

A consideration of the 'traditional terms'

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The so-called 'traditional terms' have long been seen as problematic and the argument continues about what precisely they might refer to. This article finds that there are essentially two different perspectives such that the notion of a 'part of speech' represents either a mental or a grammatical distinction. Accordingly, the problem with the traditional terms can be said to have arisen out of a conflation of these two perspectives. If we assume that the 'parts of speech' represent grammatical distinctions then the traditional terms are effectively meaningless, because from a grammatical perspective, the 'parts of speech' are not universal concepts. However, if we assume they represent mental distinctions then they would be best understood as notions that represent aspects of the world-view of people using them.

The problem

Some time ago, Richard Hudson (1981) ran an inquiry on the opinions of linguists and found a considerable degree of consensus on a number of issues. Of particular interest here is that many of the so-called 'traditional terms' (i.e. noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, pronoun, article and interjection) were used by modern linguists with approximately their established meanings (p.335). The significance of this is that, notwithstanding the progress made in linguistics in the 20th century, these traditional terms are basically the same as those in the *Techne grammatike* by Dionysius Thrax (c100 BC) (see Householder 1984).

Thrax was a scholar in the Alexandrian tradition which supported the view that the regularities in language reflected their origins in human convention. The opposing view of the Stoics was that the irregularities in language reflected the diversity in nature, but while the philosophical ideas of the Stoics have contributed to other schools, their linguistic views were mainly ignored (Robins 1997:21). The Alexandrians taught classical literature, which in their case meant teaching Homer as representing the ideal to be emulated. They had noticed how the spoken Greek in the eastern Mediterranean (the koine) had diverged from its origin (Attic Greek) and they felt that a reasoned account was needed to explain how and why Homer's Greek was 'better' and consequently Thrax compiled his *Techne*. Whether others had written grammars of Greek before that is not known. Certainly Aristotle had already commented that "knowledge of the forms of utterance belonged to the art of performance" (1995 Poet 1456^b7), but the *Techne* is the first surviving explicit description of Greek (Robins 1997:37).

The grammatical rules of the *Techne* were derived from the observed regularities in the language use of Homer, or so it would seem, but the Greek of Homer had not been spoken for several hundred years, so for Thrax it could not have been his first language. Therefore, it must be the case that his analysis of Homer's texts was done on the basis of his linguistic intuition of contemporary Greek, i.e. the koine. The result is a grammar that purports to capture the language (presumably) common at the time of Homer, but which expresses this in terms of the language common at the time of Thrax. While this discrepancy might not have bothered scholars then, it should be a concern for current scholars who approach the *Techne* with their own linguistic intuitions and even more so when we take into account that what is

'common' to, for instance, English is likely to be different from Greek, whether at the time of the Alexandrians or of Homer. However, the point here is that human conventions change over time so that, strictly speaking, what counts as 'common' is ultimately indefinable. Indeed, this approach of the Alexandrian grammarians was already criticised in the 2nd century by the Sceptic Sextus Empiricus (c100) who argued that their 'rules' were analogies of regularities found in common usage so that the notion of a 'rule' as arbitrating between correct and incorrect usage lacked a solid foundation (p.115 §§197-199). He added that because common usage was inconsistent and variable, it must follow that the rules themselves must not only be inconsistent, but variable as well (p.133 §236).

Arguably, an 'inconsistent rule' is an oxymoron, but a 'variable rule' might perhaps be interpreted as referring to statistical normalcy or maybe a rule bound by one or more parameters reflecting, for instance, social values (Labov 1969, 1972; Cedergreen and Sankoff 1974). However, interpretations like that are effectively representations of an observed regularity rather than of a rule allowing for a dichotomous classification of correct and incorrect usage, which grammatical rules, after all, *do* profess to be capable of. Accordingly, Labov's 'variable rules' are better interpreted not as grammatical rules, but as social rules that *generate* grammatical rules. Consequently, Sextus's criticism must be allowed to stand and the conclusion must be that grammatical rules cannot be derived from an analysis of common usage exclusively.

