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Concerning the Universality of the Noun vs. Verb Distionction

1. General Remarks

Word-classes are generally defined as clusters of morphological, syntactic, semantic (or ontological), and functional (also misleadingly called 'pragmatic') features. This is unobjectionable, but may not be very perspicuous. To clarify the issue, let us concentrate on the two presumably universal word-classes, i.e. **noun** and **verb**, and let us ask the following questions: 1) What would a language look like which does **not** possess the noun vs. verb distinction? 2) Are there such languages?

There seem to be (at least) two types of situation where we would be willing to say that a language lacks the N vs. V distinction. First, within the canonical sentence structure there are two distinct positions (or 'slots') for **reference** and **predication**, and both '**thing**-words' and '**action**-words' (i.e. the prima facie candidates for nouns and verbs) may freely occur in both positions, and — in particular — in any pair consisting of one thing-word and one action-word the two are freely interchangeable in both positions. Second, the sentence structure consists of two *bona fide* predications, i.e. 'thing-predication' and 'action-predication', with pronominal arguments taking care of reference. — Let us spell this out.

2. Reversible Reference and Predication by Structurally Identical Thing-Words and Action-Words

Sentence =	[Reference	—	Predication]
	[R-x	—	P-y]
a)	man	—	walk
	walk	—	man
b)	milit-**es**	—	current-**es**
	current-**es**	—	milit-**es**

c) **the**-man — walk-**s**
the-walk — man-**s**

These examples are taken from stilized or imaginary English and Latin. In addition to their mutual order, the reference-word *R* and the predication-word *P* are marked by *x* and *y*, respectively. In 2a, *x* and *y* are zero. In 2b, *x* and *y* are non-zero and identical. (The meanings of the two imaginary sentences are 'Soldiers are running-ones' and 'Running-ones are soldiers'.) In 2c, *x* and *y* are non-zero and non-identical.

It is crucially important to notice that in all three cases *R* and *P* are **structurally identical**. In 2a this is self-evident, because there is no structure (apart from the word order). 2c is meant to be understood in such a way that ***the-[R P]-s*** constitutes the **syntactic frame** in which words are placed. (Thus, one should get rid of the idea that ***-s*** is part of [verbal] inflection.) It follows that *man* and *walk,* both of which can be placed both in the R-slot and in the P-slot, are words with no internal structure (which means that they are structurally identical, just as in 2a). 2b may be understood in two ways: either there is the syntactic frame ***[R]-es [P]-es*** (with no structure in *R* and *P*) or there are two words **inflected** in the same way. Either way, *R* and *P* are structurally identical.

It seems uncontroversial to state that in these three cases there is no reason, first, to postulate two distinct classes of words, and even less reason (as it were) to call them 'nouns' and 'verbs'.

3. Two Predications (by Structurally Identical Thing-Words and Action-Words)

a) Symmetrical: Man(a) & Walk(a)
Walk(a) & Man(a)

b) Asymmetrical: Man(a), [Walk(a)](This)
Walk(a), [Man(a)] (This)

Here the full lexical units *Man* and *Walk* predicate while pronominal arguments (represented by *a*) refer. The structure of 3a is closely similar to the structure of predicate logic. In 3b there are still — in principle — two predications, but one of them assumes the referring function, as is shown by the fact that the determiner *This* has been added. (The structures is 3b could be paraphrased as 'This walking one is a man' and 'This man is a walking one'.)

Again, because thing-words and action-words behave in every respect in the same way, there is no reason to postulate two distinct word-classes (and to label them 'noun' and 'verb').

4. Examples

Now, are there languages that exemplify any of the five types of structure described above? For the present purpose, at least, this way of formulating the question is a little too presumptuous. It is better to speak of **constructions**, rather than of entire **languages**, satisfying (or not) one or another of the five types of structure. To be sure, as the number of N = V constructions increases in a given language, so does the likelihood that the language itself deserves to be labelled in the same way. — The following examples have been gathered somewhat at random. It goes without saying that others could be added.

