Lexical flexibility in discourse

# Abstract (1-2 pages)

1. a brief statement of the problem of lexical flexibility
2. a description of the data and methods used to address this problem
3. a condensed summary of the findings

# Introduction

This chapter motivates the need for research on lexical flexibility by situating it within broader concerns regarding linguistic categories more generally, and categories in human cognition. The specific problem that this study seeks to address is that we don’t yet have a good understanding of what lexical flexibility looks like, and how it varies across languages. This thesis contributes to answering these questions via a quantitative corpus-based study of lexical flexibility in English (Indo-European) and Nuuchahnulth (Wakashan). It is the first study to examine lexical flexibility using natural discourse from corpus data. This chapter provides an overview of the thesis, including the specific research questions addressed, the data and methods used, a concise summary of the results, and a preview of the conclusions.

## Hook & Significance

## General Problem

## Specific Problem

## State of the Field

## Purpose Statement

## Theoretical Framework

## Research Questions & Hypotheses

## Delimitations & Assumptions

## Definitions & Operationalizations of Terms

## Data & Methods

## Results

## Contribution

## Organization of this Study

# Background

The primary focus of this chapter is to explain the concept of lexical flexibility and consider its criticisms. I first briefly describe how flexible approaches to lexical categories developed as a response to weaknesses in traditional theories of parts of speech, and then survey the landmark studies and important findings on lexical flexibility. While lexical flexibility has recently become the focus of numerous descriptive studies, empirical coverage of the phenomenon is still limited. In particular, there have been few quantitative approaches to the topic, and none which examine natural discourse data from corpora (that I am aware of). The focus of this study will be to extend the empirical coverage of lexical flexibility to these domains and give an analysis of the findings and their implications.

In the second half of this chapter, I present criticisms and difficulties for flexible approaches to lexical categories from various functional perspectives—construction grammar, typology, and cognitive linguistics. I conclude by offering a revised conceptualization of lexical flexibility which is more in line with this functional research.

## Traditional Approaches to Parts of Speech

## Flexible Approaches to Parts of Speech

## Functional Approaches to Parts of Speech

## Lexical Flexibility: A Conceptual Definition

# Data & Methods

This chapter describes the data used and how those data were analyzed. It covers the selection criteria for both languages and lexemes, which corpora were used, and how the data were obtained and formatted. I also describe the methods used to annotate the data, and factors that influenced how the data were coded. I present and explain a measure of corpus dispersion that is used partly in place of, partly as a complement to, raw frequencies of lexemes. Lastly, I set forth a procedure for operationalizing and quantifying lexical flexibility in a crosslinguistically comparable way. The formulation of this lexical flexibility measure is a key methodological contribution of the thesis.

## Introduction

## Data

## Methods

## Data Analysis

# Results

This chapter details the findings of the procedures described in Chapter 3: Data & Methods. I begin with a brief examination of several representative lexical items from English and Nuuchahnulth, and explain to the reader how to interpret the ternary plots used to present results in this thesis. I then take a broader look at the behavior of lexical flexibility in English and Nuuchahnulth, first individually and then in comparison. The major findings are as follows:

* Almost all lexemes of English exhibit a degree of flexibility. However, the degree of that flexibility is typically small.
* The behavior of lexemes in English mostly approximates what would be expected for prototypical nouns, verbs, and adjectives, with some marginal deviation from that prototype for most words.
* Lexemes in Nuuchahnulth show a great deal of noun-verb flexibility, but very little flexibility in the adjective direction.
* Lexemes in Nuuchahnulth are generally highly flexible.
* Roots and stems in Nuuchahnulth exhibit almost identical behavior in terms of their lexical flexibility.
* Nuuchahnulth is on average more flexible than English. (pending)
* English has more words which exhibit flexibility than Nuuchahnulth. (pending; caveats: sample size; potential correlation between flexibility and frequency)
* There is a small but robust correlation between lexical flexibility and frequency/dispersion in both English and Nuuchahnulth. (pending)

## Introduction

## English

## Nuuchahnulth

## English vs. Nuuchahnulth

## General Results

# Discussion & Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the methods and main findings of this study, and then considers the implications of those results for theories of lexical categories. I argue that the data provide compelling evidence in favor of functional approaches to lexical categorization, most especially prototype theory and Croft’s theory of lexical categories as typological markedness patterns. I also argue for a reversal of the canonical position on parts of speech: instead of working from the default assumption that all languages have clearly-defined or even loosely-defined parts of speech, we should begin from the understanding that dedicated referring, predicating, or modifying constructions must develop diachronically, and that even when they do, they do not do so for the entire lexicon, or in all areas of the grammar equally. Even languages like English whose lexemes pattern strongly with the standard prototypes of noun, verb, and adjective nonetheless exhibit varying degrees of flexibility for different lexemes. Lexical categories are not a given in grammar.

I conclude by discussion limitations of the present study and avenues for future research, followed by closing remarks.

## Summary

## Discussion

## Limitations

## Future Research

## Conclusion

# Appendix

The appendix contains lists of the 100 lexemes analyzed in English and Nuuchahnulth, and their accompanying statistics.