The traditional terms

While the source of the traditional terms was the philosophically motivated subject-predicate distinction of Plato (Robins 1997:32), it is still valid to say that the list in the *Téchne* was based on an analysis of the same common usage which gave rise to the grammatical rules. Accordingly, as a catalogue of ontological elements to be manipulated by these rules, it will fall prey to the same criticism of Sextus. However, a further compounding factor is the fact that the Roman grammarians took over the *Téchne* almost as-is. Insofar as Latin had no article, there was no need for that word-class, but later grammarians did separate the interjection from the adverb with which it had been classed (p.66). Later, in the 13th century, the Modistae reinstated the article, combined the verb and the participle and placed the adjective in a separate class (p.99), which resulted in the current list of 'traditional terms'. Ignoring Sextus's criticism, or perhaps being unaware of it, successive generations of grammarians then handed down this list through the centuries. But that is not quite what actually happened.

Part of the meaning of 'tradition' is that it reflects a process of maturation of some body of accumulated understanding that is handed down through time via continued usage. The illusion is of a certain stability, but the reality in the case of the 'traditional terms' is different. The main finding of Ian Michael's (1970) survey of grammatical categories of the English language throughout the ages is that there was in fact no consensus on grammatical categories. Starting with William Bullokar (1586) at the time of the invention of printing, Michael surveys all English grammars until 1800 and classifies 259 grammars into 56 distinct systems. His conclusion is that the 'parts of speech' constituted a system that was "imprecise, inadequate and unstable" (Michael 1970:280). It was imprecise because there was recurring disagreement as to what the various terms were actually referring to. It was inadequate because it did not suffice to explain all samples of language. It was unstable because it changed so often. As an example of the unease of English grammarians, Michael (p.51 In1) quotes Phillipps, who proposed a system of only four parts of speech, viz. substantive, verb, adjective, particle (p.256), as saying:

All these together [his four primary parts] the Grammarians in obscure terms call'd Noun, Pronoun, Participle, Verb, Adverb, Preposition, Conjunction, Interjection. I dare say a Child would learn many hundred Latin Words, before he can understand these eight Terms: Nevertheless we are oblig'd to make Use of the Terms, tho' obscure in themselves, that the Learner may not be ignorant of the Grammatical Language. (Phillipps 1731:iv)

Closer to modern times, Otto Jespersen (1924), after a synopsis of the various chapters of (then) current, ordinary grammars, commented that the system represented by the parts of speech was but "a survival from the days when grammatical science was in its infancy" (p.39). Surely, this adds some piquancy to Hudson's finding that the traditional terms are still in use today, but the conclusion must be that an analysis of language-use by itself appears insufficient to justify these traditional terms.

What are called the 'traditional terms' are also commonly referred to as the 'parts of speech'. The term originated with Plato's *meros logou* in the distinction between noun and verb (1997a *Crat* 399; 1997b *Soph* 262a-263d), but as other classes of words were recognised, the expression came to take on its later meaning of 'word class' (Robins 1997:41). Within the context of this article, the meaning of *meros* should pose no problem and can simply be given as 'part', but that of *logou* is problematic. Apart from the various metaphysical meanings, there is the traditional meaning of 'sentence' which for the purposes of the discussion we can gloss with the definition in the *Techne* of 'upper limit of grammatical description' (p.40). That way, the notion of 'parts of speech' can rather uncontroversially be assumed to refer to words as the constitutive elements of sentences, i.e. the 'minimal units'. But *logou* can also be read as '(a) thought', whence the idea that a sentence can be taken as 'expressing a complete thought'. However, that would suggest that the 'parts of speech' are parallel to those elements of meaning that constitute the thought which would appear to place the notion outside the scope of linguistics. Accordingly, we focus instead on the idea of words being elements of sentences.

The parts of speech as constituents of sentences are presumed to reflect elements of a hierarchical structure. However, taking 'sentence' as a grammatical notion it follows that assuming that a given utterance is a sentence effectively means imposing a sentence-structure on the grounds of a perceived similarity with some grammatical model. Therefore, the disagreement on the meanings of the parts of speech which Michael (1970) found can be interpreted as due to a lack of clarity about what the model represents, i.e. what the structure is assumed to be a structure of. And this shifts our attention to the criteria involved.

The consensus on the traditional terms found by Hudson (1981) is interesting as evidenced by Emmon Bach's comparatively recent comment that:

suspicious about a Western European or Latinate bias in the categories seem to have been completely lost, to the point where syntactic descriptions of the most widely different languages are often couched in the traditional terminology without any comment or question (Bach 1994:270).

