Describing lexical flexibility in Caac (New Caledonia)

In many ways, Caac parts of speech share common features with the syntactic categories described in other New Caledonian languages, and based on formal grounds, one can identify four main syntactic categories: nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives. Certain parts of speech such as adjectives and adverbs are clearly dedicated to particular functions and positions in a phrase. Others can be used in non-typical constructions only after having undergone some morphological change (e.g. verbs). Like most Oceanic languages, Caac has no copula and the predicative head is often encoded by other parts of speech than verbs, i.e. nouns including nominalized verbs, pronouns, and numerals, all of which can have a predicative function without undergoing any morphological change. By contrast, verbs require deverbal derivation in order to function as the head of a NP (see "asymmetrical functional fluidity" in Bril (2009:4-6) on Nêlêmwa, New Caledonia), a process mainly used for word creation purposes.

Turning to the opposition between Caac nouns and verbs more specifically, several formal parameters which have been identified in the descriptions of other New Caledonian languages (Nyelâyu (Ozanne-Rivierre, 1998:33-34; Nêlêmwa (Bril, 2002:89-95, 2009); see also Moyse-Faurie (2004: 15-61)) enable us to distinguish a nominal category and a verbal category in Caac. On the one hand, some lexemes are classified as nouns or verbs on morphological criteria (nouns, i.e. lexemes taking a possessive suffix e.g. *he-ny* 'my foot' (foot-1SG.POSS); verbs i.e. lexemes directly followed by an object suffix e.g. *chêbi-rô* '(x) pinch me' (pinch-1SG.O)). On the other hand, some lexemes are not identifiable with this morphological criterion as the same linguistic means, i.e. [Noun or Verb + indirect marker *le~e* + NP or object suffix], encode the relationship between the possessed and the possessor within a NP and the relationship between a verb and its object in a VP (e.g. *le* <u>nek</u> *e-rô* '**my** fish' (SPEC / fish / IND-1SG.O) vs *I* <u>phaazen</u> *e-rô Carine* 'Carine asked **me**' (3SG.S / ask / IND-1SG.O / Carine)). In that case, only the distributional (in)compatibilities of the lexemes in question enable us to establish their category membership (e.g. *I phaazen e-rô **Carine*** 'Carine asked me' but **[le phaazen e-rô]*_{NP} 'my asking/request' (SPEC / ask / IND-1SG.O)). There is in addition a small number of lexical bases which can function as head of VP or NP indifferently (e.g. *le mweju* 'the work' (SPEC / work); *no gaa mweju* 'I'm still working.' (1SG.S / DUR / work)). An analysis of the syntactic context in which they occur enables us to interpret them in a particular utterance. Similar lexemes in neighbouring languages have been analyzed as flexible lexemes (named "fluid bases" by Bril (2009:2)). In this presentation, I would like to explore the extent to which flexible lexemes can be differentiated from nouns (notably free nouns) and verbs in Caac.

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Abbreviations : 1 'first person', 2 'second person', 3 'third person', DUR 'durative', IND 'indirect marker', O 'object', POSS 'possessive', PL 'plural', S 'singular', SG 'singular', SPEC 'specifier'.