurrences of the verb.

[2] The status of *uyaram* 'height' as a lexical noun can be established by looking at these examples where it can appear as a possessum (i) take case markers and post-positional markers (ii), which are prototypical characteristics of nouns.

(i) *avaL-oda uyaram*
she-POSS height
'her height'
(ii) *avaL-oda uyara-tta patti*
she-POSS height-ACC about
'…about her height'

(11) a. *neram aa-chu*
time happen-PST
'It's time.' (lit: time happened)

b. *ena-kku vayasu aa-chu*
me-DAT age happen-PST
'I am old.' (lit: age happened to me)

c. *enna aa-chu*
what happen-PST
'What happened?'

d. *paisa selavu aa-gum*
money expense happen-FUT
'It will cost money.'
(lit: money spending will happen)

e. *onnum aa-gala*
NPI happen-NEG
'Nothing happened.'

The verb in (11) conveys the meaning of something taking place or happening, which when applied to a noun such as 'height' forms 'height-happened'. The resultant adjectival structure is interpreted as 'tall', as in (10).

Essentially, there are two ways of forming adjectives in Tamil, and they are both very productive paradigms found in the language, as illustrated by (12) and (13).

(12) Root + Relativiser Strategy

a. *kett-a*
√bad-REL
'bad'

b. *peri-a*
√big-REL
'big'

c. *cinn-a*
√small-REL
'small'

d. *pudi-a*
√new-REL
'new'

(13) N + V + Relativiser Strategy

a. *amaidi-aa-na*
silence-V-REL
'silent'

b. *porupp-aa-na*
responsibility-V-REL
'responsible'

c. *sood-aa-na*
heat-V-REL
'hot'

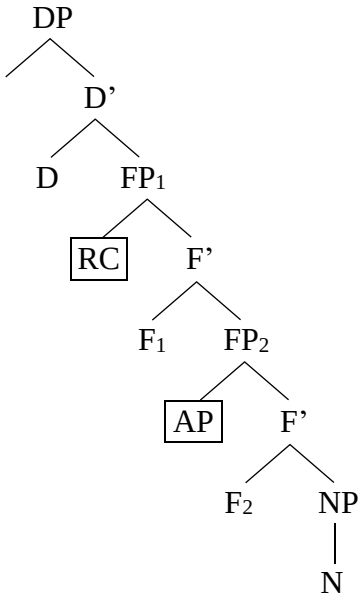
d. *sogam-aa-na*
sadness-V-REL
'sad'

With the empirical paradigm in place, we can now procced to understand the structural representation of derived adjectives in Tamil.

### 4.2. The derivational structure of adjectives in Tamil

Within the generative paradigm, adjectives are merged as modifiers to NPs within the nominal domain, or the DP (Kayne 1994). Thus, adjectives are part of the nominal spine from where they can modify the noun attributively. Cinque (2010) presents a proposal for the syntax of adjectives wherein, cross-linguistically, there are two ways in which adjectives can come about in a derivation. They can either be phrasal specifiers of dedicated functional projections – AP, or they can be introduced as predicates of reduced relative clauses. Cinque's proposal, further explained by Alexiadou (2014) is represented in (14):

(14)

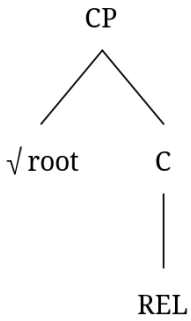



According to Cinque's proposal, these are the two possibilities by which grammars can introduce adjectives into the derivational structure. What is particularly relevant about this proposal is that the two options – AP and Reduced RC need not be obligatorily present in all languages. I interpret Cinque's proposal that the choice between using one of the two possibilities or using both the possibilities is subject to cross-linguistic variation. Germanic and Romance languages, where adjectives form a distinct class of lexical items, make productive usage of both the strategies (Alexiadou 2014).

On the other hand, Dravidian languages like Tamil are cases where the lexicon does not recognise adjectives as an independent category. Consequently, there are no dedicated APs. In these languages, the only way to obtain adjectives is through derivational means. Thus, Tamil makes uses of reduced relative clauses to form adjectives and introduce them into the spine of the DP. The role played by (reduced) relative clauses is further highlighted empirically, when we see that relativiser morphemes feature prominently in all adjectival structures in Tamil. To recall, adjectives in Tamil are formed by relativising either an acategorial root (15) or a verbalised noun (16). The structural representation of both the strategies of adjective formation in Tamil are underlain by CP. The relativiser hosted at C takes either a root (15b) or a VP (16b) as its complement.