Indeed, the consensus appears to be sufficiently strong to ignore the fact that these 'established meanings' of the traditional terms are problematic. However, it is also true that where there is consensus there must be some system that validates the concepts underlying those terms.

Grammar

As far back as the 13th century, Roger Bacon observed that there are two aspects to any language. There are those that are peculiar to the particular language and there are others that apply to all languages equally and, on account of their generality, could conceivably be formalised into a science of language, i.e. a Universal Grammar (Bursill-Hall 1972:19). Traditionally, Universal Grammar has been understood as a subsystem of languages in the sense that a grammar of a language can be seen as Universal Grammar augmented with a formalisation of the various patterns peculiar to that language. Arguably then, if as per Bach's above complaint linguists are treating the traditional terms as if they were applicable to any language then they should be part of Universal Grammar. But it is not difficult to show that this is not so.

Edward Sapir (1921:119) commented that all known natural languages express a grammatical distinction between the notions of verb and noun, but that they do not necessarily have any or all of the other parts of speech. Consequently, the only parts of speech that could qualify as elements of a presumed Universal Grammar are the verb and noun, because the other parts of speech are not universal. But there is a problem here. In a footnote to his comment, Sapir mentions Yana in which all grammatical functions other than verb and noun are expressed as affixes to the effect that, nominally, there are only two types of words, i.e. verbs and nouns. This would seem to support the idea that they could be elements of Universal Grammar. However, in the next chapter he discusses Nootka (pp.133f) to prove his point that separateness of constituents is not a prerequisite, because in this language both verbs and nouns are expressed as affixes on a neutral stem. Furthermore, and in the same footnote, he also mentions that in Yana the notions of 'verb' and 'noun' are much

closer than we would hold possible. Accordingly, we observe that the *traditional* notions of 'verb' and 'noun' are not applicable to all languages and for that reason cannot be elements of Universal Grammar. Of course, what could be an element of Universal Grammar is the verb-noun *distinction*, but before we look at that possibility there is another concern that needs to be addressed first.

Sapir's comments also afford the conclusion of there being two different perspectives: one from which we can survey *languages* and observe a distinction between the parts of speech, and another from which we see *parts of speech* and observe a distinction between languages. From the first perspective we see on the one side the notions of verb and noun and on the other side the remaining categories. From the second perspective we see languages that have *all* the parts of speech, others that have only *some* (e.g. Yana) and even one which has none (e.g. Nootka). While this confirms the earlier conclusion that the traditional terms other than verb and noun cannot refer to parts of Universal Grammar, it is still possible that they apply to *particular* grammars and thus could be meaningful for some languages, but not for others. Unfortunately, there is a problem with this idea as well. The traditional terms were originally formulated by the Greeks and have come down to us via Latin. Different languages have different characteristics and those terms which fit Latin do not necessarily fit, for instance, English. Thus, we would have an argument for the parts of speech being language-specific, but that fails, because, as per Bach's earlier quoted comment, the traditional terms are still very much used today in the description of a range of languages (which of course includes Greek, Latin and English). What this effectively means is that the meanings of the terms are held constant across all those languages. Accordingly, it is not the case that the meanings of the terms have been adapted to suit, for example, the English language. Therefore we are forced by logic to conclude that the traditional terms are *not* part of particular grammars and because, as concluded earlier, they are not part of Universal Grammar it follows that they are not part of grammar *at all*.

The conclusion we have reached now is simply that the parts of speech are not elements of grammar, not of Universal Grammar and not of particular grammars. Accordingly, we should accept Sextus Empiricus' criticism as mentioned earlier and deny that the notion of 'parts of speech' is meaningful. But clearly this conclusion cannot be right, because the traditional terms are being used today to construct grammars and this continued use of the traditional terms is evidence for a belief that such categories do exist. However, it is conceivable that insofar as the traditional terms reflect a grammatical distinction, they do so in virtue of what the grammar is a grammar *of*. This would seem justified in view of our earlier conclusion that the verb-noun *distinction* could be an element of Universal Grammar. Thus, it would seem reasonable to conceive of the verb-noun distinction as a characterisation of an event-thing continuum with different languages expressing a different 'distance' between the two.¹ The adverb-adjective distinction certainly seems to parallel the verb-noun distinction, although it cannot be as simple as that, because, on some analyses at least, adverbs can also modify adjectives. Another possible distinction might be the noun-pronoun distinction, because all languages appear to have pronouns (one of the very few 'universals' found by Joseph Greenberg (1966) which are not concerned with word-order). This distinction could be conceived of as reflecting a distinction of reference, i.e. direct vs. indirect, but here too the situation must be more complex, because reference is not a property of words, but of *phrases*. Nevertheless, while we thus have a means to distinguish verbs from nouns (and perhaps another one for nouns and pronouns), it is not immediately clear which other distinctions would be necessary to justify the remaining traditional terms so that we need to look further.

