In this paper we will compare two language groups that are known to show very little grammatical difference between nouns and verbs: the Circassian (otherwise called Adyghe(an)) branch of the West Caucasian (=Abkhaz-Adyghe) family, consisting of two languages: Adyghe and Kabardian, and the Wakashan family of the Northwest Pacific coast of North America. Both language groups are amazingly similar in their part-of-speech systems and ways of expressing the contrast between predicates and arguments.

In these languages, any notional stem may in principle be used as an argument, a predicate, or a nominal modifier, without any special marking. Unlike Old Chinese (Cikoski 1978; Starostin 1994), or Mundari (Evans, Osada 2005), but more like Salishan (Van Eijk, Hess 1986; Jelinek, Demers 1994) and Philippine (Himmelman, to appear) languages, Adyghe and Wakashan show predictable and regular differences in function between argument and predicate uses of the same notional stem.

As is known since (Jacobsen 1979), notional stems in Wakashan, contrary to what had been claimed earlier (Sapir 1911; Swadesh 1936–9), are not monocategorial, i.e. there is some distributional difference between “nouns” and “verbs”. Although at first sight arguments and predicates are marked irrespective of what notional stems are used (1), verbs do differ from nouns in that they cannot serve as arguments without a specific determiner (2); cf. examples from Nootka:

(1) a. qu:?as-ma man-3SG "The one who is big is a man"
   ʔi,h-ʔi big-DET

b. ʔi,h-ma qu:?as-ʔi man-DET "The man is big."

(2) a. mamu:k-ma work-3SG qu:?as-ʔi man-DET "The man is working"
   mamu:k-ʔi work-DET

b. *qu:`as-ma mamu:k man-DET "A person who is working is a man"
   mamu:k-ʔi work-DET

(The determiner -ʔi, being attached to any notional stem, indicates its noun-like use, whereas 3SG indicative marker -ma denotes the verb-like, i.e. predicate, function.)

Nonovert tense markers with nominal stems turn them into verbs, i.e. they cannot be used as nouns without a determiner any more, cf. in Makah baʔasʔu InlineForm “it was a house” vs. baʔasʔuʔɾ-qʔ InlineForm “former house-DET” (Jacobsen 1979: 110–112).

In Adyghe, the nominal notional stem can be used as a stative predicate (3a), or as an argument with (3b) or without (3c) an overt determiner suffix denoting specificity (
-ɾ is a syncretistic marker of specificity and absolutive case):
(3) a. a-r hač’e he-DET.ABS guest ‘He is a guest’
b. hač’e-r kwa-be guest-DET.ABS come-PAST ‘The guest (specific) came’
c. hač’e kwa-be guest come-PAST ‘A guest (non-specific) came’

However, exactly as in Waskashan, verbs in argument uses, unlike nouns, cannot be used without an overt determiner:

(4) məʔerə̌se(-r) qəset apple(-DET.ABS) give.me ‘Give me (an, the) apple!’

(5) a. qeʔp’efə̌-be-r qəset you.bought-PAST-DET.ABS give.me.IMP ‘Give me what you bought!’
   b. *qepʔefə̌-r qəset you.bought-PAST give.me.IMP ‘Give me what you bought!’

Nouns provided with overt tense markers, same as in Wakashan, cannot be used as arguments without a determiner (6b):

(6) a. č’elejeβãjo(-r) qeʔwet teacher(-DET.ABS) find.IMP ‘Find (a, the) teacher!’
   b. *č’elejeβãjo-ʃ’ǒ qeʔwet teacher-FUT find.IMP ‘Find (some, a) person that will be a teacher!’
   c. č’elejeβãjo-ʃ’ǒ-r qeʔwet teacher-FUT-DET.ABS find.IMP ‘Find the person that will be a teacher!’

A related fact common for languages of both families is the existence of special focus constructions, which give rise to peculiar predicate forms of personal pronouns and provide evidence for a certain asymmetry between nominals and verbs. Finally, it should be noted that Circassian languages, like Wakashan and Salishan, distinguish nouns from verbs morphologically by the (in)ability to take possessive person/number prefixes.

The similarities observed here are not likely to be accidental, the more so as the same cluster of characteristics is found far outside of the Caucasus and North America areas, for instance in Malagasy (Dahl 1986). And in fact, in this paper, an attempt will be made to show that the features shared by Circassian and Wakashan reveal a common type in which part-of-speech differences of notional stems are peripheral in the grammatical system.

References