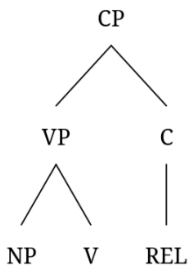
(15) a. *nall-a*
√good-REL
'good'

b.




(16) a. *uyaram-aa-na*
height-happen-REL
'tall'

b.



The (reduced) relative clauses thus formed can now be introduced into DP as adjectival modifiers.

### 4.3. Structural position of derived adjectives in Tamil

The previous section established that adjectives in Tamil are underlyingly CPs, with the relativiser in C being crucial to their formation. Empirically, it has also been established that these derived adjectives can be present as both attributive, as well as predicative modifiers. In this section, the nuances of both the structural positions will be presented.

#### 4.3.1. The Structure of attributive adjectives

Attributive adjectives are defined in terms of their positional distribution. They occur within the nominal domain, either prenominally or post-nominally. In Tamil, their position is prenominal, as established in (5). Attributive adjectives are typically considered to be modifiers of nouns, and as such, they are understood to not have an argument-predicate relationship with the nouns that they modify. In Tamil, both adjective-formation strategies, namely the 'Root + Relativiser Strategy' (17) and the 'N + V + Relativiser Strategy' (18), yield attributive adjectives.

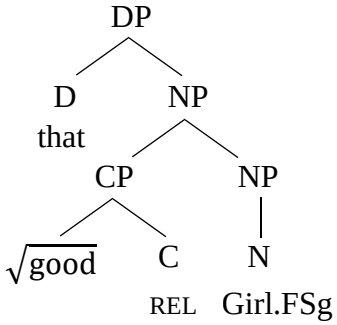
In case of the former, (17) shows that relativizing a property-denoting concept/ root results in an adjective, represented as CP. (17a-c) show that there is no agreement between the noun and the adjective. The shape of the adjective remains constant in the face of varying phi features of the subject. None of the features of the subject (MSG, FSG, PL, etc.) are reflected on the modifying adjective.

(17) a. *anda nall-a* *poNNu*
that √good-REL girl
'that good girl'

b. *anda* *nall-a* *paiyan*
that √good-REL boy
'that good boy'

c. *anda* *nall-a* *pasanga*
that √good-REL children
'those good children'

d.




The (reduced) relative clause, functioning as an adjective, is merged as an adjunct to the Noun Phrase in (17d). The representation given here can capture the idea that the adjective 'good', formed within a relative clause, is an attributive modifier of the noun 'girl'.

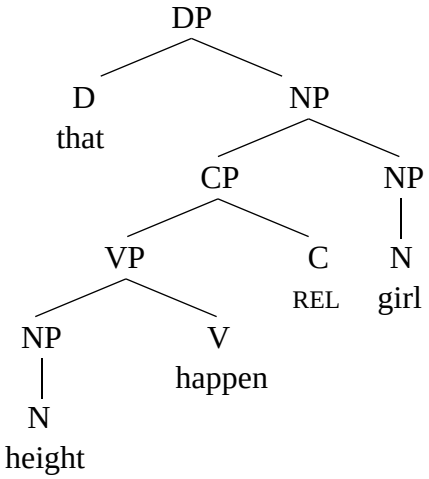
The second strategy of adjective formation, exemplified by (18), originates from a lexical noun 'height'. The noun 'height' is first verbalised with the help of a verb carrying the meaning of 'to happen'. The composite VP is then relativised in order to form an adjective. Here too, the resultant relative clause is interpreted as an adjective. The attributive adjective 'tall' does not exhibit any agreement with the head noun of the clause. Features of the noun are not reflected in the shape of the adjective (18a-c). Identical to the structure posited for the 'Root + Relativiser Strategy', the relative clause formed from VP is also merged as an adjunct modifier of the head noun 'girl' (18d).

(18) a. *anda* *uyaram-aa-na* *poNNu*
that height-happen-REL girl
'that tall girl'

b. *anda* *uyaram-aa-na* *paiyan*
that height-happen-REL boy
'that tall boy'

c. *anda* *uyaram-aa-na* *pasanga*
that height-happen-REL children
'those tall children'

d.




To generalise, both strategies of adjective formation in Tamil can occur as attributive modifiers of the head noun, and they are merged as adjuncts to NP in order to establish this relation. There are no probes in the attributive domain, leading to the absence of agreement relations between the adjective and the noun.

