

# THERE ARE NO UNIVERSAL GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES

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# Linguistic Universals

Statements which are true of  
Features which exist in all natural languages.

e.g. “IF there is a glottal stop, THEN there must be a primary oral stop.” (*universal no. 787, <http://typo.uni-konstanz.de/archive>*)

? → e.g. p, k

❖ (absolute) universals vs. statistical universals

# Grammatical categories (nº1)...

*(e.g. Shopen, 2007)*

sets of morphological or (non-lexical) syntactic features  
which:

- convey meanings within the same conceptual domains (semantics, information structure, discourse, 'pragmatics');
- are expressed in 'similar' ways; and
- are (usually) mutually exclusive of each other.

# Grammatical categories (nº1)...

e.g.:

- ❖ polarity
- ❖ aspect
- ❖ tense
- ❖ mood/modality
- ❖ directionals/  
locationals
- ❖ person
- ❖ number
- ❖ case
- ❖ definiteness
- ❖ specificity
- ❖ voice
- ❖ valence changing  
devices (e.g.  
causatives,  
applicatives)
- ❖ noun class
- ❖ classifiers
- ❖ interclausal  
categories (e.g.  
switch reference)
- ❖ mirativity
- ❖ evidentiality
- ❖ honorifics
- ❖ .....

# Grammatical categories (nº2)...

*(e.g. Payne 1997)*

= word classes/ parts of speech/ lexical categories

(classification of words based on their morphosyntactic behaviour)

- ❖ noun
- ❖ pronoun
- ❖ verb
- ❖ adjective
- ❖ 'adverb'
- ❖ adposition
- ❖ 'particle'
- ❖ article
- ❖ determiner
- ❖ expressive
- ❖ interjection
- ❖ .....

# Grammatical categories (nº3?)...

*“Structural categories of grammar (such as clitic, affix, compound, adjective, pronoun, dative, subject, passive, diphthong, coronal)” (Haspelmath 2007:119)*

- ❖ grammatical categories (nº1: ‘concept-based’ GramCat)
- ❖ grammatical categories (nº2: word classes)
- ❖ grammatical relations
- ❖ phonological/ morphosyntactic constituencies

# Distributional analysis

(e.g. Croft 2001)

e.g. English Subject

❖ subject agreement on verbs (present tense):

SUBJECT

OBJECT

1. *She sees me.*

2. *She sees him.*

SUBJECT

OBJECT

3. *You see\_ me.*

4. *You see\_ him.*

## English Subject

- ❖ *subject agreement on verbs*
- ❖ *case marking on pronouns:*

5. She (/ \*her) tickles him (/ \*he).
6. He (/ \*him) is tickled by her (/ \*she).
7. Who (/ \*whom) tickles him?
8. Who (/ \*whom) is tickled by her?





## English Subject

- ❖ *subject agreement on verbs*
- ❖ *case marking on pronouns*
- ❖ **word order:**



9. He ignores [the zombie lady/ her].

10. Female zombies he ignores.

(e.g., Male zombies he squints at.)

11. \* he her ignores/ \*her ignores he/

\* ignores he her/ \* ignores her he

# Distributional analysis

## English Subject (& other grammatical relations )

ENGLISH:	SUBJECT	OBJECT	...
verb agreements	✓		
subject pronouns	✓		
object pronouns		✓	
<i>who</i>	✓	(✓)	
<i>(whom)</i>		✓	
before the verb	✓	✓	
after the verb		✓	
⋮			

The grammatical relations in a language can only be defined by morphosyntax, and not semantics.

12. She tickles him.

(subject = agent)

13. He is tickled by her.

(subject = theme)

14. He squints at him.

(subject = experiencer)

# Grammatical relations

English Subject: subject agreement

Niuean Subject: no subject (person-)agreement

15) SUBJECT OBJECT

*tunu e matua fifine he simala.*

cook NOM parent female ACC sweet.potato

'The mother is cooking the sweet potato.' (de Sousa 2001:19)

16)

*tunu au he simala.*

cook NOM:1SG ACC sweet.potato

'I am cooking the sweet potato.'

# Grammatical relations

English Subject: case marking (pronouns)

Tok Pisin Subject: no case marking

**17) mi raus-im em.**

**1SG expel-TR 3SG**

**'I expel him/her.'**

**18) em i raus-im mi.**

**3SG PRED expel-TR 1SG**

**'S/he expels me.'**

# Grammatical relations

English Subject: case marking (pronouns)

Tok Pisin Subject: no case marking

17) *mi* ∅ *raus-im* *em*.

1SG expel-TR 3SG

'I expel him/her.'

18) *em* i *raus-im* *mi*.

3SG PRED expel-TR 1SG

'S/he expels me.'

19) *mi* ∅ *raus-im* *yu*.

1SG expel-TR 2SG

'I expels you.'

# Grammatical relations

English Subject: fixed word order

Czech Subject: word order not fixed

20) *Pavel zabil Petra.*

Pavel:NOM

kill:PST:M:SG

Petr:ACC

'Pavel killed Petr.'

