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 §{{2.3}}. 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 descriptive studies 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). However, little attention has been paid to the functional motivations for lexical flexibility (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, referential and predicative 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 a small but diverse sample of languages.

This focus on the role of lexical flexibility in discourse diverges from the existing literature 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 language. Instead, I start from the premise that all languages have some lexemes (however few) that exhibit lexical flexibility to varying degrees and perhaps at different levels (root, stem, word, or construction), and that categorical distinctions between lexemes are more strongly and consistently expressed in some languages than others. A discourse-oriented approach is also of special interest because it has the potential to shed light on a recurring question in discussions of lexical flexibility: how much of the semantic shift that occurs when a lexeme changes function can be imputed to the discourse context, and how much to language- and lexeme-specific patterns that must be memorized by the speaker? In this dissertation I aim to assess the extent to which both semantic and pragmatic/discourse properties contribute to the categoriality of lexemes.

This research potentially provides new insights into the emergence of lexical categories, in the sense of morphosyntactic constructions dedicated to specific pragmatic functions. If choice of lexical category in highly flexible languages is shown to be tied to discourse function in a way similar to that outlined by Hopper & Thompson (1984) and Thompson (1989), this suggests that categorical differences in language develop out of the gradual routinization and grammaticization[[2]](#footnote-2) of discourse tendencies. Comparable developments of grammatical categories out of discourse tendencies are attested for other areas of grammar as well, including grammatical relations (Mithun 2012) and bound vs. free pronominal forms (Mithun 2013). Conversely, Nakayama (2002:3, 54, 57) argues that this model also explains the highly flexible nature of lexemes in Nuuchahnulth (Wakashan) as compared to more categorically rigid languages. Lexical categories in Nuuchahnulth are principally discourse tendencies rather than obligatory grammatical conventions, and so the language is flexible in virtue of the fact that it has not undergone this categorical grammaticization process. This dissertation provides support for this model of the emergence of lexical categories by showing the extent to which discourse and information-structural considerations contribute to choice of lexical category.

The specific research questions I ask in this dissertation are as follows:

* Does the extent of lexical flexibility in a language correlate with size of corpus / lexicon? {{Methods Chapter}}
* Do certain semantic domains tend to exhibit a greater degree of lexical flexibility than others? Does the type of semantic shift correlate with a lexeme’s semantic domain? {{Semantic Domain Chapter}}
* Does inherent topicality correlate with degree of lexical flexibility? If so, is this mediated by information structure? Does the type of semantic shift correlate with a lexeme’s inherent topicality? {{Inherent Topicality Chapter}}
* Does the current and/or previous choice of grammatical role for a lexeme correlate with choice of lexical category? Does the type of semantic shift correlate with grammatical role? {{Grammatical Role Chapter}}
* Does information status correlate with choice of lexical category? Does the type of semantic shift correlate with information status? {{Information Status Chapter}}

I discuss my hypotheses and expected results for each of these research questions in my chapter outline below (§{{4}}).

# Background

# Data & Methods

# Outline

# Timeline

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

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I use the term grammaticization in this dissertation in a somewhat atypical sense, to refer to the process whereby a construction becomes conventionalized and grammatically obligatory, and therefore “part of the grammar” (as opposed to, say, just a discourse tendency). When necessary, the term grammaticalization will be used to distinguish between the above sense of grammaticization, and the standard definition wherein a lexical item becomes a grammatical one (Hopper & Traugott 2003:2). While this choice of terms is admittedly less than ideal, I have yet to find a better term for the notion I am calling grammaticization. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)