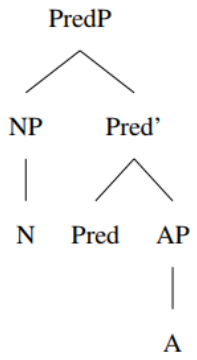
At this stage, it is important to note that the relativiser in (17) is the same as the one in (18), despite them having different phonological exponence: *-a* and *-na*, respectively. The difference arises due to a phonological constraint: *-a* denotes relativisers in Tamil. However, in (18), the verb happen *-aa* and the relativiser *-a* appearing serially would create a situation of vowel hiatus. In order to break this clustering, a consonant *n* is inserted epenthetically, resulting in (18) having a different overt realization from (17). Structurally, however, they are the same morpheme.

### 4.3.2. The structure of predicative adjectives

Predicative adjectives are located in the verbal domain. They take nouns as their arguments. The argument-predicate relationship between the noun and the adjective is

facilitated structurally – by the functional projection PredP. Pred (Baker 2008, 2011) is a special copular category that houses the noun in its specifier and the adjective in its complement position (19). The semantic function of Pred is to retrieve the thematic role implicit to the adject and transfer it onto the noun, ultimately establishing a structural connection between the two. With a thematic role from the adjective assigned to it, the noun can be structurally identified as the subject of the adjectival predicate.

(19)



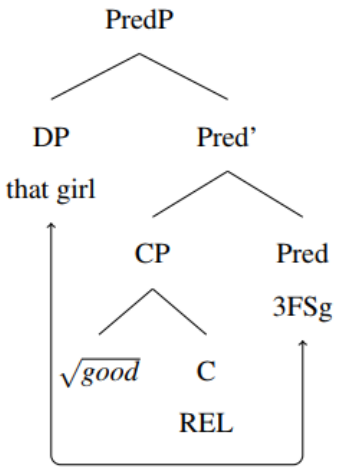

In Tamil, both, 'Root + Relativiser Strategy' and 'N + V + Relativiser Strategy' lead to the creation of predicative adjectives. In case of the former, (20a-c), the CP formed out of the root and the relativiser is merged as complement to Pred. Pred is overtly realised, and it is an active probe in Tamil. Therefore, it agrees with the phi features of the subject. The phi features of the subject are reflected in the morphological shape of the predicative adjective. In the structural configuration in (20d), agreement takes place between the subject and the predicate as a result of Bidirectional Agree (Baker 2008). Bidirectional Agree stipulates that, in order for agreement to take place, either the probe must C-Command, or be C-Commanded by the goal. In (20d), the probe in Pred is C-Commanded by the goal DP, establishing syntactic Agree between the two. As a result, the features of the subject 'that girl' are realised on the predicate. It is important to note that the agreeing head in (20) is Pred and not the adjective itself. Adjectival agreement is seen in Tamil only when the adjective is in the predicative domain, suggesting that the structural context provided by Pred is crucial for agreement to take place.

(20) a. *anda* *poNNu* *nall-a-va*
that girl √good-REL-FSG
'That girl is good.'

b. *anda* *paiyan* *nall-a-van*
that boy √good-REL-MSG
'That boy is good.'

c. *anda* *pasanga* *nall-a-vanga*
that children √good-REL-PL
'Those children are good.'

d.




It is important to note that the agreement patterns observed in (20) does not exemplify full phi feature agreement. The predicative adjective agrees with the subject in number and gender, but not in person. In order to provide a clearer characterisation of partial agree, we consider cases with first (21c-d) and second (21e-f) pronouns as subjects. In both these cases, we see that the predicative adjective agrees with the gender and number feature of the subject. The person feature of the subject does not find reflection in the adjective. The empirical evidence in (21) provides further confirmation to the idea that the agreeing head in these derivations is Pred and not T; the involvement of T would imply a full phi feature agreement. The role of T in agreement will be explained in greater detail as we move on to predicative adjectives formed using the 'N + V + Relativiser Strategy'.

