Word classes in Hiw: polyfunctional and rigid

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The workshop Lexical Flexibility in Oceanic Languages plans to compare several Oceanic languages, and observe, in each system, how “flexible” lexical roots can be with respect to their word class membership. A highly flexible system would be one where many roots are “precategorial”, or where members of one class are easily converted to another class; a highly rigid system would be one where lexical roots are assigned a single word class, and cannot easily move across parts of speech.

Hiw is spoken by about 250 people on Hiw island, in the Torres group of northern Vanuatu. The Hiw system of word classes can be established based on internal contrasts and distributional properties, by observing the syntactic functions which are open to each set of lexemes. Empirical observation makes it possible to identify seven major syntactic categories: VERBS, ADJECTIVES, NUMERALS, STRONG NOUNS, WEAK NOUNS, LOCATIVES and ADVERBS.

The general rule is for each lexeme to be assigned one, and only one, word class: mītiř ‘sleep’ is strictly a verb, maēsē ‘old woman’ strictly a strong noun, powēge ‘shark’ strictly a weak noun,1 pwō ‘large’ strictly an adjective, etc. Some lexical roots show hybrid class membership (e.g., a lexical root that is both a verb and a noun, or both a noun and a locative), but these are a minority – not more than a dozen cases attested. (“Hybrid” is a better description than “precategorial”, because such roots are only compatible with a specific subset of word classes: e.g. veņoye ‘fight’ is both a noun and a verb, but not an adjective or a locative: it is therefore not “precategorial”.)

Hiw has a number of strategies for deriving members of one category into another one: weak nouns into strong nouns; weak nouns into locatives; verbs into nouns; etc. These strategies generally take the form of (morphological or syntactic) derivation, and only rarely involve zero-conversion. Moreover, not all derivations are attested, e.g. there is no simple way to derive a noun into a verb.

Overall, Hiw thus stands on the “rigid” side of the flexibility gradient.

This being said, some aspects of its grammar could be interpreted as reflecting a form of flexibility. Notably, each word class is assigned not one syntactic function, but an array of functions which are open to all members of this class. Relevant functions include: the head

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1 The contrast between strong and weak nouns is language-specific. Essentially, it is based on a semantic contrast, respectively, between human and non-human nouns.
and the modifier positions within an argument phrase; the head and the modifier positions within a predicate phrase, whether a direct predicate or a TAM-inflected one. Table 1 shows the mapping of these syntactic functions with word classes. Whereas most functions are shared between different word classes, each class is associated with a unique array of potential functions.

**Table 1 – Major word classes in Hiw and their syntactic functions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic function</th>
<th>VERB</th>
<th>ADJECTIVE</th>
<th>NUMERAL</th>
<th>STRONG NOUN</th>
<th>WEAK NOUN</th>
<th>LOCATIVE</th>
<th>ADVERB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>head of argument phrase</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modifier of head in argument phrase</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>head of direct predicate</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAM-inflected predicate</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modifier of head in predicate phrase</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjunct</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incorporated object</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like many Oceanic languages, Hiw trumps the simplistic generalisation suggested by well-known European languages, whereby the functions of ‘argument’ and ‘predicate’ should be restricted, respectively, to nouns and verbs. Thus, Hiw is “omnipredicative” (Lemaréchal 1989, Launey 1994), i.e. most major categories of lexemes can form the head of a direct predicate phrase, with no need of a *be* copula:

(1)  **Tōrō QUQUY.**

1inc:du friend

‘You and I are friends.’

Also, Hiw can combine all major word classes with a TAM-inflected predicate, with no need of a *become* copula (a property also observed for neighbouring Mwotlap: François 2003, 2005a,b).

(2)  **Tōrō (peon QUQUY).**

1inc:du fut friend

‘You and I will be friends.’ [Music.22] [TAM-inflected predicate]

Syntactically, nouns thus behave the same as verbs or adjectives when they are heads of predicate phrases.

Such observations could have been taken as a case of *lexical flexibility*: if *ququy* were to be interpreted as a verb in (1) and (2), then one would be tempted to say that *ququy* ‘friend’ can easily migrate from the Noun class to the Verb class. However, my analysis is different: I contend that *ququy* in (1) and (2) is still a noun, and behaves exactly like any noun would do in this context. The semantic change from ‘friend’ to ‘be/become a friend’ is predictable from the syntactic context, and does not require positing any migration to another word class.
In sum, a lexical root like *ququy* can be POLYFUNCTIONAL (since the same lexeme can head an argument phrase, a predicate phrase, or even a TAM-inflected clause), without showing any sign of lexical FLEXIBILITY. Polyfunctionality is not here a property of individual lexemes, but of an entire word class. As for the relationship between a root and a word class, it is generally a rigid one. Thus in all its syntactic functions, *ququy* remains rigidly a noun (or within Hiw’s system, a “strong noun”), and is not more flexible than any other noun.

All in all, the system of Hiw parts of speech consists of rather watertight word classes, with little flexibility; yet each of its word classes is internally characterised by a rich array of syntactic functions, with regular and predictable semantics.

**References**