Type 2a = ?. Personally, I do not know any convincing examples. Yet maybe the following piece of information is relevant here. Li & Thompson (1981) take it for granted that Modern (Mandarin) Chinese has the noun vs. verb distinction, based on co-occurrence relations between lexical units and various grammatical morphemes. In this respect Ancient Chinese seems to have been somewhat dissimilar: "The salient feature of Late Archaic Chinese is that it has relatively few morpho-syntactic structures beyond principles of constituent order, and the richest grammatical category is the class of utterance-final particles denoting mood, speaker's attitude and discourse functions. Even the distinction between such fundamental grammatical categories as nouns and verbs is often unclear from a text of the Late archaic period" (Li 1997: 276).

Type 2b = Ancient Tamil. — Consider the following example (due to Asko Parpola, in personal communication):

(1) malar-∅ micai-∅ eek-in-aan-∅ maaṉ aṭi-∅
flower-GEN upside-LOC walk-PRET-3SG&M-GEN power(ful) foot-LOC

ceer-nt-aar nila-∅ micai-∅ niṭu
arrive&at-PRET-3PL&HUM world-GEN upside-LOC long&time

vaal-v-aar
live-PRES/FUT-3PL&HUM
'Those who have arrived at the powerful feet of the one who walked over flowers will live long on the earth'

Both the indigenous tradition (expounded in the old grammar *Tolkaappiyam*) and the mainstream Western scholarship agree that the N vs. V distinction exists in Ancient Tamil. However, the situation seems a bit more complicated. The finite verb-forms of Ancient Tamil are identical with nominative forms of the main type of participle, as shown in (1) by the identity between *ceerntaar* (= reference-word) and *vaalvaar* (= predicate-word). (Similarly, *eekinaan*, which is here a participle, could also be the corresponding finite form.) Such word-forms are reversible in reference—predication constructions. To this extent, then, the N vs. V distinction has been neutralized.

It is also neutralized insofar as in those constructions which correspond to the copula constructions of Indo-European languages prima facie nouns must take personal endings. (Given the ambiguity mentioned above, the resulting constructions have the two meanings 'I am X' ~ 'I who am X', 'He is X' ~ 'He who is X'; etc.) In the discussion on the status of adjectives, it is agreed that the A vs. V distinction is neutralized when the property-word, or the word which would otherwise be A, inflects in the predicate function like V (cf. Pajunen 2000). The same argument applies to (would-be) nouns of Ancient Tamil. — On the other hand, those words which function as reference words with no endings (or with endings distinct from the finite = non-finite endings) qualify as genuine nouns. — Incidentally, the example (1) illustrates a curious fact about Ancient Tamil: although it had a rich case system (which has remained practically the same in Modern Tamil), the case endings could be freely deleted (cf. Lehmann 1994: 29, 52).

It may be added that Proto-Finnish exemplified the type 2b insofar as the affirmative finite third-person verb-forms of Modern Finnish descend from participles, i.e. nominal forms. There is, in fact, even today a perfect match between the structures of our imaginary Latin sentence and its actual Finnish counterpart; in the following example *P* stands for '(present) participle':

(2) milit-es curre-nt-es = sotilaa-t juokse-va-t
soldier-NOM&PL run-P-NOM&PL soldier-NOM&PL run-P-NOM&PL

Type 2c = Tongan. — Consider the following pair of examples (taken from Broschart 1997: 134):

(3) na'e lele e kau fefiné
PRET run ART PL&HUM woman&DEF
'The women were running'

(4) na'e fefine kotoa e kau lelé
PRET woman all ART PL&HUM run&DEF
'The ones running were all female'

In (3) and (4) there is the same syntactic frame, namely ***na'e [P] e [R]*** (with an accent on the last vowel of *R*, indicating definiteness), and both the P-slot and the R-slot may be filled by thing-words like *fefine* ('woman') and by action-words like *lele* ('run'). To the extent that this reversibility is valid, Tongan exemplifies the type 2c and has no noun vs. verb distinction. — Broschart (1997) also argues that some constructions that seem to exhibit N vs. V distinctions can be reduced to a single 'neutral' construction, but I shall not pursue this issue here.

