

Is it an adjective or a noun?

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Special to The Daily Yomiuri

Imagine a language where “pretty” was a noun, and “same” was both an adjective and a noun. Unlikely, you say? Well, if you’re learning Japanese, read on, because you’re studying such a language!

In a previous article I discussed that Japanese verbs and adjectives have form restrictions (verbs end *u* or *ru*, adjectives end *ai*, *ii*, *ui* or *oi*). Because these form restrictions are strict, borrowed words almost always become nouns. Even borrowed verbs become nouns. To use them as “verbs” the versatile *suru* is added, creating a compound verb: *repōto-suru* (to report), *kopi-suru* (to copy), *komyunikētō-suru* (to communicate).

So, what happens to foreign adjectives? The same rules apply. We cannot possibly expect foreign words to conform to the strict rules held for Japanese adjectives. The words inevitably become nouns; that is to say, they *behave* as nouns.

Despite this obvious fact, most Japanese textbooks call these words “adjectives,” or more specifically “*na*-adjectives.” This is only because the original foreign word was an adjective. I challenge this naming convention, for the sake of people learning Japanese.

Why they are called “*na*-adjectives” requires us to first look at “regular” adjectives and nouns. In Japanese, modifying nouns with adjectives is simple; put the adjective in front: *omoshiroi shimbun* (an interesting paper), *atarashii hon* (a new book), etc. However, when noun X modifies noun Y, the connective particle *no* is necessary: *kyō no shimbun* (today’s paper), *watashi no hon* (my book), *Tokyo eki no soba* (near Tokyo Station), etc. The only exception is *onaji* (same), which mostly behaves as a noun but does not require a connective: *onaji hon* (the same book) instead of *onaji no hon*. And you might occasionally encounter the “living fossil” *onajiku*. This is interesting because, even though *onaji* is a “noun,” the *-ku* suffix is exclusive to adjectives. But, in general, Japanese is very good at sticking to its rules; this is one of very few exceptions.

When a “*na*-adjective” X modifies a noun Y, the connective *na* is employed, instead of *no*: *shikku na nekutai* (a chic tie), *torendā na kōto* (a trendy coat), etc. Although these are French and English words, a good number of “*na*-adjectives” not realized by most Japanese to be loanwords exist: *kirei* (pretty;

clean) and *benri* (convenient) are examples from Chinese.

Most Chinese-origin words have been part of Japanese for so long that they are integral to it, like many Greek- and Latin-origin words are thought of as English.

Apart from these loanwords, whether Chinese, English, or other, there are a number of purely Japanese “*na*-adjectives,” like *shizuka* (calm, quiet), and *odayaka* (peaceful). They invariably take *na* when modifying nouns: *shizuka na tokoro* (a quiet place), *odayaka na hanashiai* (a peaceful discussion), etc.

Many words, whether foreign or Japanese, may take either connective when modifying nouns: *dame* (no good), *daijōbu* (OK), *genki* (good spirits), *nimaim* (handsome), *kenkō* (health or healthy). Hence: *dame na/no hi* (no good day when one is available), *raishū daijōbu na/no hito* (the person who is available next week), *kare no genki no/na wake* (the reason he is in good spirits), *nimaim no/na otoko* (a handsome guy), *watashi no kenkō no/na himitsu* (my health secret), etc.

As you can see, sometimes it’s pretty difficult to determine whether a word is a noun or an adjective just by its meaning. Even in English this can be true. Can you say that the word “fun” is an adjective or a noun? Its meaning is adjective-like, but you don’t say (or at least grammarians say you shouldn’t), “This is very fun,” because “fun” is a noun. Or rather, because it behaves as a noun, it belongs to the noun class. (However, these days this noun is often treated as an adjective: “This is more fun,” “This is a fun game”—traditionally unacceptable usages).

For the sake of foreign learners of Japanese, who must very consciously strive to use the language like natives, it is more useful and practical to think of the words they learn not as “*na*-adjectives” but as “*na*-nouns.” This is because they behave as nouns: You don’t say *genkiku nai*, but *genki ja nai*; not *kirei katta*, but *kirei datta*. This is just like saying *Nihonjin ja nai*, and *Nihonjin datta*, etc. Also, male and female styles of speech are differentiated by the word class. For example, *genki da yo* sounds masculine while *genki yo* feminine, just like *Nihonjin da yo* sounds masculine while *Nihonjin yo* feminine.

There once was an English word used as an adjective instead of a noun—a very unusual case. That was *nauī*, from the English word “now,” whose meaning was “trendy.” Although this word is almost no longer used, it was then an adjective: *nauī hito* (trendy person), *nauku nai* (not trendy), etc. To the best of my knowledge, this was the only ever case where a foreign word became an adjective.

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