It is a typological commonplace that adjectives are often intermediate in their grammatical characteristics between the two major categories of nouns and verbs. Typological studies on adjectival predicates (e.g. Wetzer 1996) demonstrate that there are languages that employ both noney and verby morpho-syntactic strategies for its property concept words (switch-adjective type). Stassen (1997) argues that in a switch-adjective language the choice of a morpho-syntactic strategy for predicative encoding is controlled by the time stability principle. On the other hand, Holton (1999) in his analysis of a switch-adjective language Tobelo demonstrates that there can be discourse factors at work: nominal property words tend to modify nouns introducing new referents and verbal property words tend to modify already established referents. His results are consonant with Thompson’s (1988) study that argues that the mixed categoriality of adjectives can be explained by the discourse functions of property words, since they are employed to modify established referents (as verbs do) and to introduce new referents (as nouns do).

The aim of this paper is to present a study of Miyako-Hirara dialect of Ryukyan (a sister language to Japanese) as a switch-adjective language and to demonstrate factors that determine the choice of the encoding option. We argue that Miyako-Hirara is an example of a language where distribution of the encoding options is motivated by pragmatic factors (informational status). However, it can not be explained by the pragmatic functions verbs and nouns play in discourse. Rather, Miyako-Hirara developed a switch-adjective encoding, in order to retain the functional distinction between predicates in focus and in presupposition after its morphological marking was lost.

The Miyako-Hirara dialect is spoken on the Miyako island of Okinawan archipelago, which lies 290 km to the south-west from the main island. There are three paradigms for adjectives in Hirara dialect: attachment of a bare stem, reduplicated forms and the use of a suffix –kaZ. In this paper we will focus of the predicative uses of the latter two strategies. Syntactically, reduplicated forms behave like nouns in a number of ways:

1. They employ genitive marker nu in the attributive position.
2. Like nouns, they can appear in the predicative position without a copula in the present tense but require a copula in the past tense.

On the other hand, the syntactic behavior of kaZ-forms resembles that of verbs:

1. Like verbs, they do not morphologically distinguish between attributive and predicative forms.
2. They do not need a copula.
3. They employ a nominalizer –su.
Let us now consider the difference in the usage of nominal and verbal forms.

Nominal forms are employed as predicates in the topic-comment structure, where the subject introduces a referent that is available as a topic for discussion and the predicate elaborates on it. The topic-comment structure is the unmarked focus type (Lambrecht 1994).

(1) kunu pito: taka:taka/*takakaZ
    this person.TOP high

‘This man is tall.’

On the other hand, the verbal –kaZ forms of adjectival predicates are used in the sentences where the focus falls not on the predicate but on one of its arguments (argument-focus structures, cf. Lambrecht 1994).

(2) kunu jama nu du *taka:taka/takakaZ
    this mountain NOM FOC high

‘THIS MOUNTAIN is high.’

Verbal forms of adjectival predicates are also employed in subordinate clauses and in those contexts where the properties they refer to are assumed to be known to the hearer from the previous discourse or from a pool of general knowledge.

(3) uja:si takakaZ sa
    as.we.know high PART

As we know, he is tall.

These examples demonstrate that the distribution of morpho-syntactic predicative strategies for an adjective is determined by the discourse factors, namely informational status: if the adjectival predicate is in the focus domain, i.e. if the property denoted by the adjective is new to the hearer, the nominal strategy (reduplicated forms) is used. If the existence of such a property is presupposed, i.e. the speaker assumes it to be familiar to or likely to be taken for granted by the hearer, the verbal strategy (–kaZ forms) is employed.

However, the Miyako-Hirara data are surprising in light of Thompson’s (1988) analysis. We would expect verbal forms of adjectival predicates to be associated with established (topical) referents and therefore to appear in the topic-comment structure. Nevertheless, Miyako-Hirara adjectives demonstrate an opposite pattern. In order to explain this distribution, we will turn to the other dialects of Ryukyuan.

1. Many Ryukyuan dialects (as well as Old Japanese) employ morphologically different forms in order to mark the informational status of the predicate. In topic-comment constructions the predicate takes a finite form, while in argument-focus constructions it takes a non-finite (usually attributive) form. However, in Miyako-Hirara there is no morphological distinction between attributive and predicative forms of verbs (and therefore verbal adjectives).
2. The reduplicated forms of adjectives are a Miyako-Hirara innovation, since they are not observed in other Ryukyuan dialects. Employing nominal morpho-syntactic strategy, they do distinguish between attributive (genitive marker) and predicative (zero/copula) forms, i.e. have a morphologically distinctive predicative form.

3. Thus we suggest that reduplicated forms of adjectives were developed to compensate for the absence of a specialized morphological form for marking a predicate in focus. It is the flexibility of adjectives as a category that enabled Miyako-Hirara dialect to employ both nominal and verbal options for its adjectival predicates and thus retain a functionally important distinction.

The case of Miyako-Hirara might demonstrate a more complicated scenario for the development of a switch-adjective language, where the choice of encoding option is motivated by pragmatic factors.

References