Type 3a = Cayuga? — Consider the following example (from Sasse 1988: 192, with a slightly simplified orthography):

(5) he-kee'-é ho-honat-á-kate
(1SG→3SG&M)-younger&sibling-DEMINUTIVE (3SG&N→3G&M)-potato-LINK-be&much
'My younger brother has much potatoes'

(5) contains the full lexical units *kee'* (= 'younger sibling'), *honat* (= 'potato') and *kate* (= 'be much'). The units *-é* and *-á-* are here without importance. The crucial units are the prefixes *he-* and *ho-*. They are interpreted as portmanteau morphs for a pair of pronominal arguments standing in an agent—patient relation, i.e. *he-* = 'I—him', and *ho-* = 'It—him'. Accordingly, the sentence would have, in principle, the following reference—predication structure:

'Brother(I,him) & Potato-be-much(it,him)'

It is obvious at once that this structure matches exactly the type 3a, or the structure of predicate logic, with only the qualification that all predicates express **two**-place relations. — Sasse (1993) is careful to point out that predicates with action-like meanings are inflected in all combinations of persons and in all tenses, aspects, and moods, whereas the inflection of predicates with thing-like meanings is much more restricted. Yet, as he sees it, it would be wrong to call the former 'verbs' and the latter 'nouns' because noun and verb are opposite notions whereas in Cayuga the thing-words are a

subtype of, or included in, the action-words qua two-place predicates.

However, the preceding analysis of Cayuga has been called into question by Mithun (2000). Therefore the relevance of (5) to the present topic remains open. In any case, it is significant that the type 3a has quite explicitly been claimed to exist.

Type 3b = Straits Salish. — Consider the following pair of examples (from Jelinek & Demers 1994: 718, with a slightly simplified orthography); *ABS* stands for 'absolutive case':

(6) cey-∅ cə swəy'qə'
work-3ABS DET man
'He works, the (one who is a) man'

(7) swəy'qə'-∅ cə cey
man-3ABS DET work
'He (is a) man, the (one who) works'

At first glance, these examples seem to exemplify the type 2c above. However, Jelinek & Demers insist that the last word in both (6) and (7) is a genuine predicate; and they describe the function of determiners like *cə* as follows: "they do not function either as predicates or arguments. [Their] primary syntactic function is ... to derive referring expressions from underlying clauses" (p. 717).

Insofar as this characterization is valid, and insofar as (6) and (7) are representative of Straits Salish in general, this is indeed a language without the noun vs. verb distinction. The position of Jelinek & Demers acquires additional credibility from the fact that for those working within the generative paradigm it may not have been easy to reject the distinction between N and V, the two pillars of X-bar theory.

5. Qualifications and Implications

In the course of the preceding argument the following notions were introduced at different stages: thing vs. action (= semantic or ontological), reference vs. predication (= functional), syntactic frame (= syntactical), and inflection or the lack of it (= morphological). Thus, it is indeed the case that all these four levels, i.e. semantic, functional, syntactic, and morphological, are involved in defining word-classes.

In the five structures 2a–3c the dichotomy between reference and predication is taken for granted. This position seems to be justified by cross-linguistic evidence. To be sure, there are instances of 'pure' predication, like the Latin *pluit* ('it rains') and its exact Finnish equivalent *sataa*, but they always seem to be marginal. On the other hand, instances of pure reference — like *the baby*! — are clearly elliptical. One can also imagine, for instance, a 'mereological' type of language where the reference vs. predication distinction has been annulled entirely. However, natural language does not seem to be this type of language.

Moreover, it is not only the case that the reference vs. predication distinction has been assumed in what precedes. It has also been assumed that in a given sentence a distinction can always be made between the reference-word and the predication-word. There are well-known cases where this is not true, e.g. equative or identifying sentences, but as far as I can see, they can be ignored here.

In all examples above — perhaps apart from (5) — only **one**-place predication has been under scrutiny. For the sake of generality, the argumentation has to be extended to cover many-place predicates as well.

In what precedes, I have imposed rather strict constraints on the N vs. V neutralization, namely **structural identity** and **reversibility**. The former constraint rules out Tagalog as a N=V language. Although in Tagalog both action-words and thing-words can occur in the predicating position (and in the referring position as well, assuming that non-predication equals reference), they are not structurally identical, because the former, unlike the latter, inflect in aspect/tense and in voice (or focus). If one drops the constraint of structural identity, one is free to consider Tagalog as a N=V language (cf. Gil 2000).

