Parts of speech and dependent clauses: A typological study

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INTRODUCTION

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Languages are formal systems used for human communication. Three basic communicative functions, or communicative acts, may be distinguished: Reference, predication, and modification. The act of reference identifies a referent, i.e. an entity that one wants to talk about, and establishes a cognitive file for that referent. The act of predication ascribes something to a referent, i.e. it reports that this referent is involved in some state of affairs. The act of modification enriches either reference or predication, by expressing an additional feature of either a referent or a state of affairs (Searle 1969, Croft 2001: 66).

The functions of reference, predication, and modification may be fulfilled through linguistic forms of various types. The most basic way to do this is probably by means of a phrase consisting of a single lexical element. The lexical elements of any particular language can be divided into different groups or classes, called *parts of speech*. Prototypically, the class of *nouns* is used for communicative acts of reference (cf. *car* in example (1a)); *verbs* are used for predication (cf. *wash* in (1b)); *adjectives* for the modification of referential expressions (cf. *red* in (1c)); and *adverbs* for the modification of predications (cf. *quickly* in (1d)).

(1)   a.   I wash the **car**.
        b.   I **wash** the car.
        c.   I wash the **red** car.
        d.   I wash the car **quickly**.

However, not all languages follow this particular pattern, in which every part of speech class is specialized for the expression of a single function. Alternatively, languages may display part of speech classifications in which two or more functions can be expressed by members of the same class. Hockett (1958: 225) compares such functionally different parts of speech to "*athletic squads, trained in different ways to play much the same game.*" Some languages train specialists, while others try to make an "*all-'round player or triple-threat man of every member in the squad.*" These two types of techniques may also be combined within a single language system, "*producing some specialists but also good numbers of double-threat and triple-threat men.*" Adopting a terminology proposed by Hengeveld (1992), I will call parts of speech that are functionally specialized *rigid*, and those that can express multiple functions *flexible*.

Apart from simple lexical items, however, more complex linguistic structures may also be used to express the functions of reference, predication, and modification within an utterance. One possibility is the use of a clause-like construction within a larger utterance. Traditionally, this linguistic situation is referred to as *subordination*. Consider the example in (2), where the subordinate or *dependent clause 'John will come home soon'* is used as a referring expression that functions as the object of the predicate of the main or *matrix clause 'Mary hopes'*, to which it is linked by means of the subordination marker *that*.

(2)   Mary hopes [that John will come home soon].

Like parts of speech, certain types of dependent clause constructions are rigid, i.e. can fulfil only a single type of function, while others are flexible, i.e. may express multiple functions. For instance, the English *that*-construction, illustrated in (2) above, is flexible because it can also be used for modification, as is shown in (3), where the dependent clause '*that we bought together yesterday*' expresses an additional property of the referent of '*book*', which is the direct object within the matrix clause '*I gave her the book*'.

(3)   I gave her the book [that we bought together yesterday].

Apart from their possibilities regarding the expression of communicative function(s), dependent clauses – being complex constructions – can

also be studied from the perspective of their internal morpho-syntactic properties. Usually, the morpho-syntactic properties of dependent clauses in a particular language are described in comparison to the properties of ordinary *in*dependent clauses in that language. Consider the difference between examples (4a) and (4b): The dependent clause in (4a), marked with the subordinator *that*, expresses future tense (*will move)* and the subject *Paul* is encoded in the same way as it would be in an independent clause. This type of dependent clause, which structurally resembles an independent clause, is called *balanced*. In contrast, the dependent clause in (4b) is marked by the special *-ing* form of the predicate, it cannot express tense, and it has a subject that is encoded as a possessor (*Paul's*). This second type of dependent clause, the structure of which deviates to some extent from the structure of an independent clause, is called *deranked* (Stassen 1985).

(4) a. John regrets [that Paul will move to Finland].
     b. John regrets [Paul's moving to Finland].

The aim of the present research is to investigate the relationship between the functional flexibility or rigidity displayed by a particular language's parts of speech classes on the one hand, and by its balanced/deranked dependent clauses on the other hand. More specifically, this study tries to discover to what extent it is possible to predict, on the basis of a language's parts of speech system – that is, its major part of speech classes and their respective potential to express particular functions – what the functional potential of its dependent clause constructions will be.

This goal is approached by means of an investigation of the parts of speech classes and dependent clause constructions of a genealogically and geographically balanced sample of 50 languages. For every major part of speech class and for every relevant dependent clause construction in each of the sample languages it is determined which function(s) it may express. These typological data pertaining to parts of speech and dependent clauses are then combined in order to identify dependency relations between the functional behaviour of lexical and clausal constructions in languages. The results of these analyses are interpreted within the framework of functional linguistics, which assumes that grammars, i.e. linguistic forms and structures, are ultimately explainable in terms of their function: the encoding of human communication.

