Parts of Speech

Particulars, universals and theoretical constructs

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1. Introduction

This volume collates a selection of studies first presented at a conference on Parts of Speech (PoS) held at the University of Amsterdam in June 2006. The aim of that conference was to bring together approaches as different as possible, from the theoretical to the descriptive, the synchronic to the diachronic, variation and language contact to acquisition. The studies introduced below reflect the current concerns within the field in different domains: theoretical concerns regarding the status of PoS; descriptive puzzles in the application of PoS to a range of diverse languages; and elaborations of models for PoS.

Since the earliest studies of human language, it has been recognized that the elements that together make a sentence come in different types. It was first recognized by Plato (Cratylus) that a sentence is built from a nominal part (onoma) and a verbal part (rhexa). Later, Dionysius Thrax in his Techne Grammatike developed a theory in which eight different word-classes were distinguished. In order to make the relevant distinctions, a combination of morphological, syntactic and semantic criteria was applied.

It seems safe to say that actual practice in present-day linguistics does not differ much from that of two millennia ago where a set of categories is distinguished, among which the 'lexical' categories noun, verb and adjective, and that morphological, semantic and syntactic criteria all help us make the relevant distinctions. Verbs are roughly those elements that typically express actions, come with tense, aspect and mood markers, and are the heads of predicates. In contrast, nouns typically refer to objects, come with case and number markers, and are heads of arguments. Adjectives most typically are modifying elements that often show agreement with the modified element.

However, as shown in the approaches to PoS presented in this volume, it is not true that categorial assignment is completely unproblematic; far from it. Different descriptive traditions, as well as different linguistic theories, may assume different sets of
categories, applying different criteria to set them apart. In fact, one of the most interesting questions is whether PoS should be treated as descriptive tools or whether there is actually a core set of PoS that can be postulated as universal constructs. A related question is whether essentially these alleged universal PoS should be defined semantically, syntactically, or otherwise.

The diversity encountered in the study of PoS, the contrasting perspectives that arise from different theories and the methodological choices implied in selecting a syntactic, semantic or other analysis have led Haspelmath (2007) to suggest that it would be impossible in principle to come up with any cross-linguistically valid formal category, because categories of language structure are ultimately language-specific. According to this view there are no pre-established cross-linguistic categories that linguists can choose from in their descriptions, and therefore, they have no other choice than to “adopt the Boasian approach of positing special language-particular categories for each language, unless they do not mind Anglo-centric or Dyirbalo-centric descriptions that give a distorted picture of their language” (Haspelmath 2007: 121). In this sense, he suggests that, as long as the evidence for universal categories is more negative than positive, we need to be careful about the generalizations we derive on the nature of PoS in linguistic analyses.

Structural analyses of PoS often lead to controversial category assignment which, according to Haspelmath (2007), is futile if the categories under discussion are not cross-linguistically compatible in the first place. A semantically-based classification may be somewhat more promising, because semantically-based categories do not need to match identically but should simply match in communicative function, in terms of overall ‘translatability’ (Haspelmath 2007: 128). However, as pointed out by Newmeyer (2007), many linguists have successfully made comparisons between syntactic categories in different languages and have come up with explanations for their different behavior in those very languages. How would this be possible in the alleged absence of formal cross-linguistic categories?

