

When the Exception is the Norm: How Approaches to Part of Speech Teaching Fail Learners

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This paper presents a rational argument based on examples of real language to make the case that lay definitions of parts-of-speech are more complex than commercial language pedagogy appreciates. Put simply, school grammars are misleading. They tend to pick the most convenient words for explanation and categorize them as if there were few or no variants within that category, when in reality, however, variation is the norm. Word class categories as presented in typical textbook illustration function as a handicap to future learning. I thus argue two points in this paper. First, that the definitions of lexical categories ought to be made in the form of respecting distinct linguistic dimensions and not in oversimplified and misleading one-dimensional categories which must be unlearned in order for learners to begin actually learning about how languages function. Secondly, a proper theory that radically separates the representation of linguistic expressions in the various grammatical components must be adopted for pedagogy to develop. I illustrate these points with examples drawn from English and Japanese.

As with many disciplines, linguistics has much fundamental jargon. Some expressions are already known to the extent that they are regarded as common sense. There are hence potential pitfalls in learning anew how they are understood among professionals and experts of language. The nature of “lexical categories” (also called “part-of-speech” and “word class”) is one such concept that I have found not fully taught and understood in students’ previous education and consequently an issue that requires considerable time in class. In order for a learner to learn real parts of speech, they must un-learn nearly all the learning that has brought them to their present confidence in their knowledge about parts of speech. As college students, they know standard definitions; nouns are names of persons, places, or things; adjectives modify nouns, and verbs typically describe a certain kind of action and/or motion. None of these semantico-pragmatic characterizations are wrong per se, but from a linguist perspective, they are so oversimplified that their utility is questionable. Learners don’t write better by knowing these definitions, and this understanding does not improve comprehension either. I suspect linguists may have failed to make clear the usefulness of the results of their research for language education. This short paper is thus intended to constitute a small step towards bridging the putative gap between linguistics and school grammars, and the goal is quite modest. It argues that information of word’s internal structure (morphology) and of its external distribution in sentences (syntax) are of equal importance to characterizing lexical categories, thereby claiming that definitions of them ought to be multi-dimensional, not one-dimensional as is commonly found in textbook definitions. These principles are a brief extension of my class at ICU, *Studies in the Japanese Language*, in which I teach basic yet critical concepts of linguistics to students having language-related majors/minors.

What's in a Word?

Let us begin with a dialogue that I set up in the course of the above mentioned class: when I ask my students which lexical category *hosii* ('want') in Japanese falls into, they usually make a slight pause to consider. If designated to answer, some of them diffidently answer "verb?" by analogy to the English counterpart *want*. I then point out that where to formally place a semantic concept (here WANT) differs from language to language, reminding them of the conjugations of *hosii* running exactly parallel to those of adjectives like *kawaii* ('pretty') and *atarasii* ('new'). The conjugations are contrasted with those of verbs below.

	<u>Adjective</u>		<u>Verb</u>
(1) non-past	<i>hosi-i</i> ('want')	<i>kawai-i</i> ('pretty')	<i>tabe-ru</i> ('eat')
zero-form	<i>hosi-ku</i>	<i>kawai-ku</i>	<i>tabe</i>
negative	<i>hosi-ku na-i</i>	<i>kawai-ku na-i</i>	<i>tabe-na-i</i>
<i>te</i> -form	<i>hosi-ku-te</i>	<i>kawai-ku-te</i>	<i>tabe-te</i>
past	<i>hosi-kar-ta</i>	<i>kawai-kar-ta</i>	<i>tabe-ta</i>
<i>tara</i> -conditional	<i>hosi-kar-tara</i>	<i>kawai-kar-tara</i>	<i>tabe-tara</i>
<i>reba</i> -conditional	<i>hosi-ke-reba</i>	<i>kawai-ke-reba</i>	<i>tabe-reba</i>

It seems that students have no problem in accepting this explanation, for they already know that one of the goals of linguistics is a study of the ways we categorize the actual world. The meaning of WANT, being a person's psychological state rather than his/her action, fits with that of other adjectives. To put it differently, categorizing WANT as an adjective makes notionally more sense than categorizing it as a verb (like English), and the Japanese language faithfully reflects the way we conceptualize it in the morphology. (In this respect, English may be somewhat deviant, though it is not inconceivable at all to categorize WANT as a verb.) What seems novel to them is the fact that definitions of lexical categories are actually more complex and that it is insufficient to simplistically label a word adjective or verb on the basis of its semantic information.