Sapir made a clear distinction between verbs and nouns on the one hand and the remaining parts of speech on the other hand and I suggested that this represents two distinct perspectives. On the one hand we have one or more *distinctions* that appear to be legitimately represented in grammars in the sense of being descriptions of language-use, while on the other hand we have constituents of sentences that are controlled by the grammars so that speakers will produce 'proper' sentences. Certainly, the verb-noun distinction can be thought of as the basis on which relevant constituents are classified as either verbs or nouns and the same could conceivably hold for any other distinction that is recognised by the speakers of the language in question. However, such distinctions are really dispositions of mind while sentence constituents are matters of fact. And this suggests that the list of traditional terms is a result of the conflation of the two perspectives. But before we tackle this, we need to make more precise what verbs and nouns could be categories *of*.

Discourse and world-view

Paul Hopper and Sandra Thompson tell us that the distinction between verb and noun is a discourse function in the sense that "the categories of N and V actually manifest themselves only when the discourse requires it" (1984:747). The terms are thus conceived of as describing *facts*, so that, roughly, nouns introduce *participants* of the discourse and verbs introduce *events*. However, facts are only facts insofar as they have been perceived as such and what a grammatical object might describe could seem a 'thing' to one and an 'event' to another. To say then that the distinction is a discourse function is saying that interlocutors are effectively restricted in their choice of judgements of where they would site a particular linguistic form on the event-thing continuum. Accordingly, we could say that the rules governing a discourse are like a grammar, because a restriction on what kind of linguistic entity can serve as a particular grammatical object is tantamount to being a rule that determines which use is correct. The implication is that insofar as the verb-noun distinction belongs to the grammar, it does so only in virtue of what grammars are rules *for*.

Typically, a grammar of a language is seen as a tool for determining whether a given sample of language is 'well formed' in the sense of identifying it as a sample of that language. Thus, the concept is close to the notion of a set of formation rules. However, it can also be seen as a conversion tool to translate from thoughts to language, from 'bad language' to 'good language', as in the case of a style grammar (e.g. Darbyshire 1971) or, more generally, from one language to another. Here it should be noted that grammars will typically be different for people speaking different languages. In comparing some language to their own, structures that are either identical or different need less elaboration than those that are similar such that it could be said that the purpose of a grammar is to arbitrate in cases of ambiguity. Accordingly, we widen the notion of grammar to the rather general idea of a 'system of rules'.

De Saussure conceived of language as being but one system of signs for the expression of ideas, albeit the most important one. The study of signs as part of social life, he referred to as 'semiology' (de Saussure 1916:33) and he held that the true nature of language-systems could only be discovered after we take into account what they have in common with all other semiological systems (p.35). De Saussure himself made no suggestion as to what this might be and while considerable effort has been expended by researchers in pursuit of this task, nothing was ever found (Sperber and Wilson 1995:7). However, some advance can be made if we take the view of Charles Morris (1938) that semiology (or 'semiotics' as he called it) concerns the study of behaviour.² What this affords is the conclusion that a grammar is effectively a system of rules for *communicative behaviour* which then should be taken in its widest possible sense and not be restricted to linguistics. Specifically, it should be applicable to *any* shared mode of communication including phenomena such as 'body language' and 'dress code'. In this respect it is worthwhile to mention Chomsky's suggestion that it might be possible to develop a 'grammar of faces', because the human ability to recognise faces is truly remarkable (Chomsky 1980:248).

