Parts of speech and dependent clauses: A typological study

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Summary and Conclusion

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The aim of this study was to investigate the functional relationship between a language's parts of speech classes and its dependent clauses, in terms of the set of propositional functions that both construction types can express. First, in Chapters 2 and 3, I discuss various functionalist approaches to the theory and typology of parts of speech and dependent clauses, respectively. It is shown that both parts of speech and dependent clauses can be defined as formal mappings onto a space consisting of four propositional functions. A basic distinction is adopted between rigid and flexible constructions: The former type can express only a single propositional function, while the latter can be used in two or more functions, without any difference in structural coding.

Whereas both lexical and clausal constructions can thus be defined in terms of their functional possibilities, only the latter are configurational, and can as such also be classified according to their internal morpho-syntactic properties. On the basis of earlier functional-typological studies, a distinction is made between balanced and deranked dependent clauses. Balanced clauses, which represent one extreme of a scale, are characterised by the fact that they express the same set of categories as independent clauses. Towards the other extreme we find various types of deranked clauses, the internal structure of which is increasingly deviant from the structure of independent clauses. This deviation may show in two ways: First, it may take the form of de-categorization, i.e. (partial) loss of 'verbal' features, such as TAM distinctions

and person marking, and/or non-expression of arguments. Second, deranked dependent clauses may show formal reflections of re-categorization, i.e. they may acquire (some) 'nominal' features, such as the expression of case markers and/or determiners and possessive coding of argument(s).

Against this theoretical backdrop, Chapter 4 formulates a set of predictions concerning the expected similarity between the functional possibilities as displayed by the parts of speech classes of a particular language and by its dependent clause constructions. Some predictions are formulated in general terms, i.e. they make reference to languages with some flexibility versus no flexibility in their parts of speech system, and the expected reflection of this difference on the functional properties of dependent clause constructions in these languages. Other predictions are more specific; they aim at the identification of one-to-one matches between the functional possibilities of particular types of part of speech classes and dependent clause constructions. In addition, all predictions are formulated first without differentiation for dependent clauses in terms of their internal morpho-syntactic properties, and then in sets of sub-predictions that make specific reference to balanced clauses versus (various types of) deranked clauses.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the classifications of parts of speech classes and dependent clauses in a balanced sample of 50 languages in terms of the typological frameworks developed in Chapters 2 and 3. Subsequently, in Chapter 7, the two data sets of Chapter 5 and 6 are linked in order to identify dependency relations between the functional patterns displayed by the parts of speech classes of particular languages, and their (different structural types of) dependent clause constructions. The analyses reveal that the presence of flexible deranked dependent clauses in a language is dependent upon the presence of flexible parts of speech classes in that language. This does not mean, however, that all languages with flexible parts of speech systems also display flexible deranked dependent clauses.

Furthermore, it is shown that pervasively flexible parts of speech classes and deranked dependent clauses are both, i.e. independently of each other, cross-linguistically rare phenomena. Therefore, the generalization that maximally flexible deranked dependent clauses do not occur in languages without the same degree of flexibility in the lexical domain does not have much explanatory power. More interestingly, it is shown that whenever maximal lexical flexibility does occur in a language, this strongly increases the chances of also finding the other rare phenomenon: maximally flexible deranked dependent clauses.

In contrast to the result obtained for pervasively flexible constructions, no dependency relations can be established between the presence of less flexible or rigid parts of speech classes and deranked dependent clauses with the same functional behaviour. Moreover, the functional patterns of balanced dependent clauses are not related to those of parts of speech classes either.

In Chapter 8 an attempt is made to provide a functionalist explanatory framework to account for these results. In particular, I suggest that the findings concerning parts of speech and deranked dependent clauses can be interpreted as conforming to the Principle of Increasing Categoriality (or Staggering Level-dependent Categoriality), which states that the categorial specificity of linguistic units increases – or their flexibility decreases – with increased structural complexity. Deranked dependent clauses, as opposed to balanced ones, are regarded as secondary constructions, derived from primary lexical or phrasal constructions, in terms of the Principle of Formal Adjustment. Deranked dependent clauses are more complex than their lexical counterparts, and therefore the Principle of Increasing Categoriality predicts that the former should be at least as categorially specific as the latter. In other words, the degree of categorial specificity attested at the lexical level is expected to determine the minimal degree of categorial specificity (or the maximal degree of flexibility) that should be maintained at the level of deranked dependent clauses. This principle explains the finding that flexible deranked dependent clauses are almost exclusively found in languages with (pervasively) flexible parts of speech systems.

