Dissertation Prospectus:

The discourse correlates of lexical flexibility

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# Introduction

This dissertation investigates the discourse correlates of lexical flexibility. It is by now well known that some languages show significantly greater degrees of lexical flexibility than others, permitting roots, stems, and even full wordforms to alternate in their use as nouns, verbs, adjectives, or other lexical categories to varying degrees. What is less understood is why speakers make the particular categorical choices they do in discourse. 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 the other? The presence of lexical flexibility in a language provides a dimension of variation that speakers can manipulate to achieve their manifold discourse goals, since any choice between linguistic alternatives provides yet another means of conveying information. How then is lexical flexibility deployed in discourse? This dissertation aims to answer this question via several case studies. In particular, it poses the following research questions:

* How do languages differ in regard to their degree of lexical flexibility? (Ch. 4)
* In languages with flexible stems, does the choice of lexical category depend on its information status (given vs. new, backgrounded vs. foregrounded)? Its inherent topicality? Its affectedness? Its grammatical role? (Ch. 5)
* In languages with flexible wordforms (i.e. fully-inflected words that are nonetheless still flexible regarding lexical category), does the interpretation of the pragmatic function of those words correlate to its information status (given vs. new, backgrounded vs. foregrounded)? Its inherent topicality? Its affectedness? Its grammatical role? (Ch. 6)
* Does lexical flexibility correlate with word order flexibility? In languages with both flexible word order and flexible lexemes, is there a correlation between choice of lexical category and choice of word order? (Ch. 7)
* Crosslinguistically, do certain semantic concepts tend to exhibit greater lexical flexibility than others? If so, does this variation correspond to degree of inherent topicality? To grammatical role? To information status? (Ch. 8)

This focus on the role of lexical flexibility in discourse diverges significantly from existing literature (to be surveyed in Ch. 2 of the dissertation) in that it aims to understand the functional underpinnings of lexical flexibility rather than debate its existence, the universality of lexical categories, or the existence of a particular lexical category in a particular language. Instead, it begins with the fact that all languages have some lexemes that exhibit lexical flexibility to varying degrees, and that categorical distinctions between lexemes are more strongly expressed in some languages than others – facts which will be supported with empirical data in this dissertation. By first acknowledging the existence of lexical flexibility and its variability across languages, it becomes possible to make a first foray into investigating the function that lexical flexibility serves in discourse, which this dissertation sets out to accomplish.

Answering the above questions requires a definition and operationalization of the concept of lexical flexibility, as well as relevant concepts within information structure, such as given vs. new, activation status, and topicality. Since much work has already been done to define and operationalize information structural concepts, this dissertation relies on methods and definitions used by earlier studies on information structure in discourse {{Chafe}}. Attempts to define and operationalize lexical flexibility, on the other hand, are relatively scarce. As such, this dissertation expands upon earlier work on lexical flexibility {{Evans & Levinson 2005; Rijkhoff, Hengeveld, etc.}} to present a general definition of lexical flexibility, as well as ten criteria by which one can assess the degree of lexical flexibility for a language (Ch. 3).

With an operationalized definition of lexical flexibility in place, the dissertation will proceed to apply several of the proposed criteria for assessing lexical flexibility to a small crosslinguistic sample of languages (Ch. 4), building a foundation from which to look for correlations in later chapters. Each of the following chapters (Chs. 5–8) then utilizes this data to look for correlations in answering one of the above research questions. The data and methods for each case study will be presented in their respective chapters.

# Background

General approaches to lexical flexibility

Lexical flexibility as

Theoretical contribution

# Data & Methods

Which languages you’ll look at, and why (generally speaking, not specifically)

* Convenience
* Prominence in the lexical flexibility debates (on either end of the spectrum)
* Geographic and linguistic diversity (a sampling consideration)

Lay out how you’ll structure each of your case studies to answer your research questions.

# Prior Studies

Evans & Levinson’s 1000-word sample

Nakayama’s dissertation

My pilot study

# Outline

The outline of the dissertation is planned as follows:

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

A brief introductory chapter overviewing the research question, its importance, and the plan of the dissertation. This chapter will likely be based heavily on this prospectus.

**Chapter 2: Background**

This chapter surveys the prior literature on lexical flexibility, with a particular focus on its known functional motivations, especially discourse functions. Given that the literature on word classes and lexical flexibility is quite vast, this chapter does not aim to be an exhaustive survey of studies relating to parts of speech. Instead, it will focus primarily on typological surveys, and studies that explicitly treat the problem of lexical flexibility, or the high-level theoretical and methodological concerns relating to word classes. This chapter will make clear the need for studies, like this proposed dissertation, which explicate the functional motivations of lexical flexibility.

**Chapter 3: A typology of lexical flexibility**

This chapter briefly surveys, and then expands upon, existing definitions of lexical flexibility to propose a crosslinguistically valid definition that views lexical flexibility as resulting from the degree to which categorical distinctions have (or have not) become conventionalized into the grammar of a language. In some languages, categorical distinctions between lexemes are supported by copious pieces of grammatical evidence which strongly align, while in other languages the evidence for categorical distinctions is subtle and/or provides overlapping or conflicting results. The chapter then outlines ten criteria by which one might assess the degree of lexical flexibility in a lexicon.

**Chapter 4: Lexical flexibility across languages**

This chapter applies several of the criteria from Ch. 3 to a small sample of languages, with the hypothesis that languages will vary widely in their degree of lexical flexibility both overall and along each of the individual criteria. If this hypothesis is correct, it provides strong empirical evidence that languages differ drastically in the strength of the distinctions between lexical categories.

**Chapter 5: Lexical flexibility at the stem level**

This chapter examines the factors that contribute to choice of lexical category for flexible stems. If a given stem appears variously in morphosyntactic constructions associated with different lexical categories, what determines when that stem appears in one construction versus another? The possible determinants examined are grammatical role, affectedness, information status, and inherent topicality.

**Chapter 6: Lexical flexibility at the word level**

Parallel to the previous chapter, this chapter examines factors that contribute to the interpretation of lexical category for fully-inflected yet flexible words. That is, in languages like Iñupiaq, in which the same morphological wordform may be interpreted as either noun or verb depending on context, what determines which interpretation is most salient? The variables examined will again be grammatical role, affectedness, information status, and inherent topicality.

**Chapter 7: Lexical flexibility and word order**

This chapter investigates two questions: 1) Does a high level of overall lexical flexibility in a language correlate to a highly flexible word order? 2) Does choice of lexical category for a flexible stem correlate to choice of word order?

**Chapter 8: Lexical flexibility and semantic domains**

This chapter utilizes data on lexical flexibility from Ch. 4 to determine whether certain semantic concepts are more likely to participate in categorical alternations than others. Lexemes that have approximate parallels in each of the languages studied in Ch. 4 will be compared and ranked in terms of their overall flexibility. The chapter will then discuss any noticeable patterns or clusters in the semantic domains for the most flexible items.

**Chapter 9: Conclusion**

This chapter summarizes the findings of the thesis and emphasizes the major theoretical implications, namely that a) lexical categories should be viewed as emergent and gradient rather than categorical; b) languages vary as to the strength with which they express categorial distinctions; and that c) lexical flexibility is functionally motivated and deployed by speakers towards various discourse ends.

# Timeline