This book is organized as follows. The first part, to which Chapters 2, 3, and 4 belong, provides the theoretical and methodological background

of the research. Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to the theory and typology of this study's two *dramatis personae*: parts of speech and dependent clauses, respectively. First, in Chapter 2, I give an overview of possible approaches to parts of speech classification as proposed in the functional-typological literature. Two (relatively) recent approaches are discussed and compared in detail: Hengeveld's pragmatic-syntactic theory of parts of speech and Croft's universal-typological theory of parts of speech. The former serves as a point of departure for the present study, because it defines parts of speech exclusively in terms of the communicative function(s) that they can express (Hengeveld 1992, Hengeveld et al. 2004, Hengeveld & Rijkhoff 2005, Hengeveld & Van Lier 2008, 2009). The mono-dimensionality of this approach has been the target of its most important critic: Croft (2000, 2001, 2005). The latter proposes to define parts of speech in terms of a broader set of criteria, including their semantic meaning and their ability to express particular morphological categories. Croft's approach yields a typology in which part of speech classes are not directly comparable across languages. On the other hand, the cross-linguistic comparability of parts of speech defined according to Hengeveld's approach is achieved at the cost of ignoring specific sets of linguistic facts. In addition, the difference between the Hengeveldian and the Croftian approaches has important repercussions for the debate about so-called *flexible languages*, i.e. languages that presumably lack all parts of speech distinctions, most significantly a basic distinction between nouns and verbs. At the end of Chapter 2 I review this particular debate, and propose an approach to lexical flexibility that aims to integrate the insights of several earlier studies (see also Don & Van Lier, forthcoming).

In Chapter 3 I turn to the theoretical and typological treatment of dependent clauses, which is approached from two perspectives. First, it is shown that dependent clause constructions, like parts of speech, can be defined in terms of the communicative function(s) that they are able to express. Second, as mentioned above, dependent clauses are complex constructions, which can also be classified according to their internal morpho-syntactic properties. This second perspective, which is most common in the existing literature, focuses on the fact that dependent clause constructions often display a certain mixture of formal features of independent clauses on the one hand, and features of lexical or phrasal constructions on the other hand (cf. examples (4a-b) above). I briefly review the functional-typological literature concerning these two types of features and the various ways in which they may be combined in

actual dependent clause constructions. Two recent studies on the typology of the internal structure of dependent clauses, by Cristofaro (2003) and Malchukov (2004), are discussed in more detail. These formal features of dependent clauses, as I will show, are expected to influence the hypothesized functional dependency relation between these constructions and parts of speech classes. Therefore, at the end of Chapter 3, I present a classification system of dependent clause constructions that takes into account both their functional properties and their internal formal properties.

Chapter 4 rounds off the theoretical and methodological part of the book. In this chapter, I first present the composition of the language sample investigated for this research. Second, I formulate and operationalize the specific hypotheses that are tested on this sample. These hypotheses take the form of predictions about dependency relations between the functional patterns displayed by the part of speech classes of particular languages, and the functional patterns of their (different structural types of) dependent clause constructions. Finally, Chapter 4 presents the method that will be used to test these predictions.

The second part of the book contains the actual typological data. First, Chapters 5 and 6 separately present the classifications of part of speech classes and dependent clause constructions in the languages of the sample. In addition, a number of issues related to the analyses of both types of constructions are raised, and linked to the theoretical discussions of Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. Subsequently, in Chapter 7, the two data sets of Chapters 5 and 6 are combined in order to test the specific predictions about their interrelationship, as formulated in Chapter 4. This analysis yields a set of statistically significant correlations, which allow for the formulation of a number of typological generalizations. It is shown that these generalizations pertain in particular to languages with part of speech classes displaying a high degree of flexibility or multi-functionality (as opposed to languages with less or no lexical flexibility), and to the functional behaviour of deranked (as opposed to balanced) dependent clauses.

In the third and final part of the book I further discuss the results of the study and present its conclusions. First, In Chapter 8, the findings of Chapter 7 are reconsidered, taking a specific functionalist perspective that makes reference to the overall complexity of language systems and the various ways in which this level of complexity can be attained. To quote Hockett once more, "*all languages have about equally complex jobs to do.*" (Hockett 1958: 180) This 'job' – the encoding of human communication – can indeed be considered

universal. However, languages differ in the way in which they divide the labour of expressing the total amount of functional complexity over the available grammatical resources, including lexicon, morphology, and syntax. It seems that flexibility or multi-functionality in one area of the grammar must be counterbalanced or 'traded off' by functional specificity or rigidity in another area. In general, the functional flexibility of linguistic units tends to gradually decrease when they become structurally more complex. When flexibility is nonetheless retained in complex constructions, this requires functional disambiguation at the highest level of phrase-structure, either by means of ordering restrictions or through the use of function-indicating elements. In general, it will be shown in Chapter 8 that an explanatory framework based on functional transparency provides a complete account of the findings of this research. Finally, Chapter 9 summarizes the main points of the study as a whole and presents its overall conclusions.