2. **Overview of the volume**

The first paper in this volume presents a fresh take on PoS in sign languages, and offers a thorough methodological study on how to identify PoS in the first place, something often taken for granted in other linguistic domains. In comparing *Deutsche Gebärdensprache* (German Sign Language) with Kata Kolok, a Balinese community sign language, Schwager and Zeshan opt for a basic language-specific assignment of PoS based on cross-linguistically valid criteria, thus avoiding the imposition of pre-established categories in linguistic analysis. This serves as a useful reminder that broad generalizations across PoS systems may achieve the overarching goal of producing taxonomies of languages, but do not necessarily lead to a deeper understanding of
what is specific and what is universal cross-linguistically. This issue is taken up in the second paper, in which Lehmann puts forward a strong statement against the universal categoriality of roots. In his view, postulating universal categories is misleading; this is essentially a claim of an empirical-theoretical dichotomy which, if accepted, questions whether theory-building can actually explain language-specific properties of language. When we shift our attention away from the familiar ground of Indo-European structure, it becomes obvious that our notions of PoS are still heavily based on the study of Greek and Latin grammars, and that one often assumes too much about the alleged universality of the linguistic categories derived from such observation. This is clear in the analysis of PoS in Late Archaic Chinese (LAC) discussed by Bisang in the third paper in this volume. LAC is a precategorial language, i.e. a language in which there is no assignment of categoriality in the lexicon, the result of loss of morphosyntactic material over time. N and V are interpreted based solely on argument structure, as the meaning of lexical items is derived from the specific construction in which they appear. This strict formal requirement for PoS assignment, according to Bisang, argues against universality of PoS in the lexicon.

In the two following contributions, we are offered new perspectives on a class of words with a very tricky status: adjectives. Based on the analysis of Tukang Besi, an Austronesian language of Indonesia, Donohue shows that the semantic prototypes that can be identified as ‘adjectives’ in fact lack a distinctive morphosyntax, but pattern with either N or V depending on their discourse function, and must therefore be assigned variable categorial status. The study of the Miyako-Hirara dialect of the Ryuky Islands (Japan) likewise presents us with a ‘split’ status in the adjectival domain: the language, treated as switch-adjective by Koloskova and Ohori, codes adjectives as either N or V depending on information structure. What is furthermore of interest is that this is the result of morphosyntactic loss, which suggests that PoS distinction at the lexical level is no robust property of language (see also Bisang, this volume). It may indeed be the case that only very few of the many PoS observed cross-linguistically have universal status, perhaps as few as two. This is argued for in the paper by Gil, which offers yet another dimension of the syntax of Jakarta Indonesian, where only two syntactic categories can be distinguished: N and V. The paper looks at children’s acquisition of categories within constructionist approaches and suggests that categorization starts at a very broad level and gets more specific over time.

It is obvious that, if universal aspects of linguistic categorization can be uncovered, the acquisition domain is in need of further investigation. With this in mind, Don and Erkenlis look at another dimension of acquisition, namely phonological cues in adults’ classification. Their study shows that phonological cues matter in the classification of Dutch nouns, and proposes that children, too, may use phonology in assigning categorial membership to lexemes.

Yet another domain in need of much more investigation is language contact, for the potential it holds of revealing degrees of compatibility between PoS systems of
different languages. As shown in Nichols’ contribution, the grammatical complexity of Zuni noun roots poses constraints on borrowability, leaving some hope of identifying borrowability constraints that have so far eluded us.

Three papers in this volume look at the nature of PoS within functional theory-construction, in particular within the approach known as the ‘Amsterdam Model’ (Anward 2004). Salazar-Garcia offers an evaluation of the strengths and the weaknesses of the model, in particular in arguing for a constituent-based, rather than language-based taxonomy of PoS. A specific claim of this paper relates to Spanish quantifiers, the analysis of which leads the author to claim that degree words are lexical, rather than morphosyntactic. Rijkhoff discusses the dichotomy between flexible and rigid PoS and proposes a more sophisticated yet very challenging definition of nouns: rather than one unified category, he argues, we may have to postulate at least four different categories, based on semantic and syntactic criteria. In the final study, Hengeveld and van Lier present a cross-linguistic investigation of 23 varieties and set out to map the correlation between lexical and clausal constructs based on their comparable functional properties. In doing so, their study moves the Amsterdam Model into a new domain of grammatical theory, Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008).

3. Final remarks

In collating a set of diverse approaches to PoS we wish to present the reader with a combination of explorations in language-specific aspects of PoS, novel conceptualization as well as elaborations of existing theories, which is representative of the current concerns, challenges and potential solutions to one of the oldest and most fundamental aspect of linguistic enquiry. Since PoS often constitute the tools with which we approach the earliest stages of linguistic analysis, we can never be too careful about how precisely we think we understand them.

References