To put our discussion on more concrete footing, consider *near* in English for example. We learn and/or teach it as a preposition in school. As such, it takes a noun phrase as a complement (=2a), and it may not allow another preposition (=2b) nor an adverb (=2c) to follow. Examples below are taken from Newmeyer (2000) with some modification added; the resulting ungrammaticality is indicated by the asterisk mark bracketed by parentheses below (*).

- (2) a. H&H Bagels is near the 79th Street Station.
 b. H&H Bagels is right near (*to) the 79th Street Station.
 c. H&H Bagels is near (*enough) Zabar's.

Unlike other prepositions such as *above* (as in *above the window*) and *across* (as in *across the river*), *near* can also be used as an adjective, and accordingly it has the comparative form *nearer* (=3a) and the superlative form *nearest* (=3b).

- (3) a. H&H Bagels is much nearer to the 79th Street Station.
 b. The nearest station to H&H Bagels is the 79th Street Station.

Faced with the examples in (2) and (3), it is tempting to say that there are two different kinds of *near* in English; one is a preposition and the other is an adjective. However, given a mixed-type *near* is acceptable in the context of (4) below, the correct observational generalization is that *near* has characteristics of both preposition and adjective simultaneously.

- (4) As the bus draws nearer the 79th Street Station, you can see H&H Bagels.

It should be noted that if we simply conceive of lexical categories as some kinds of primitives and attempt to define them monolithically as is so often characterized in school grammars, the example *nearer* above may be dismissed or else treated as exceptional; the former case leads to failure of representing a fact of the English language, and the latter case leaves it unexplained on which grounds *nearer the 79th Street Station* is judged as a peripheral expression.

Then, what does it mean exactly that a word (here *near*) is both prepositional and adjectival? In order to make such a proposition, it is necessary to ask what it means that we know a word. What naturally comes to mind is the phonetic representation (e.g., pronunciation, syllabification, and stress) and semantic information (e.g., argument-predicate relation and cognitive aspects of meaning). In addition, an important part of our lexical knowledge includes the external distribution in syntax (e.g., the way a word forms a larger, phrasal constituent structure and where a word figures in a sentence) and the internal structure (e.g., knowledge of the set of well-formed morphological entities; whether the lexical item is a stem or affix etc.). These are traditionally called phonology, semantics, syntax, and morphology, respectively. Linguistic research has come to the conclusion that these constituent members and categories provide mutually exclusive types of information (Sadock 1991; Jackendoff 2001; Culicover 2009). In other words, each of them has its own autonomous set of principles, which are not integrated or complementary to one another. That is to say, what we call a word consists of a cluster of characteristics relating to heterogeneous grammatical components, or “modules,” and its function is to bind all of these independent linguistic representations and make them a description of a single language. To put it more concretely, if we call a certain word of a language an “adjective,” it is entirely legitimate to ask which aspect of the word makes it an adjective, and the criteria can be language-specific. (For example, *hosii* in Japanese and *want* in English typify this point: while they share semantic parallels, they do not share formal ones.) A closer look of (2) and (3) reveals that we see two distinct dimensions of *near*. The examples in (2) show one of *near*’s external distributions in syntax; how closely a phrase headed by *near* runs parallel to other prepositional phrases such as *above the window* and *across the river*. On the other hand, the examples in (3) reveal that the internal or morphological structure of *near* is the same as many adjectives such as *pretty* and *new*. Given this multi-modular definitions of lexical categories, there are no oddities in characterizing *near* both prepositional (in syntax) and adjectival (in morphology).

Meaning and Form on Equal Footing

At this point, one may take issue with this argument and counter that the above conception of word and lexical category is based on the exceptional property of *near* in English. One might further say that the majority of words do not show this kind of mismatch between different levels of linguistic analysis and claim that it is acceptable to regard lexical category

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as a certain kind of primitive in grammar. For example, the adjective *happy* does not show any oddities in both meaning and form in light of the English grammar. Semantically, it describes properties of an entity. Syntactically, it occurs in attributive position (i.e., between an article and a head noun) (=5a), it forms a predicate phrase with *be* (=5b), and it can be intensified by the adverb *very* whether it is attributive or predicative (=5c). Furthermore, in terms of the morphological domain, *happy* is graded (i.e., having comparative and superlative forms) (=5d), and it also undergoes *un*-prefixation (=5e).