(21) a. *ava(n)* *nall-a-va(n)*
she(he) √good-REL-FSG(MSG)
'She (or he) is good.'

b. *avanga nall-a-vanga*
they √good-REL-PL
'They are good.'

c. *naa nall-a-van*
I √good-REL-MSG
'I am good.' (male speaker)

d. *naa nall-a-va*
I √good-REL-FSG
'I am good.' (female speaker)

e. *nee nall-a-van*
you √good-REL-MSG
'You are good.' (male addressee)

f. *nee nall-a-va*
you √good-REL-FSG
'You are good.' (female addressee)

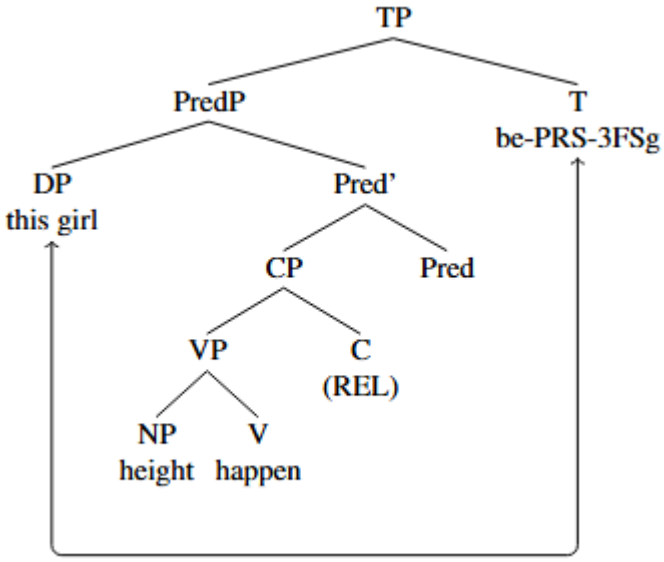
Using the 'N + V + Relativiser Strategy' to form predicative adjectives in Tamil yields structures such as (22). A noun, such as 'height', is first verbalised with the verb 'to happen' and then relativised. The composite (reduced) relative clause is then realised as complement to the null Pred. Adjectives formed using this strategy are distinct from the Root-relativising strategy in having an overtly realised copula. Agreement is now realised on the copula, and no more on the predicative adjective (22a-c). This agreement configuration is structurally represented in (22d), where T agrees with the subject DP. T C-Commands the subject DP and is therefore capable of entering into a relation of Agree with it.

(22) a. *inda* *poNNu* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-aa*
this girl height-happen(-REL) be-PRS-3FSG
'This girl is tall.'

b. *inda* *paiyan* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-aan*
this boy height-happen(-REL) be-PRS-3MSG
'This boy is tall.'

c. *inda koLandainga* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-aanga*
this children height-happen(-REL) be-REL-3PL
'These children are tall.'

d.




In order to conclusively establish T, and not Pred, as the agreeing head we consider sentences with first (23c-d) and second (23e-f) person pronouns as subjects of the predicative adjectives. In (23c-f) the predicative adjectives agree with the person feature of the subject, inflecting differently for the different person and number features of the subject.

(23) a. *ava* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-aa*
she height-happen(-REL) be-PRS-3FSG
'She is tall.'

b. *avan* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-aan*
he height-happen(-REL) be-PRS-3MSG
'He is tall.'

c. *naa* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-en*
I height-happen(-REL) be-PRS-1SG
'I am tall.' (male or female speaker)

d. *naanga* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-om*
we height-happen(-REL) be-PRS-1PL
'We are tall.' (male or female speaker)

e. *nee* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-a*
you height-happen(-REL) be-PRS-2SG
'You are tall.' (male or female addressee)

f. *niinga* *uyaram-aa(-ga)* *iru-k-iinga*
you.PL height-happen(-REL) be-PRS-2PL
'You are all tall.' (male or female addressee)

It has been well-established (Baker 2008, 2011) that the involvement of T is crucial for the execution of person agreement. Agreeing heads lower than T cannot enable person agreement. The sentences in (23) display person, number and gender agreement on the overt copula, because of which we can infer that T must be involved in this structural configuration. Another phenomenon that merits our attention in these cases is that when a higher functional projection, T, is involved, the lower head, Pred, automatically stops in agreement. Pred does not realise agreement in (23). However, it did in (21), when the higher functional projection was not involved. The morphological exponence of the subject features are seen only once in Tamil; only one head exhibits agreement overtly. When T is involved, it is the copula (23) and in the absence of T, Pred is the agreeing head, with the agreement morphemes hosted on the predicative adjective itself (21).

