Transcategoriality and syntax-based parts of speech — the case of Late Archaic Chinese

1. Theoretical background

The present paper is based on the following four prerequisites for the definition of parts of speech (cf. Sasse 1993: 196-201):

(1) Prerequisites for distinguishing word classes:
   a. Semantic criteria
   b. Pragmatic criteria
   c. Morphosyntactic criteria
   d. Distinction between lexical and syntactic levels of analysis

The first three prerequisites are generally agreed on by contemporary linguists. Thus, Croft (2001) defines parts of speech in terms of function-indicating morphosyntax within a conceptual space consisting of the pragmatic functions of reference, modification and predication and the semantic classes of object, property and action. Within that space, the following unmarked combinations of pragmatic function and semantic class universally constitute word classes (Croft 2001):

   nouns: reference to an object
   adjective: modification by a property
   verb: predication of an action

Croft’s approach is very adequate for languages in which there is a one-to-one correspondence between lexical categories and syntactic categories in the sense that lexical items are preclassified in the lexicon for their syntactic distribution (e.g. in a verbal or in a nominal position). Problems arise if prerequisite (1d) becomes relevant. This is the case if lexical items are transcategorial, i.e. if they are not preclassified for syntactic categories. In Croft’s view, the lack of difference in markedness across two or more word-class indicating constructions implies the lack of a word-class distinction for that semantic-pragmatic domain.

As I will try to show on the basis of Late Archaic Chinese, the language of Confucius, Laozi and others between the 5th and the 3rd centuries BC, this conclusion is inadequate. If one looks at argument-structure constructions of that language, one can see that there are two different syntactic positions N and V and that lexical items are transcategorial. The distribution of lexical items to these positions depends on stereotypical pragmatic inferences of whether they have to be conceptually understood as objects (in the N position) or as events (in the V position). My overall approach will be that of Construction
Grammar in a general sense not limited to Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001). If my analysis is true, Late Archaic Chinese does make a distinction between nouns and verbs but it does so only syntactically.

2. Late Archaic Chinese

In Late Archaic Chinese, the argument-structure construction is characterized by the following distribution of nominal positions (N) and verbal positions (V) (S stands for intransitive argument, A and O for actor and patient in transitive contexts):

(2) Argument-structure constructions:
   a. Intransitive: \( N_S \ V \ (N_S) \)
   b. Transitive: \( N_A \ V \ N_O \)

To illustrate the lack of syntactic preclassification in the lexicon, I will concentrate on the V-position, which can take event-denoting lexemes (stative and dynamic events) as well as object-denoting lexemes. The meaning of the lexical item in that position can be regularly derived from the construction to which the V-slot belongs plus the semantics of that lexical item. I will briefly illustrate this with person-denoting lexemes (PDL; (3) and (4)) and with instrument-denoting lexemes (IDL; (5) and (6)):

(3) Semantics of person-denoting lexemes in the V-position:
   a. In intransitive argument-structure constructions:
      (i) \( N_S \) behaves like a PDL, \( N_S \) is a PDL
      (ii) \( N_S \) becomes a PDL
   b. In transitive argument-structure constructions:
      (i) \( N_A \) CAUSE \( N_O \) to be/behave like a PDL
      (ii) \( N_A \) CONSIDER \( N_O \) to be/behave like a PDL

(4) PDL in a transitive argument-structure construction (Mencius 5B.3):

\[
\text{wú yú Yàn Bān yē, zé yóu zhī yī.}
\]

I \text{PREP} Yän Ban be thus V:friend him PF
‘What I am to Yan Ban, I consider/treat him as a friend.’

(5) Semantics of IDL in the V-position:
   a. In intransitive argument-structure constructions:
      \( N_S \) is IDL/is used as IDL.
   b. In transitive argument-structure constructions:
      (i) \( N_A \) CAUSE \( N_O \) to be IDL: to use s.th./s.o. in the function of an IDL.
      (ii) \( N_A \) APPLY IDL on \( N_O \): to use the IDL on s.th./s.o.

(6) \text{biān} ‘whip’, illustrating (5bii) (Lunyu 7.15):

\[
\text{gōng zǐ nù yù biān zhī.}
\]

prince be/get.angry want V:whip him
‘The prince got angry and wanted to whip him.’
There are different probabilities for object-denoting lexemes to occur in the V-slot. The probability roughly follows a version of the animacy hierarchy adapted to Late Archaic Chinese:

(7) 1st/2nd person > proper names > human > nonhuman > abstracts

The higher a lexeme is in the above hierarchy, the less likely is its occurrence in the V-position. This hierarchy reflects a stereotypical implicature (Levinson 2000) in the sense that the more a lexeme refers to a concrete item the more likely is its occurrence in an N-position. This implicature can be flouted for rhetorical purposes. In the following example, the proper name Wu Wang ‘King Wu’ occurs in the V-position in the rhetorically marked context of regicide:

(8) Rhetorically marked use of a proper name in the V-slot (Zuo, Ding 10):
    Gong Ruò yǔ ěr yù Wu wáng wǒ hū?
    Gong Ruó say you want Wu king I QUEST
    ‘Gong Ruó said: “Do you want to cause me to be the King of Wu?”’
    [World knowledge: King Wu was murdered. ➔ 'Do you want to kill me?’]

3. Outlook

• Croft’s (2001) approach is based on Radical Construction Grammar. However, it should be possible to apply his conceptual space and its markedness patterns to theories that assume the existence of syntactic categories such as N and V if one looks at the markedness of the lexemes occurring in the respective positions.

• Broschart (1997) claims that transcategoriality is only possible in type/token languages like Tongan. Late Archaic Chinese is a counterexample to this claim. It is a noun/verb language but there is no preclassification of lexical items for the positions of N and V.

References


