

The Big Mess: an LFG Analysis

Doug Arnold & Louisa Sadler
University of Essex

The so-called 'Big Mess' construction (BMC) in English, involves an adjectival expression containing one of a limited number of Degree ('Deg') words, including *too*, *so*, *as*, *this*, *that*, and *how*, appearing before the determiner, in what we will call the BM position, as in (1). As (2) indicates, adjectivals which do not include a Degree word are excluded from this position. Instead they occur in what we will call the 'canonical' position after the determiner, as in (3). Degree modified adjectives are normally excluded from this position, see (4).

- (1) She made too rude a remark (for me to repeat).
- (2) *She made (very) rude a remark . . .
- (3) She made a (very) rude remark . . .
- (4) *She made a too rude remark . . .

The construction poses a number of challenges, and despite considerable attention over a long period, it has proved resistant to analysis in all frameworks (Kim and Sells (2011), Kay and Sag (2012) provide the most descriptively satisfactory accounts to date, but are still not without difficulties); and there do not appear to any LFG analyses at all. This paper will provide a descriptively appealing LFG account of the construction, which compares favourably with alternatives.

The two most interesting characteristics of the BMC relate to the conditions under which a Degree word licenses the BMC, and restrictions on the determiner that follows the BM. As regards the first, it is striking that the licensing Deg need not be a direct modifier of the adjective in the BM: in (5), the licensing word *as* is modified by *nearly*, and is a modifier of *impressively*, itself a modifier of *rude*.

- (5) Nearly *as* impressively rude a remark

The second characteristic of the BMC is a strict requirement that the determiner be *a* or *an*. No other determiner is permitted, including other indefinites (like *no*), or plural determiners, or the 'zero' determiner – hence uncountable nouns and bare plurals are impossible:

- (6) *She made too rude no/the/every remark (for me to repeat).
- (7) *She made too rude \emptyset /several remarks (for me to repeat).
- (8) *She serves too expensive coffee (for us to afford).

Notice that these restrictions are absent with post-nominal modifiers, where any Degree word is compatible with any determiner:

- (9) She made a remark too rude (for me to repeat).
- (10) She made no/the/every remark too rude (for me to repeat).
- (11) She made \emptyset /several remarks too rude (for me to repeat).
- (12) She serves coffee too expensive (for us to afford).

In other respects, the BMC is more straightforward. Overall, an expression like *too rude a remark* is clearly an NP: it appears to have exactly the distribution one would expect for a singular indefinite NP containing *a* (as the full paper will demonstrate, it can be used predicatively, as an apposition, as subject, direct or indirect object, as object of a preposition, and has the full range of expected interpretations). Similarly, the expression that follows *a* appears to be a normal N', for example, it can contain normal pre-nominal and post-nominal modifiers, and one sees the normal *a/an* alternation:

- (13) a. That was too rude a casual remark about his work for him to forgive.
b. That was too rude a declaration . . . (**an*)
c. That was too rude an assertion . . . (**a*)

Modulo the requirement that it contain a Degree word, the BM adjectival also appears to be a normal pre-nominal adjectival. All gradable adjectives are allowed there (the adjectives must be gradable in order to be modified by a Degree word), with precisely the range of meanings one would get if they appeared directly after the determiner. For example, pre-nominally, when modifying an action nominal, *hard* can be interpreted adverbially, so *hard worker* can be interpreted as 'one who works hard'. This adverbial interpretation is not possible when *hard* is used predicatively, or post-nominally, where it has to be interpreted as the opposite of *soft*, cf. *as a worker she is hard, a worker hard and dedicated*. Notice the adverbial use of *hard* is perfectly compatible with the BMC: *too hard a worker to be accused of shirking*.

