

LEXICAL CATEGORIES

Wylie Breckenridge

1. What is a noun? Two unsatisfying claims:

- a. A word that stands for a person place or thing.
False consequence: every word is a noun.
- b. A word that can be used in at least one of the following gaps:
' ___ went to the store', 'The ___ went to the store', ...
False consequence: every word is a noun.
Problem: how do we formulate this in a way that works for all languages?

2. My main proposal is a semantic one (from which I will draw syntactic conclusions):

- (LC) If w is a word and c is a lexical category then by ' w is a c ' we mean:
- a. w is used in c position
 - b. events in which w is used in some position are generally events in which it is used in c position.

For example:

By "'dog' is a noun" we mean that 'dog' is used in noun position; more explicitly: that events in which 'dog' is used in some position are generally events in which it is used in noun position.

3. Clarifications:

- a. The step from (LCa) to (LCb) is not meant to be controversial. It is like claiming that by 'Mary jogs in the park' mean that events in which Mary jogs somewhere are generally events in which Mary jogs in the park.
- b. By 'position' I mean a position within the structure of a sentence. I shall take this to be a node on the tree that represents the structure of the sentence. So, 'John loves Mary' has five positions.

4. Two (surprising) consequences:

- a. We use "'dog' is a noun" to quantify over events. ('Generally' is an adverb of quantification – it means 'in most cases'.)
- b. By 'noun' we primarily mean a property of positions, and only secondarily a property of words (a property that a word has in virtue of being used in that position).

5. Some analogous claims:

- a. By 'George is a halfback' we mean that George plays in halfback position; more explicitly, that events in which George plays in some position are generally events in which George plays in halfback position.
- b. We use 'George is a halfback' to quantify over events.
- c. By 'halfback' we *primarily* mean a property of positions in a rugby team, and only *secondarily* a property of people (a property that a person has in virtue of playing in that position).

6. It is not *ad hoc* to propose that we use ' w is a c ' to talk about *usage* (without making that explicit):

- a. i. The sign warned us to turn back.
 - ii. The sign *was used* to warn us to turn back.
 - b. i. This switch turns on the light.
 - ii. This switch *is used* to turn on the light.
 - iii. Events in which this switch is used to do something are generally events in which it is used to turn on the light.
 - c. i. 'Dog' means dog.
 - ii. 'Dog' *is used* to mean dog.
 - iii. Events in which 'dog' is used to mean something are events in which 'dog' is used to mean dog.
7. So LC is not *ad hoc*. But why think it is true? Because of its explanatory power.
8. What is a noun? LC gives a clear answer: **A noun is a word that is used in noun position.**
- a. It is a consequence of LC that (1a) and (1b) are both false.
 - b. This answer applies to *all* languages.
 - c. It allows that the one word can belong to more than one category: 'I needed some cash', 'I cashed a cheque' – there is no need to think that there are two words 'cash'. (I have argued elsewhere that they are in fact the same word.)
 - d. It allows that a word can acquire a new lexical category, or change categories altogether, and it explains how this happens. 'I've misbelted myself'. Need not be any explicit decision to change, or convention, or no intrinsic change to the word itself.
 - e. When we categorise a position in a tree, we are not specifying what category of word is to be used there – position categorization is prior to word categorization.
 - f. 'The yinkish dripner blooked quastofically into the nindin with the pidibs.' (Carnie, p. 29)
9. This answer, of course, raises a further question: What is a noun position? I propose that this is the question to ask about nouns (and lexical categories in general).

I propose: the results of research into what nouns are should be thought of as results about what noun *positions* are, and that doing so will help make sense of things.

Constraints on an answer:

- a. It must explain the correlation between the position in which we generally use a word and its meaning.
 - b. It must be language-independent, and it must not appeal to other lexical categories.
10. A proposal: a noun position is one in which a word is used for a certain semantic role. Further proposal: it is used to specify a participant of an event. 'John just arrived.'

This satisfies the two constraints:

- a. What a word means makes it better or worse suited to being used for that role: 'Handsome just arrived.' (Rugby analogy)
- b. It is language-independent. (Rugby analogy)