*Petra zabil Pavel.*

*Pavel Petra zabil.*

*(Naughton 2005:216)*

...

'Pavel killed Petr.'

# Grammatical relations

English Subject: very few IS restrictions

Sesotho Subject:

‘highly topical, old, given information’

21. \* *mang o-pheh-ile lijo?*

who SBJ-cook-PFV food

‘Who cooked the food?’

22. *lijo li-pheh-il-o-e ke mang?*

food SBJ-cook-PFV-PASS-MOOD by who

‘The food was cooked by who?’ (Demuth 1989:67-68)



# Grammatical relations

'Subject': 30 possible properties (Keenan 1976)

None shared by all languages.

- ❖ ergative languages: 'subject-like' properties more distributed;
- ❖ Philippines-type languages: prominent phrase = topic? subject?

NO universal grammatical relations

# Word classes

Defined morphosyntactically, not semantically:

English Nouns (e.g. *the* \_\_\_):

*concrete pole*

*fire*

*love*

*theocracy*

*obese*

*race (competition)*

# Word classes

e.g. English word classes (adopted from Croft 2001:37-38):

subclasses of one word class?

ENGLISH:	PLURAL	<i>the</i> ____
Count Noun: e.g., <i>student, book</i>	✓	✓
Mass Noun: e.g., <i>mud, air</i>		✓

separate word classes?

ENGLISH:	<i>the</i> ____	<i>the</i> ____ NOUN	<i>be</i> predicate
Noun: e.g., <i>student, book</i>	✓	✓	✓
Adjective: e.g., <i>tall, sad</i>		✓	✓

# Word classes

two word classes? three?

ENGLISH:	<i>the</i> ____	<i>the</i> ____ <i>one</i>
Noun: e.g., <i>box</i> , <i>woman</i>	✓	
Adjective: e.g., <i>tall</i> , <i>sad</i>		✓
Noun & Adjective?	✓	✓
Noun+Adjective?: e.g., <i>rich</i> , <i>poor</i>		

# Word classes

Verby property words in Okinawan:

e.g., *kusasan* 'stinky'

(<     *kusa-sa*     *ʔan*)  
          stinky-ness    have

*23.ʔaree     hwisa   nu     kusasa-n.*  
3SG:TOP   foot   NOM   stinky-PRED  
'His/her feet stink.'           ('As for him/her, feet stink.')

*24.ʔaree     sikarasi     nu     ʔa-n.*  
3SG:TOP   experience   NOM   have-PRED  
'S/he has experience.'       ('As for him/her, experience exists.')

# Word classes

Verby property words in Okinawan:

e.g., *kusasan* 'stinky'

(< *kusa-sa* *?an*)  
stinky-ness have

25. [*hwisa nu kusasa-ru*] *ccu*  
[foot NOM stinky-ATR] person  
'person whose feet stink'

26. [*sikarasi nu ?a-ru*] *ccu*  
[experience NOM have-ATR] person  
'person who has experience'

# Word classes

	<i>kusa-sa-N</i> 'stinky'	<i>?a-N</i> 'have'
n-past	<i>kusa-sa-N</i>	<i>?a-N</i>
past	<i>kusa-sa-ta-N</i>	<i>?a-ta-N</i>
n-past neg	<i>kusa-koo nee(-ra)-N</i>	<i>nee(-ra)-N</i>
past neg	<i>kusa-koo neen-ta-N</i>	<i>neen-ta-N</i>
pol n-past	<i>kusa-saibii-N</i>	<i>?aibii-N</i>
...		
pol past q	<i>kusa-saibi-tii</i>	<i>?aibitii</i>
...		
.....		

# Word classes

	<i>kusa-sa-N</i> 'stinky'	<i>?aN</i> 'have'
reason	<i>kusa-sa-kutu</i>	<i>?a-kutu</i>
reason	<i>kusa-sa-nu</i>	
	<i>kana-sa-N</i> 'cute'	
attributive	<i>kana-sa-ru</i>	<i>?a-ru</i>
attributive	<i>kanasii</i>	
adverbial	<i>kusa-ku</i>	
	<i>kanasi-ku</i>	
noun/vocative	<i>kusa-sa</i>	
	<i>kana-sa</i>	



# Word Classes?

- ❖ Descriptive linguistics must use morphosyntactic criteria to distinguish word classes in a language (semantics too fuzzy, sometimes not applicable);
- ❖ 2 classes? 2 subclasses of 1 class? decision arbitrary;
- ❖ no meaningful ways to resolve word class membership:
  - abandon the idea of solid word classes
  - no universal word classes

# Concept-based categories...

e.g.:

- ❖ polarity
- ❖ aspect
- ❖ tense
- ❖ mood/modality
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locationals
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# Universal?

Grammatical categories: no.

Concepts: yes

- ❖ Concept-based GramCat: concept
- ❖ Word classes: e.g. object, property and action (Croft 2001)
- ❖ Grammatical relations: semantic roles and information status

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