Moreover the only adjectives that are allowed are ones which can appear pre-nominally (e.g. adjectives with complements are excluded from the BMC, as in (14), just as from 'canonical' position, as in (15)):

- (14) *too fond of children a person (cf. a person too fond of children)
 (15) *a (very) fond of children person (cf. a person very fond of children)

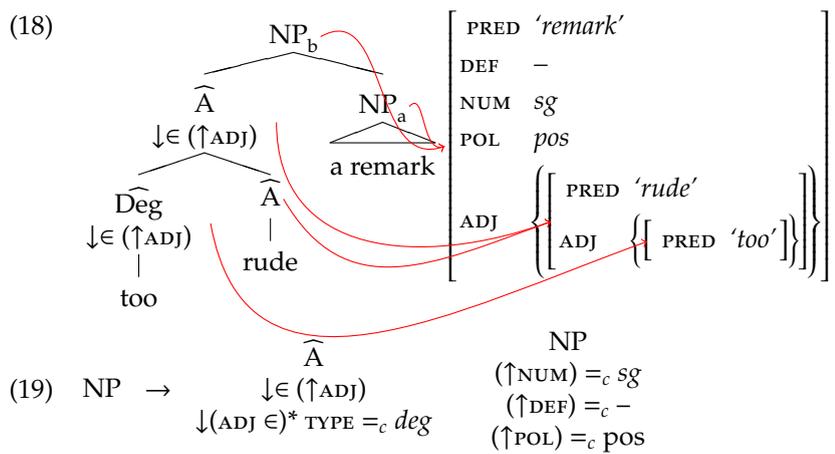
Following Arnold and Sadler (2013), we can account for this if we take the BM to be an \widehat{A} (it follows that sub-constituents will also be ‘hat’ categories, e.g. \widehat{Adv} , \widehat{Deg}).

Coordination facts suggest a binary c-structure structure. In particular, notice that *a* seems to form a constituent with the following nominal (the interpretation of (16) makes it clear that *too honest* is coordinated with *a man*, both being modified by *too honest*):

- (16) But Mr Utterson was too honest a man and a lawyer to do that. [BNC]
 (17) too honest [[a man] and [a lawyer]]

As regards f-structure, the modification relations between the elements of the BMC are relatively clear, e.g. *too rude a remark*, *too* is an adjunct of *rude*, which is an adjunct of *remark*.

These observations, though straightforward, are problematic for many analyses (the full paper includes a literature review that substantiates this). However, they can be captured straightforwardly in an LFG analysis if the c- and f- structures as in (18). The crucial rule is given in (19). (The *a* and *b* subscripts on the NPs are just for naming convenience). The f-structure is precisely what one would have for a post-nominal use of an AP containing a BMC licenser (e.g. *a remark too rude (for me to repeat)*).



The constraints on NP ensure it is singular and indefinite (hence no plural or definite determiners are allowed), the +POL requirement excludes indefinites with *no* (cf. **too rude no remark*). In other respects, the lower NP, NP_a , will have a normal internal makeup, as required. Similarly, from the outside, NP_b looks like any other indefinite singular NP, and will have the distribution noted above. The constraints on the \widehat{A} ensure that it is an adjunct and that it contains a Degree word adjunct, either a direct adjunct of the \widehat{A} or an adjunct of an adjunct (etc.): thus accounting for (5) as well as (1)-(4). Note this account is independent of, but entirely compatible with, existing accounts of the complementation of Degree words (i.e. the dependency between *too* and *for me to repeat*).

The full paper will supplement this account in three ways. First, it will provide a critical comparison with extant approaches in other frameworks, pointing out their descriptive shortcomings. Second, it will explore a number of analytic alternatives that the LFG apparatus makes available (e.g. accounts which are more lexically or semantically driven). Third, it will consider a wider range of data. In particular, it will show how associated restrictions on ‘canonical’ position can be captured: it is often assumed that BMC licensers are excluded from ‘canonical’ position. This is untrue. For example, though a string like *a too rude remark* in (4), is ungrammatical, it becomes grammatical if the Degree word is pre-modified, compare *a far too rude remark*. We will show how the analysis can be extended to handle this.

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