Book Review

Jan Rijkhoff and Eva van Lier (eds.). *Flexible Word Classes: Typological Studies of Underspecified Parts of Speech*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013. xix + 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-966844-1

Linguists have long noted that traditional labels like "verb", "noun" and "adjective" do not apply to all languages in the same way, and that many languages show "flexibility" across ontological domains (things, events, properties) or grammatical functions (referential phrase, predicate, modifier). These facts are compelling for understanding word class systems across languages. In this volume Rijkhoff and van Lier contribute the most detailed treatment of word class flexibility to date, including both chapters aimed towards typological generalization and more descriptive chapters in which language specialists provide great illustrations of how word class flexibility plays out in different linguistic systems, covering diverse languages from Australia, Asia, and the Americas, with a special focus on the particularly relevant Munda languages.

The many different approaches linguists take towards word classes has led to controversy, so in their introduction van Lier and Rijkhoff take a smart position: rather than advocating any single theoretical orientation, the volume "presents a wide range of novel descriptive facts and shows how some grammatical theories could accommodate these facts" (2). The first three chapters by van Lier and Rijkhoff, Hengeveld, and Don and van Lier focus on crosslinguistic questions, and Bisang's Chapter 10 revisits these from a welcome diachronic perspective on a topic that is usually treated synchronically, using examples from Archaic Chinese, Khmer, Nahuatl, and Tagalog to ask how languages may become more flexible or rigid over time.

One new and interesting way to extend the discussion of word class flexibility, outlined by van Lier and Rijkhoff and then picked up in other chapters, involves the distinction between the flexibility of lexemes and the flexibility of grammatical markers, yielding a four-type classification based on rigidity vs. flexibility in both domains (p. 25). Languages that are relatively rigid in one or both of these domains are attested, but languages with high flexibility in both domains appear to be uncommon or nonexistent. As Hengeveld points out in his chapter, "there is a trade-off between lexical structure on the one hand and syntactic and

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morphological structure on the other" (p. 37), and a language with neither specialized lexical classes nor functional slots would have a hard time narrowing down specific meanings.

The comparative chapters contain many further insights that I cannot fully summarize here, but I would offer one comment on their general approach, which appears to rest on what Hengeveld calls "a fundamental distinction between flexible and rigid PoS-systems" (p. 31). This implies that languages like those discussed in this volume are radically different from the well-known European languages often taken as canonical examples of "rigid" or "differentiated" word class systems. In fact, most if not all languages, no matter how "rigid", show elements of flexibility in their word class systems (e.g., English has many words that can be used alternatively as predicates, referential phrases, or modifiers). This, along with the diachronic issues discussed by Bisang, suggests that flexibility is a matter of degree and not entirely reducible to a set of discrete types. The assumption that in "rigid languages" such phenomena are exceptional and that in "flexible languages" they are the norm provides a good pragmatic solution to assigning languages to "types" for comparison, so this is not problematic in itself, but problems arise if the types are taken as natural classes rather than methodological tools. It is not surprising that almost as soon as these types are proposed, the need arises to create "intermediate" types for languages that do not fit (p. 36), since they impose boundaries within a space that is essentially gradient. Van Lier and Rijkhoff concede this point, calling flexibility "a phenomenon that may apply in different degrees to different levels of the grammar of an individual language" (p. 26). For this reason, I would suggest the slight adjustment of avoiding asking whether a language is "flexible" or not, and instead asking the more interesting question of what kind or degree of flexibility it shows. Indeed, the strength of the descriptive chapters in the volume is that they apply the latter question to a diverse set of languages.

Several of the chapters engage with the challenge presented by Evans and Osada (2005) to accounts of Mundari nouns and verbs as a single flexible class, in which they hold such accounts to a high standard based on criteria of "semantic compositionality", "bidirectional distributional equivalence", and "exhaustiveness" that would be required to establish a true a lack of differentiated word classes. Despite the doubts raised by this critique for Mundari, and by extension to claims about extreme word class flexibility in general, several of the chapters in the volume describe language systems that do appear to be clear examples of word class flexibility even by Evans and Osada's conservative criteria. Gil's chapter on Riau Indonesian gives a good example of a language with one word class that spans all of the functions of the major classes seen in other languages. Gil shows that the entire class ("exhaustiveness") applied in

any function ("bidirectionality") can refer to any of the major ontological categories ("compositionality"), using the innovative method of testing randomly generated lists of words across different functions (pp. 116–119). Peterson's and Rau's analyses of two Munda languages (Kharia and Santali, respectively) suggest that these languages have better candidates for a highly flexible noun/verb class than their sister language Mundari. Even subclasses like Kharia proper nouns, which might be expected to have only nominal uses, can apparently occur in the predicate's syntactic slot for an unproblematic interpretation as an event (pp. 180–183).

However, some of the other chapters present systems that are not so easy to classify as either "flexible" or "rigid". Beck analyzes the Salish language Lushotseed as an example of an "omnipredicative" language in which all nouns may occur as predicates, but not all verbs can head noun phrases, showing only a "unidirectional" kind of flexibility rather than the "bidirectional" flexibility seen in "precategorical" systems like that of Riau Indonesian (186). McGregor discusses the significance of word class flexibility with respect to the type of complex predicate system seen in the Australian language Gooniyandi, in which a large class of "verbals" often combines with a smaller class of "verb classifiers" in order to form a finite predicate, potentially leading to the conclusion that even "verbals" are not really verbs when they require "further measures" to predicate (p. 229). However, McGregor points out that word class flexibility interacts with other features of the grammar (p. 246), so while asking whether or not Gooniyandi verbs are "flexible" does not seem to be the most appropriate question for this type of predicate system, asking how issues of flexibility relate to the system turns leads to fascinating answers. Nordhoff's chapter on Sri Lanka Malay has a similar upshot, showing how this language has clearly defined noun and verb classes, but also how its adjectives satisfy the criteria for either of these two classes, providing another example of "intermediate" word class flexibility situated on the gradient between strongly rigid and strongly flexible.

While the descriptions of languages with extreme word class flexibility like Riau Indonesian, Kharia, and Santali go a long way towards vindicating flexibility as a valid area of typological investigation, at the same time the descriptions of languages like Lushotseed, Gooniyandi and Sri Lanka Malay challenge attempts at classifying languages as either "flexible" or "rigid". What might it mean for typology if the majority of languages do not fit into one of the discrete types of proposed word class system, but instead show a more complex picture of languages that are flexible in one area of grammar but not another, or in one direction but not the other, or in one time period but not another? These are the types of questions that typologists can build on now that this volume has made a

considerable advance in word class typology by bringing issues of flexibility into focus.

Reference

Evans, Nicolas & Toshiki Osada. 2005. Mundari: The myth of a language without word classes. *Linguistic Typology* 9. 351–390.