- (5) a. a happy teacher d. happy / happier / happiest
b. she is happy e. unhappy
c. very happy

However, words classified under a lexical category do not have to satisfy all of these intra-modular criteria as listed in (5) above. As Aarts (2004) amply shows, when we apply these syntactic criteria (above left) and morphological criteria (above right) to other adjectives such as *thin*, *alive*, and *utter*, they show different formal behaviors, thereby forming a continuum from “fully adjectival” (e.g., *happy*) to “less adjectival” (e.g., *utter*).

- (6) a. a thin man d. thin / thinner / thinnest
b. he is thin e. * unthin
c. very thin
- (7) a. * an alive hamster d. ? alive / more alive / most alive
b. the hamster is alive e. * unalive
c. very (much) alive
- (8) a. an utter disgrace d. * utter / utterer / utterest
b. *the problem is utter e. * unutter
c. *very utter

What is important here is that there are more variations in category membership than it is believed, so that grouping these words under one category label (here, adjective) or else classifying them by a semantic criterion (e.g., properties of an entity) is equivalent to sweeping all clutter under a huge rug. To put it in other words, these formal characteristics of each word are not entirely predictable from the meanings of the words. Thus, in (7), it conceptually makes perfect sense to say **an alive hamster* (in contrast to *a dead hamster*) but English grammar simply does not allow it for *a living/live hamster*. In (8), the adjective *complete* or *absolute* may reasonably be synonymous to *utter* (as in *a complete/absolute disgrace*) but *the problem is complete/absolute* and *very complete/absolute* are arguably acceptable expressions. These data all demonstrate that members in a lexical category must primarily be determined by formal or distributional patterns, each of which must consequently be learned as per an individual lexeme (Gleitman 1991).

Having said that, I should hasten to add that these formal criteria alone are not sufficient to define the lexical category either. Why? It is precisely because members of the same lexical category do not always need to possess all distributional properties, as the above examples (a-e) show. A glance at a few words and phrases in English will clarify this point further. Words like *unsubscribe*, *undo*, and *untie* share the apparently same prefix with *unhappy* but they show no other formal properties of adjectives listed in (5). Indeed we know that they are verbs

in light of tense inflection and predicative function without *be* (e.g., *She unsubscribed from the mailing list.*). On the other hand, *college* as in *a college teacher* shares no formal properties with adjectives (**A teacher is college, *very college, *a more college teacher, *uncollege* etc.), and it is undoubtedly a noun with respect to its referential property and number inflection (e.g., *Those colleges are competitive.*). However, we know that its function is adjectival or modifying in *a college teacher*. Why is that possible? To recapitulate the matter at hand, we are in a somewhat puzzling situation. If neither meaning nor form is sufficient in determining a lexical category, how can we possibly learn the lexical category of any given word? This question poses significant challenges for us, and ultimately, the answer depends on what kind of conceptions or theories we would have for the definition of lexical categories.

Drawing on works of McCawley (1987) and Sadock (1989), my own suggestion is that semantic definitions cannot entirely be dismissed. For some reason not yet fully explained, well-known semantic characteristics of word classes (e.g., for adjectives, properties of a referential entity) are supposed to correspond to a certain syntactic position and a certain morphological feature within and across languages. (In the case of English, a prenominal position and comparative/superlative suffixation, respectively.) I would say that it is this default, or inter-modular, expectation that underlies our intuition that *happy* and *thin* (but not *alive* and *utter*) are more canonical adjectives in the English language. (The interested reader is referred to Francis 2002 for her persuasive accounts of prototype effects within a lexical category.) What follows are the proposed canonical alignments across three distinct English grammatical modules: semantics, syntax, and morphology. For the sake of simplicity, phonology is omitted, but it occasionally plays a significant role to distinguish, say, noun from verb (e.g., *ice-cream* vs. *I scream*).

