A recent problem in typology concerns the nature and existence of so-called ‘flexible’ word classes, i.e. lexical categories which appear (from an extra-linguistic, typological, or universal perspective) to subsume multiple semantic and pragmatic distinctions so as to make them categorically indistinguishable within a given language. Clearly, the notion of flexible categories itself depends on the existence of cross-linguistically applicable labels (‘comparative concepts’ or ‘pre-established categories’, following Haspelmath (2007; 2010)), another intransigent problem in typology. Despite these difficulties, most linguists accept the idea that some languages lack the major category ‘Adjective’ (Dixon 1977: 20), for example, although quibbles still arise as to whether certain *particular* languages possess this category.

The focus of recent debates, however, is far more controversial, and centers on whether there exist languages for which even the basic noun-verb distinction is collapsed into a single, perfectly flexible category (Evans & Osada 2005a; Hengeveld & Rijkhoff 2005; Evans & Osada 2005b). While the debate focuses crucially around the noun-verb distinction (due to the long-standing nature of the claim that all languages distinguish these two fundamental classes), it also raises the broader theoretical issue of what constitutes flexible word classes more generally. What are the principles and criteria by which we could identify a flexible category in a given language? Evans & Osada (2005a) make an attempt at answering these questions, providing four criteria which they claim could identify the perfectly flexible language. However, since their focus is on the noun-verb distinction and the identification of flexible *languages*, their criteria – although useful – do not fully elucidate the concept of a flexible *category*. What is needed instead is a model of flexible categories which allows us to compare the categories of individual languages against the canonical type.

The canonical approach to typology (Corbett 2004) is particularly useful for addressing this type of theoretical problem. The method first defines the canonical instance of a phenomenon, and then establishes a number of criteria which converge on this same theoretical point. It is then possible to outline the possible ways in which a language might deviate from the canonical point along various dimensions. Only after we have established the theoretical space of possibilities do we look at individual languages to see how this theoretical space is populated, allowing us to determine how far a given construction or phenomenon is from the canonical point, and categorize its particular type of deviation.

This paper seeks to define ‘flexible’ and ‘rigid’ word classes through the framework of canonical typology, and examines canonical and noncanonical cases from various languages. Noting that different classification schemes, when applied to the same language, will pick out different sets of words as belonging to the same class, I define rigid categories as those where, no matter what property(s) are used as the basis for categorization, the members of its class remain the same. Put differently, each word class in the language uniquely maps to one set of properties or functions, which do not overlap with the properties or functions of any other class. A flexible word class, by contrast, is one which has maximal overlap of properties between categories. Members of a perfectly flexible word class can thus function as any lexical category – ‘noun’, ‘verb’, ‘adjective’, ‘adverb’. I then show how categories in various languages can fall on different places on the continuum from flexible to rigid. Having defined the canonical flexible word class, I then conclude, contra Hengeveld & Rijkhoff (2005), that no language has a perfectly flexible category subsuming both nouns and verbs, i.e. no language exhibits the canonical instance of flexible categories. However, the canonical approach highlights the fact that languages approach this point in a number of unique and interesting ways.

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Rejected Penn Linguistic Colloquium, 30 January 2012:

----------------------- REVIEW 1 ---------------------  
PAPER: 49  
TITLE: A Canonical Typology of Flexible Categories  
AUTHORS: Daniel Hieber  
  
I had a very hard time figuring out what the significance of this abstract was supposed to be. It seemed a bit circular. The author first invents extreme canonical definitions of rigid categories and flexible categories and then concludes (on what basis he/she doesn't say)that "no language exhibits the canonical instance of flexible categories." I don't see what we've learned from this, especially since the definition of the canonical flexible word class is given as "one which has maximal overlap of properties between categories." By definition, some language must have the maximal extant overlap (though not, I guess, the maximal possible overlap). The definition of the rigid category is just as puzzling: "no matter what property(s) are used as the basis for categorization, the members of its class remain the same." Wouldn't this also require that all categories be the same?  
Fianlly, the author seems to criticize previous scholars for trying to identify flexible languages rather than flexible/rigid categories within those languages, but then goes on to "compare individual languages against he canonical type."  
  
  
----------------------- REVIEW 2 ---------------------  
PAPER: 49  
TITLE: A Canonical Typology of Flexible Categories  
AUTHORS: Daniel Hieber  
  
Three quarters of the abstract are devoted to a long introduction.  
Only the last paragraph deals with the content of the presentation,  
and even this paragraph is a very general description with no  
specific claims that can be evaluated.  
  
  
----------------------- REVIEW 3 ---------------------  
PAPER: 49  
TITLE: A Canonical Typology of Flexible Categories  
AUTHORS: Daniel Hieber  
  
It would be useful to discuss some specific examples for concreteness.  
In the absence of such examples, it's difficult to evaluate how  
convincing the proposal is.