Admittedly, defining 'grammar' as loosely as a 'system of rules for communicative behaviour' allows for languages to be of any conceivable kind, but here I will assume 'language' to stand for 'verbal language'. Thus, whenever speakers use language, they are performing a social activity. Babbling infants perform a *self-oriented* activity which nevertheless is a social activity, because it is part of learning to communicate. Speakers talking to hearers perform an *other-oriented* activity which is, by that token, a social activity, because of their perlocutionary intention. Researchers expressing their thoughts by writing an article perform a *group-oriented* activity which is, also by that token, a social activity, because they want to share their ideas and understanding. Arguably, expressing thoughts is inclusive of talking and talking is inclusive of babbling and, clearly, the higher the level, the more constraining will be the rules governing the activity. The point to note, however, is that because the activity is social, these rules are socially determined, a point fully in line with social interactionist George Herbert Mead (1934) who taught that everything pertaining to society, including language, is socially constructed. A consequence of this is that each language is biased toward expressing the social identity of its speakers, with the bias effectively representing their shared world-view. From that perspective, a grammar of language then becomes a system of rules for how to verbalise in order to be recognised as a speaker of that language.

If we now accept the idea of the verb-noun distinction being a characterisation of an event-thing continuum with different languages expressing a different 'distance' between the two, then we have the particular distinction serving as a means to identify a particular social group while the distinction itself merely serves as a means to effect the event-thing

distinction. In other words, the distinction informs hearers about what the sentence is about and *how* the distinction is made informs hearers about speaker's social orientation. Thus, we can say that the *particular* verb-noun distinction is a social construction representing the world-view of speakers and that it is *not* part of any grammar. However, the *possibility* of the distinction is part of grammar.

What we can conclude at this point is that there appears to be a parallel between, on the one hand, language and world-view and, on the other hand, grammar and discourse. Accordingly, the notion of discourse can be understood in two different, but related, ways. From a linguistic perspective a discourse is an *incidence* of verbal behaviour and from a social perspective a discourse is a *domain* of verbal behaviour. So, building on our earlier decision that the rules governing a discourse are like a grammar, I now submit that a 'grammar of language' is a 'set of rules which determine whether a given sentence fits within a domain of verbal behaviour'.

Hopper and Thompson interpret 'discourse' as 'human communication', tacitly assuming that this will be verbal. They align themselves with Talmy Givón (1979, 1981) basing their understanding on "general pragmatic principles of human communication" and claim that "the linguistic categories V and N exist as functions of the need to report events and of the people and things involved in them" (Hopper and Thompson 1984:710). However, it is necessary to go one step further and recognise that there is an element of *control* involved and, specifically, that the parameters which set the limits of discourse exist *outside* of the discourse. Saying that something exists as a 'function of a need' immediately raises the question of 'a need of *what*', presupposing that a definition of this 'need' illuminates the framework of the matter. Arguably, this 'need' cannot be expressed in terms other than those describing the social system that interlocutors are part of. Accordingly, the shared world-view must be recognised as constituting the parameters that set the extent of the domain which determines the possibilities that exist within the discourse. And now we can draw the conclusion.

Conclusion

The contrast between *mental* distinctions and *grammatical* distinctions affords the conclusion that the list of traditional terms is indeed a result of conflating the two perspectives. If we assume that the 'parts of speech' are elements of sentences, we should accept Sextus Empiricus' criticism as mentioned earlier and deny that the notion of 'parts of speech' is meaningful, because from a grammatical perspective, the 'parts of speech' are not universal concepts. The alternative is quite simply that the 'parts of speech' are notions that belong to the world-view of the people using them. As linguistic terms they represent pre-scientific notions, belonging to a time when "grammatical science was in its infancy" (Jespersen 1924:39, as quoted earlier) and therefore would only have limited use outside studies in historical linguistics. As general terms, however, they lead to questions that probe the structure of a people's world-view and ask about the cognitive structure of people's definition of what is 'real' to them. Of course, whether such definitions would be useful from a linguistic perspective is a different matter.

Notes

1. Strictly speaking, the event-thing distinction is not a continuum, but rather a consequence of the two opposite perspectives of complexity and simplicity.
2. While the consensus appears to be that Morris has overstated his case (e.g. Black 1949:185) I remain convinced that his basic insight is sound and that at least some aspect of the process of semiosis can be explained in terms of behaviour.

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