(9) <u>Category</u>		<u>Semantics (Universal)</u>		<u>Syntax (English)</u>		<u>Morph. (English)</u>
Adjective	↔	property	↔	the/a(n) __ N	↔	__-er / -est
Verb	↔	action/motion	↔	N __ [N]	↔	__-ed / -en
Noun	↔	(referential) entity	↔	__ V __	↔	__-(e)s

Given these default or violable categorial correspondence conditions, it is natural that *unsubscribe* is more likely to be recognized as a verb than an adjective; it means action/motion, it occupies the site after a subject nominal (=predicate position), and it possesses the tense suffix. At the same time, (9) predicts that *college* in *a college teacher* can be understood as the property of *teacher*, for the pre-nominal position in English is semantically associated with properties of the following noun by default. I conjecture that it is this knowledge of ours that makes the property or adjectival reading of *college* felicitous in the grammar of English. I will not present a detailed defense of this position here, but these ubiquitous examples show that variations within lexical categories are everywhere, and while formal properties are indispensable for definitions of word classes, presumably near-universal semantic characteristics cannot be cast off for the proper understanding and treatment of part-of-speech.

A Mismatch in Japanese

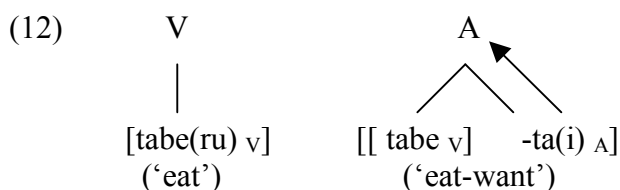
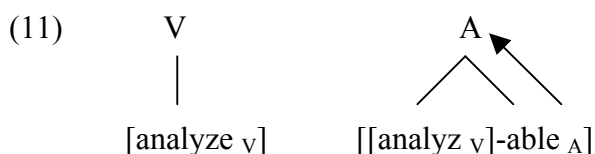
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Finally, I would like to return to Japanese data that every native speaker knows (subconsciously) and albeit briefly, discuss the negation form of Japanese verbs that lends further support to the multi-modular definitions of lexical categories.

The negative element of Japanese /nai/ is, when it is attached to a verb stem, a (so-called) derivational adjectival suffix (e.g., *tabe-nai* ‘eat-not’). All negated verbs are thus adjective words in terms of conjugations, and as such, part of them cannot be separated with a particle like *-sae* (‘even’) and *-wa* (‘contrastive focus’) (i.e., **tabe-sae-nai*, **tabe-wa-nai*). The inflection paradigm of the verb negation form is provided below in contrast to the canonical adjective and verb inflection paradigms. Incidentally, note that /nai/ is also used to negate adjectives as in *tabe-na-ku nai* (‘not eat-not’) and *kawai-ku nai* (‘not pretty’). This part is underlined below (in the third line). The *nai* in this usage is not a suffix but a fully independent word from the preceding formative. (I have hence used the phonological representation /nai/ at the above.) It thus allows a particle to intervene between *V-naku* and *nai* as in *tabe-naku-wa nai* (‘not just eat-not’) and *kawai-ku-sae nai* (‘not even pretty’).

	Adjective		Verb
(10) non-past	<i>tabe-na-i</i> (‘eat-not’)	<i>kawai-i</i> (‘pretty’)	<i>tabe-ru</i> (‘eat’)
zero-form	<i>tabe-na-ku</i>	<i>kawai-ku</i>	<i>tabe</i>
negative	<i>tabe-na-ku <u>na-i</u></i>	<i>kawai-ku <u>na-i</u></i>	<i>tabe-na-i</i>
<i>te</i> -form	<i>tabe-na-ku-te</i>	<i>kawai-ku-te</i>	<i>tabe-te</i>
past	<i>tabe-na-kar-ta</i>	<i>kawai-kar-ta</i>	<i>tabe-ta</i>
<i>tara</i> -conditional	<i>tabe-na-kar-tara</i>	<i>kawai-kar-tara</i>	<i>tabe-tara</i>
<i>reba</i> -conditional	<i>tabe-na-ke-reba</i>	<i>kawai-ke-reba</i>	<i>tabe-reba</i>

It has been often said that the core element of a morphologically analyzable word is frequently the rightmost member of that word (Williams 1981). We already know that what constitutes “core” (or “head”) is an intricate matter, but for the sake of discussion, let us assume that it is both semantic and morphological properties. That is, both in English and Japanese, the right-hand members of the words usually determine meanings and word classes in the sense of school grammars. (See Hoji & Kitagawa 1990 for the linguistic notion “head” from a pedagogical perspective.)



We should now consider the negated verb form *tabe-nai* (‘eat-not’). The question that I always have my students consider is: Can we say that it is an adjective? (This is in fact a trick question but my intention in class is to have them recognize if the definition is that straightforward.) In my view, this example from Japanese most explicitly establishes that various linguistic properties of a word are radically separated from one another in grammar.

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