The latter constraint rules out Wari' (an Amazonian language belonging to the Chapakuran family) as a N=V language. Because both thing-words and action-words of Wari' are uninflected, they are structurally identical (unlike thing-words and action-words of Tagalog). The standard word order of Wari' sentences is VOS, and in the basic sentence structure V is followed by a clitic which expresses tense/aspect/mood as well as person(s). Thus, the predicating position is to the left of this clitic. Thing-words too may occur in this position, but (basic forms of) action-words cannot occur to the right of the clitic (cf. Everett & Kern 1997). Thus, there is no reversibility, which means that the N vs. V distinction remains in force (as suggested by the use of V in what precedes).

Generally speaking, the N vs. V distinction seems to be valid in the

world's languages. But it is **not** absolutely valid. This is of crucial importance because it shows that **all** categories, even those which have been considered the most secure, are non-discrete or continuum-like. It is well known that among the word-classes the status of Adjective and Adposition is weaker than that of Noun and Verb, because the former are lacking in many languages. But now it has become common knowledge that the status of Noun and Verb has been undermined too. With hindsight, one cannot help wondering how generativism managed, with so much success, to portray the word-classes of English as universal, discrete categories, given that the universality of even the basic N vs. V distinction has been contested on cross-linguistic evidence at least since Winkler (1887).

6. But is it all just One Big Mistake?

Croft (2000) claims that word-classes do not exist at the level of particular languages, which entails that everything that has been said above is just one big mistake. It seems appropriate to comment, in conclusion, on this interesting claim.

Before going into the details, one Croftian implication needs to be pointed out in particular. Linguistic research both in the Western tradition and in the non-Western traditions, for instance in the Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Tamil, Arabic, and Japanese traditions, has been crucially based on the concept of word-class (cf. Itkonen 1991, 2000, 2001).Where would e.g. Pāṇini have been without his N vs. V dichotomy, which he uses to define the notion of 'word' in his own inimitably trenchant manner: 'suptiṅantam padam' (cf. Itkonen 1991: 17)? At one masterly stroke, Croft wipes out of existence some 99% of the world history of linguistics.

Next, let us go into the details. As Croft sees it, there is no point in trying to elicit the word-classes of a given language, because either you make too few distinctions, which makes you guilty of 'lumping', or you start making a never-ending series of distinctions, which makes you guilty of 'splitting'. How can 'lumping' and 'splitting' be avoided? — by ascending (or escaping) into the higher regions of universal theory, in the following way. You postulate a one-to-one correspondence between three entities at three levels: semantic class = thing – property – action → pragmatic function = reference – modification – predication → (universal) word-class = noun – adjective – verb. In addition, you postulate a notion of typological markedness which predicts that deviations from this triple one-to-one correspondence will possibly (but not necessarily)

produce formal complications.

As such, this view is quite plausible. Indeed, I submit that, ever since the mid-seventies, and maybe even earlier, most people interested in cognitive and/or typological linguistics have been operating with some such view. It is only the grandiose nature of claims connected with this common-sense view that may raise, if not outright objections, then at least one eye-brow or two. One may also ask oneself whether splitting und lumping have really been disposed of. — The following comments could well arise:

i) It is well known that philosophical and/or logical linguistics has been content to rely on two ('pragmatic') functions only, namely (reiterated) reference and predication. It may be less well known that Hermann Paul, the leading exponent of the Neo-Grammarian school, already subscribed to this two–functions view (cf. Itkonen 1991: 291). To justify his own three–functions view (i.e. reference – modification – predication), Croft (2000: 87) refers to the 'propositional acts' of Searle (1969: 23–24). But this reference is inaccurate. Searle is a two–functions man. He needs only reference and predication. Croft turns out to be a splitter, after all: he could not resist splitting predication into two, namely modification and 'predication proper'.