Moreover, the Principle of Increasing Categoriality accounts for a number of other results of Chapter 7: First, it captures the finding that the functional matches between flexible parts of speech and flexible deranked dependent clauses need not be one-to-one, but may also involve a partial decrease in the flexibility of the latter construction type, as compared with the former. Second, the principle accounts for the finding that languages with pervasively flexible parts of speech systems almost always have rigid deranked dependent clauses (possible alongside their flexible deranked clauses). Third, the principle explains at least partly why a lower degree of flexibility at the lexical level does not correlate with flexibility at the level of dependent clauses: If a flexible part of speech class covers only two functions, then even a loss in flexibility of one function on the part of the dependent clause automatically results in a rigid construction.

Finally, the Principle of Increasing Categoriality and the Principle of Formal Adjustment shed light on the fact that no correlations are found

between particular types of rigid parts of speech classes and rigid deranked dependent clauses with the same distribution. The reason for this is that, instead of rigid deranked dependent clauses, languages may employ balanced constructions. The latter, since they are presumably not modelled on lexical categories, may be rigid as well as flexible. However, whenever a language has a deranked dependent clause construction to express a function for which a rigid parts of speech class is available, then this dependent clause construction is rigid as well. This holds both for languages with flexible parts of speech systems that include one or more rigid parts of speech classes, as well as for languages with rigid parts of speech classes only. These findings confirm the prediction that a deranked dependent clause cannot exhibit a greater degree of flexibility than a parts of speech class appearing in the same function.

Regarding balanced dependent clauses, I argue that even though their functional possibilities cannot be linked to those of parts of speech, their distributional behaviour is in accordance with the more general Principle of Functional Transparency. This principle predicts that every linguistic unit should ultimately, i.e. at the utterance-level, be endowed with a categorial value, in order to make its function identifiable for the hearer. As expected, the multiple possible functions of flexible balanced clauses, both in languages with rigid and with flexible parts of speech systems, can be disambiguated through additional morpho-syntactic strategies. Some of these strategies, such as the use of resumptive pronouns, are confined to the functional domain of subordination, while others, such as fixed constituent order, are used much more generally to establish functional transparency in grammatical (sub-)systems.

With regard to this last point, a particularly interesting finding is that the flexible dependent clauses – both balanced and deranked ones – in languages with very flexible parts of speech systems often make use of the same morpho-syntactic strategies that are used to indicate the functions of lexical and phrasal constituents. This supports a general pattern emerging from the present study concerning languages with pervasive lexical flexibility: They appear to have a particular type of phrase structure, consisting of a 'grid' of morpho-syntactically marked slots, which may be filled by formal units of any type of internal structure: not just single lexemes, but also complex phrasal and clausal constituents. These complex units can (but need not) retain maximal flexibility until the final level of the structure-building process, when they are inserted into a syntactic frame corresponding to a

particular propositional function. This pattern is in accordance with findings from other studies, which suggest that, in the encoding of a particular functional domain, flexibility in one grammatical area must be compensated with rigidity in another area.

Both the Principle of Increasing Categoriality and the Principle of Functional Transparency are ultimately motivated in terms of the functional principle of Economy. In particular, languages either retain the functional specialization present in simple units in the process of building more complex ones, or gradually increase it, until the ultimate level of functional specialization required at the utterance level is reached. If, in contrast, the functional specialization of less complex units would be decreased or altogether lost along the way towards more complexity, this would require additional and as such uneconomical processing on the part of the speaker. Moreover, if the loss of categorial specificity would not be repaired at some later stage in the derivational process, this would imply an additional processing load for the hearer, who would ultimately have to solve the problem of functional ambiguity that he or she would be presented with. Therefore, the Economy principle predicts that complexity-increasing linguistic processes will produce output structures that are at least as categorially specific as their input structures, in order to maximize processing ease for both participants of a communicative situation.

On a final note, I would like to point out that redundancy seems to be a common phenomenon in languages, while ambiguity is not. In other words, languages often encode a particular functional distinction within a certain domain by means of more than one formal device, while they apparently tend to prevent situations in which there is too little grammatical coding to unambiguously identify the function of a linguistic unit within an utterance. Viewed from the perspective human communication, this suggests that languages strongly adhere to processing ease for the hearer, although not necessarily for the speaker.