### 4.3.3. What is an adjective in Tamil?

To summarise, adjectives in Tamil do not originate as a an independently defined category in the lexicon. The lexicon does contain some property concept denoting roots, but even these need to undergo certain derivational steps in order to be realised as adjectives. Essentially, adjectives in Tamil are formed in the syntactic component. Relative clauses are crucial to the formation of adjectives in Tamil. Relativising either an uncategorised root or a verbalised noun results in the formation of adjectives in Tamil. The adjectives derived in this fashion can be in the attributive/modificational as well as the predicative domain. In the former, the relativised root/verbalised noun (CP) is merged as an adjunct to the Noun Phrase, and in the latter CP is merged as complement to Pred. In both these structural configurations, the relativised structures are interpreted as adjectives in Tamil.

| | Attributive | Predicative |
|---|---|---|
| Root + Relativiser Strategy | [Root + REL] as adjunct to NP | [Root + REL] as complement to Pred |
| N + V + Relativiser Strategy | [N +V+ REL] as adjunct to NP | [N + V + REL] as complement to Pred |

Table 1: What is an Adjective in Tamil?

## 5. The distinction between attributive and predicative adjectives

Attributive and predicative adjectives are differentiated based on their structural position: the former occurs as an adjunct to the Noun Phrase, while the latter is the object of the predicate. In Tamil, adjectives in both these positions are derived from the same underlying structure – in both cases, (reduced) relative clauses are crucially involved. It is by relativising property-concept denoting roots and verbalised nouns that adjectives in both positions are composed. Given such a configuration it is of particular relevance that, despite these underlying similarities, the syntax of attributive and predicative adjectives in Tamil are kept distinct.

Essentially, even a grammar without lexically demarcated adjectives (such as that of Tamil) seeks to make structural and principled distinctions between the attributive and predicative versions of adjectives. Both are derived using identical structural mechanisms, but there are two salient features that set them apart: Agreement and Finiteness.

(i) **Agreement:** A major difference between attributive and predicative adjectives in Tamil is that the former is completely devoid of agreement, and the latter has either partial or full phi feature agreement, depending on the head that participates in agreement. As illustrated above, the attributive domain does not contain any probes, and therefore does not display any agreement relations with the noun it modifies. The morphological shape of the adjective remains invariant regardless of the featural make-up of the head Noun Phrase. In contrast, the adjectives in the predicative domain exhibit two patterns of agreement with the subject. When the agreeing head is T, there is full phi agreement with the subject, and when an overt copula is absent, the agreeing head is Pred. In this case, the adjective agrees with the subject in number and gender to the exclusion of person features.

(ii) **Finiteness:** The second key difference between modificational and predicative adjectives is in terms of the expression of finiteness. Attributive adjectives, which only modify the head Noun Phrase, are present inside the DP, and thus, do not carry any tense information. Predicative adjectives, on the other hand, are anchored in time – as indicated by the presence of Pred/T. In these configurations, the predicative adjective exists on a point in the timescale, and tense information is overtly marked on the copula.

These are the two ways in which Tamil differentiates between attributive and predicative adjectives. Using these strategies, adjectives that were derived from the same underlying structure can still be differentiated on the basis of structural properties.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper provided a sketch of adjectives in Tamil. The springboard for this paper is the existing claim that Tamil does not have any adjectives; there may be some certain modifiers with nominal or verbal origins. However, closer inspection into these modifiers revealed that they follow several characteristic traits exhibited by adjectives cross-linguistically, making it clear that they should be understood as adjectives. Following this reanalysis, the paper also provided the structural representations underlying these derived adjectives in Tamil, and how they occur in attributive and predicative domains.

## References

Alexiadou, Artemis. 2014. The syntax of adjectives. In Andrew Carnie, Daniel Siddiqi and Yosuke Sato (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Syntax*, 89–107. London: Routledge.

Amritavalli, Raghavachary. 2019. Morphology in Dravidian languages. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*.

Baker, Mark. C. 2008. *The Syntax of Agreement and Concord*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baker, Mark. C. 2011. When agreement is for number and gender but not person. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 29, 875–915.

Cinque, Guglielmo. 2010. *The Syntax of Adjectives: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jayaseelan, Karattuparambil Achuthan and Raghavachary Amritavalli. 2017. *Dravidian Syntax and Universal Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kayne, Richard S. 1994. *The Antisymmetry of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Krishnamurti, Bhadiraju. 2003. *The Dravidian Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Menon, Mythili. 2014. Property concepts and the apparent lack of adjectives in Dravidian. In Pritha Chandra and Richa Srishti (eds.), *The Lexicon–Syntax Interface: Perspectives from South Asian languages*, 25–52. John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1075/la.209.02men.
Menon, Mythili. 2013. The apparent lack of adjectives in Malayalam and other related languages. In Nobu Goto, Koichi Otaki, Atsushi Sato and Kensuke Takita (eds.) *Proceedings of Glow-in-Asia IX 2012*, 157–171.