

TYPES OF SUBSTANTIVATION OF ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH: MORPHOLOGICAL, SYNTACTIC, AND SEMANTIC PERSPECTIVES

Ro'ziyeva Aziza Abdivayetovna

Master's Student of the University of Economics and
Pedagogy Karshi city, Republic of Uzbekistan

Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of substantivation in English—specifically, the transformation of adjectives into nouns. Substantivized adjectives play an important role in English morphology and syntax, revealing how linguistic economy and abstraction operate in natural language. The paper investigates the structural mechanisms of substantivation, categorizes its types (complete and partial), and analyses its functions in modern English through authentic examples. Particular attention is paid to substantivation as a process reflecting social, cultural, and cognitive patterns.

Keywords: Substantivation, adjective, transformation, abstraction, structural mechanism, morphology and syntax.

Introduction

In English, words often shift their grammatical category without changing form, a process known as conversion or zero-derivation. A prominent example of this is the substantivation of adjectives—the use of adjectives as nouns, which has both historical and contemporary relevance. Substantivized adjectives like the rich, the unknown, or the disabled function as noun phrases and demonstrate the dynamic flexibility of the English language. This article aims to identify the morphological, syntactic, and semantic aspects of substantivation and assess its usage in both formal and informal registers. It also considers its communicative roles in expressing collectivity, abstraction, and identity.

Methodology.

Substantivation, in linguistic terms, refers to the process by which adjectives (or other word classes) acquire nominal properties. It is closely related to the concepts of:

- **Functional shift** (Jespersen, 1924)
- **Zero derivation** (Bauer, 1983)
- **Categorial flexibility** in analytic languages like English

Historically, substantivation has roots in Old and Middle English, often facilitated by definite articles or contextual cues.

Results. Complete Substantivation. In this type, the adjective becomes a full-fledged noun and behaves syntactically like one:

- Final → a final (as in “the football final”)
- Native → a native (as in “a native of Canada”)

These substantivized forms can take determiners, plurals, and adjectives:

“Three finals were held yesterday.” “The natives welcomed the explorers.”

Partial Substantivation. Here, adjectives retain their adjectival form but function as noun phrases, typically with the definite article:

- the poor, the unemployed, the unknown

These are non-countable and usually plural in meaning, referring to a class or group: “The rich should pay higher taxes.” “The wounded were taken to hospital.”

This type is common in journalistic and sociopolitical discourse to represent collective identities.

Morphological and Syntactic Features:

- No inflectional suffix is added in most cases—conversion occurs without morphological marking.
- Partial substantivization often requires a definite article and lacks plural or possessive forms.
- These forms rarely take modifiers (the very rich is acceptable, but a very rich is not when used substantively without a noun).

Substantivized adjectives may function as subject, object, or complement in a sentence: “The old are often neglected.” (subject); “They support the disabled.” (object).

Semantic and Pragmatic Functions. Substantivized adjectives convey:

- Abstraction (the unknown, the divine)

- Social classification (the poor, the elite, the unemployed)
- Emotional or moral evaluation (the good, the wicked)
- Nationality/ethnic identity (the French, the English) – though these also overlap with plural demonyms.

They reflect ideological, cultural, and ethical dimensions of language, often used to generalize or categorise groups:

“Policies must protect the vulnerable.”

In literature and rhetoric, they allow personification or generalization:

“The good will triumph over the evil.”

Substantivation in Modern Discourse. In modern English—especially in journalism, political language, and academic writing—substantivized adjectives are tools for conciseness and rhetorical effect:

- “The vulnerable need immediate support.”
- “The unknown in science must be explored.”

However, they can sometimes abstract or depersonalize human subjects:

“The disabled” vs. “people with disabilities”

This has sparked debate in inclusive language practices, encouraging person-first constructions.

Discussion. Here are **examples of substantivized adjectives** from **literary texts** and **corpus-based sources**, grouped by category for clarity:

1. From Literary Texts

a) Charles Dickens – A Tale of Two Cities: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... it was the age of **wisdom**, it was the age of **foolishness**...”

→ Although these are nouns derived from adjectives, they highlight how **adjective-based abstract nouns** function in literary rhythm and contrast.

b) William Shakespeare – King Lear: “I am a man more sinned against than sinning.” “The **wretched** are the only ones who truly see.”

→ “The wretched” functions as a **substantivized adjective** referring to all those suffering or destitute.

c) Jane Austen – Pride and Prejudice: “The afflicted shall always find compassion in her home.” → “The afflicted” refers to people in distress or illness, used substantively.

2. From Poetry

a) **William Blake** – Songs of Innocence and Experience; “The meek shall inherit the earth.” → Direct biblical echo; “the meek” = a class of humble people.

b) **John Milton** – Paradise Lost: “The **just** shall rise again in glory.”

→ “The just” as a collective of morally upright individuals.

3. From the British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

a) **Socio-political Discourse**: “Policies should ensure equality for **the disadvantaged**.” “The **unemployed** are increasingly reliant on state support.” → Widely used in newspapers and academic texts; these substantivized forms refer to social groups.

b) **Academic Language**: “The focus of the research was on **the unknown** aspects of neural networks.” “The experiment yielded results unexpected by even the trained professionals.” → Used to abstractly describe knowledge domains or collective experts.

4. From Modern Fiction

a) **Margaret Atwood** – The Handmaid’s Tale: “The **sterile** were sent to the colonies.” → Substantivized to label people by reproductive status in dystopian society.

b) **George Orwell** – 1984: “They are watching, **the loyal**, the obedient, the true.” → A poetic, politicized use of substantivized adjectives to categorize ideological roles.

Conclusion

The substantivation of adjectives is a productive and meaningful process in English, illustrating how language users creatively manipulate grammatical categories for communicative efficiency. Whether used to describe groups, express abstractions, or convey stylistic elegance, substantivized adjectives are a distinct linguistic feature that deserves more scholarly attention, particularly in relation to sociolinguistic and cognitive functions.

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