Distribution of Tobelo Property Concept Words Across Lexical Categories

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1. Introduction.

Recent interest in the universality of lexical categories has led to a flurry of cross-linguistic typological studies that seek to characterize the various parameters along which languages distinguish lexical categories. In spite of occasional arguments to the contrary, usually based on limited evidence from only part of the lexicon, it appears that all languages distinguish the major categories of Noun and Verb. These categories can be defined externally, both on classical semantic grounds (Nouns denote objects, Verbs denote actions) and on pragmatic grounds (Nouns refer, Verbs predicate) (cf. Hopper and Thompson 1984; Schachter 1985; Croft 1991).

Yet many languages have been identified which apparently lack a lexical category of Adjective. In most of those languages the work of Adjectives is done by either Nouns or Verbs. Thus, among such non-adjectival-verb and adjectival-noun (cf. Schachter 1985). Here I present evidence from the Papuan language Tobelo which suggests that some non-adjectival languages may express adjective-like words as either Nouns or Verbs, depending on discourse context.


In a seminal study of the cross-linguistic typology of Adjective, Dixon (1977) identifies seven semantic types which make up the (English) category Adjective, as in (1). I adopt Thompson’s (1988) term “property concept” to refer to these words, which can in general be considered to denote properties or qualities.
Non-adjectival languages distribute property concept (PC) words in these seven classes across the lexical categories of Noun and Verb. The category which subsumes PC words is characteristic for adjectival-verb and adjectival-noun languages. But as Thompson (1988) notes, this need not be the case. For example, in Japanese some PC words behave morphosyntactically as Nouns while some behave more like Verbs (Dixon 1977). In fact, some non-adjectival languages distribute individual semantic classes in (1) across lexical categories. In Yup'ik, some COLOR terms are Nouns while other are Verbs (Jacobson 1995:253). Such languages can be said to represent points on a continuum from adjectival-verb languages to adjectival-noun languages, so that some PC words are morphosyntactically indistinguishable from Nouns, while others are morphosyntactically indistinguishable from Verbs.

Quite a different picture emerges in the “switch-adjective” language Tobelo. Unlike Tobelo Nouns and Verbs, Tobelo PC words do not exhibit distinguishing morphological characteristics, but rather are distributed across the categories of Noun and Verb. Individual Tobelo PC words sometimes occur as Verbs, with requisite agreement morphology, and sometimes occur as Nouns, morphologically marked by the relational prefix ma- (glossed REL). For example,¹

\[(2)\quad o\text{-}gakana\quad i\text{-}doto\]
\[\text{NM-knife}\quad 3\text{A-sharp}\]
\['a\;\text{sharp knife}'\]
(3) o-otoimi ma-doto wo-diai
NM-spear REL-sharp 3MASC:A-make
‘he made a sharp spear’

The existence of forms like (2) is consistent with Tobelo being an adjectival-verb language, in which PC words form a subclass of Verbs. The existence of forms like (3) is consistent with Tobelo being an adjectival-noun, in which PC words form a subclass of Nouns.

3. Tobelo Lexical Categories.

Tobelo provides interesting insight into the problem of lexical categorization because Tobelo Nouns and Verbs exhibit clear and distinct morphological reflexes. Before considering the distribution of Tobelo PC words across the categories Noun and Verb, it is important to carefully examine the syntactic behavior of both nominal and verbal forms of PC words. In contrast to some free-adjectival languages, such as Japanese, there is no basis for distinguishing a separate lexical category of Adjective in Tobelo. Verbal PC words are true Verbs, and nominal PC words are true Nouns.

3.1 Verbs.

Tobelo Verbs cross-reference the person and number of at least one and as many as two core arguments via an active-stative system of verbal cross-referencing. In addition, Verbs may be optionally inflected for aspect and negation. Complex verbal constructions are formed paratactically with no distinction between matrix and subordinate Verb. With respect to these verbal properties, Tobelo verbal PC words (i.e., PC words which are expressed as verbs) exhibit no special or restricted distribution.

First, let's consider verbal cross-referencing. Tobelo distinguishes two lexical classes of Verb: Active and Stative. Active verbs may take on or two core arguments, while Stative verbs take only one core argument. As with other active-stative languages, the cross-referencing system does not treat the single argument of intransitive Verbs uniformly. One-argument (i.e., intransitive) Active Verbs cross-reference their single "actor" (A) argument via one paradigm of verb prefixes, as in (4), while one-argument Stative Verbs cross-reference their single "undergoer" (U) argument via a different paradigm, as in (5).

(4) \( o-Yahe \quad wo-lio \)
\( \text{NM-Y.} \); \( 3\text{MASC}:A\text{-return.home} \)
'Yahe is going home'

(5) \( o-Yahe \quad i-wi-ihumu \)
\( \text{NM-Y.} \); \( 3\text{A}-1\text{MASC}:U\text{-tremble} \)
'Yahe is trembling'

Verbal PC words always occur as one-argument (i.e., intransitive) Verbs, either Active or Stative. Notice that the PC words in (6) and (7) below take the same cross-referencing pronouns as do the intransitive verbs in (4) and (5) above.

(6) \( o-Yahe \quad wo-pako \)
\( \text{NM-Y.} \); \( 3\text{MASC}:A\text{-big} \)
'Yahe is big'

(7) \( o-Yahe \quad i-wi-hole \)
\( \text{NM-Y.} \); \( 3\text{A}-3\text{MASC}:U\text{-tired} \)
'Yahe is tired'

Two argument (i.e., transitive) Verbs employ both actor and undergoer cross-referencing, as in (8).