ii) First and foremost, however, Croft reveals his true self as a passionate lumper. Consider the following lumpings: a) There is the lumping-by-neglect. When Croft speaks of 'modification', he mainly means modification of an object (by an adjective). But towards the end of his paper he has to admit that there are in fact other (sub)types of modification too, namely modification of an action by an adverb, and then modifications by quantifiers, numerals, all the various types of deictics etc, etc. A trained eye immediately sees a proliferation of splittings. A trained eye also sees something else. There will be as many types of modification (= "quantification, enumeration, deixis, anaphoric reference, selection from a set" [p. 95]) as there are corresponding 'minor' word-classes. In the time-honored 'virtus dormitiva' fashion, minor functions are postulated, one-to-one, to 'explain' minor word-classes. Thus, the appearances notwithstanding, the word-classes remain the primary thing. b) When considering a sentence like *John is a student*, Croft claims that *student* refers to an object. Because *student* does not refer to an object, but rather to a class of objects, this means that objects and classes of objects are being lumped together. Towards the end of his paper Croft has to admit that there is indeed a 'subtle semantic shift' from the former to the latter. More precisely, he claims that in our example sentence *student* "denotes the relation of membership in the object class" (p. 96). This is less than true. The relation in question is

expressed by the copula (and in the absence of a copula it is expressed by the mere juxtaposition of the reference-noun and the class-noun).

iii) Croft castigates pre-Croftian typology for atomism, or for not realizing that the identity of (members of) word-classes is determined by the role that they play in larger constructions: "the constructions are the primitive elements of syntactic representation; categories are derived from constructions" (p. 84). But Croft's own notion of 'construction' remains atomistic in an interesting way. On a single page (= p. 87) he enumerates such constructions as "copular and non-copular constructions, relativising or other attributive constructions, nominalisation constructions, predicative and nominal (term) constructions". But he fails to see that there is one construction which simultaneously integrates all the others, namely **sentence**. In the examples (1)–(7) I have tried to give some precise meaning to the claim that there is no 'predication construction' without the simultaneous presence of a 'reference construction', and vice versa. It is the traditional task of **syntax** to show how these fit together. The same is true of all more complex cases (like 'numeral constructions', for instance).

iv) Sentences are defined by the words they contain, and words are defined by the sentences in which they are contained. In this, Croft sees (p. 85) a 'circularity' which has to be 'broken'. However, it is one of the lasting achievement of **hermeneutic** philosophy to have shown that all circularity is not necessarily evil. This is especially true of the relation between a whole and its parts. 'Ascending' from the parts, one learns to know the nature of the whole. Then, 'descending' from the whole, one learns to know the parts better than one did before; and so on. This 'dialectical' back-and-forth movement defines the concept of 'hermeneutic circle' (or rather, 'hermeneutic spiral').

v) Croft sees a nearly insuperable problem in 'splitting', or in the fact that the more one gets to know the data, the more and more delicate distinctions one can make, at least in principle. On reflection, Croft's position turns out to be indefensible. It is well known that no two human beings are entirely identical, and that even one and the same human being at one moment is never identical with what (s)he was at the preceding moment or with what (s)he will be at the next moment. And yet, by a judicious use of **idealizations** a science like psychology has been able to achieve generally valid results. (Some people might even go so far as to argue that also such sciences as sociology, anthropology, musicology etc. have achieved at least some general results.) The fact that some idealizations — both inside linguistics and outside — are bad, and sometimes extremely bad, does not mean that all idealizations must be bad.

One cannot envisage a scientific discipline that could dispense with idealizations entirely.

vi) Because knowing one's data well leads to 'splitting', Croft's advice to give up splitting amounts to an advice to turn one's back on the data. This interesting interpretation is confirmed by his view (p. 66) that typologists who attempt to define their concepts (e.g. 'word-class') are actually **worse** that generativists who *a priori* give up any such attempt. In this respect Croft continues the Chomskyan line of thinking (cf. Itkonen 1996).

In the so-called construction grammar there is a tendency to deny the relevance of word-classes and to focus, instead, on 'constructions' (which range from particular morphemes via sentence structures to idiomatic expressions). Above, I have give some reasons for not taking the construction grammar too seriously. Other reasons could be added. Because constructions are language-specific, they are not of much help in typological studies. And accepting 'construction' as a descriptive device commits one to an endless task because the number of constructions in a given language is infinite.

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