Dissertation Prospectus:

Lexical flexibility in discourse

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# Introduction

This dissertation investigates the discourse-functional motivations for lexical flexibility, i.e. the ability for a lexeme (or class of lexemes) to occur in multiple pragmatic functions (reference, predication, or modification, inter alia; Croft 1990) with no overt coding (Hengeveld 1992:65; Croft 2001:66; van Lier 2016:197; van Lier 2017:242). This is frequently discussed as conversion, zero-derivation, or functional shift (Crystal 2008:114); I expand on and clarify this definition in §2. When lexical flexibility is widespread in a language, it is often taken as evidence of flexible word classes, i.e. lexical categories which appear to subsume more than one traditional part of speech (Hengeveld 1992:65; Rijkhoff 2007:715; van Lier & Rijkhoff 2013:1; van Lier 2016 and accompanying articles; van Lier 2017:243; Vapnarsky & Veneziano 2017a).[[1]](#footnote-1) Flexible categories have become a vibrant topic in recent years, prompting discussions on the existence of flexible categories in particular languages (Kinkade 1983; Van Eijk & Hess 1986; Broschart 1997; Sadock 1999; Evans & Osada 2005; Hengeveld & Rijkhoff 2005; Dorvlo 2009; Koch & Matthewson 2009; Floyd 2011; Chafe 2012; Chung 2012), the plausibility of flexible categories in general (Dixon 1982; Don 2004; Croft 2005; Evans & Osada 2005; Luuk 2010; Baker & Croft 2017; Palmer 2017), and detailed typological studies of the nature of flexible categories and the diversity of their expression across languages (Hengeveld 1992; Holton 1999; Hengeveld, Rijkhoff & Siewierska 2004; van Lier 2006; Luuk 2010; Rijkhoff & van Lier 2013; van Lier 2016; Cauchard 2017; Lichtenberk 2017; Vapnarsky & Veneziano 2017b).

But while the existence and nature of lexical flexibility has been thoroughly debated, little attention has been paid to its discourse-functional motivations (though see Hopper & Thompson 1984, Thompson 1989, and Nakayama 1997). Why, in flexible languages, do speakers make the particular categorial choices they do? If a given lexeme can more-or-less freely alternate between, say, nominal and verbal uses, what determines when a speaker uses one function over another? Since any choice between linguistic alternatives provides a means of conveying information, the presence of lexical flexibility in a language is yet another dimension of variation that speakers can manipulate to achieve their manifold discourse goals. How then is lexical flexibility deployed in discourse? This dissertation represents a first attempt to answer this question, summarizing the discourse-functional correlates of lexical flexibility in both qualitative and quantitative terms in a small but diverse sample of languages.

# Background

Considerations:

* Clarification of all the aspects of the definition of lexical flexibility
  + overt coding = structural coding
  + semantic shift involved
  + mention Croft’s 2 universals (of structural coding and behavioral coding)
* What’s a lexeme?
* What constitutes overt coding?
* What are “functions”? (Propositional act functions) Which functions are there?
* Conversion / zero-derivation vs. lexical flexibility
* What about grammatical flexibility?
* Heterosemy (Lichtenberk) – “the use of identical forms with different combinatorics and different meanings” (Evans & Osada 2005:357)

# Data & Methods

# Outline

# Timeline

# References

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1. In principle, grammatical (as opposed to lexical), closed-class categories such as demonstratives might also exhibit flexibility (cf. François 2017; Lichtenberk 2017), but this possibility will not be discussed here.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)