The lexical category debate in Salish and its relevance for Tagalog*

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Abstract

We review some morpho-syntactic contexts where, parallel to data in Tagalog, Salishan languages famously fail to distinguish the categories noun and verb. Nevertheless, we then show that Salish languages do distinguish noun from verb, both lexically and syntactically, and suggest how similar analyses might perhaps be applicable to Tagalog.

1. Introduction

Kaufman offers a novel approach to the apparent lack of lexical category distinctions in Tagalog. Assuming that roots are precategorial and that the categories noun and verb are created in the syntax by n and v heads, Kaufman suggests that Tagalog lacks the syntactic category v altogether, and thus that the grammar lacks the capacity to create verbs. This claim of category neutrality is strong, and should result in new research on Austronesian morpho-syntax, just like the category neutrality claim did in another language family: Salishan.

In this response, we offer a view on the Tagalog data from the Salish perspective. The 23 Salish languages were or are spoken in the Pacific Northwest of North America. As Kaufman notes (see also Foley 1998, 2009, Theoretical Linguistics 35–1 (2009), 125–137 0301–4428/09/0035–0125 DOI 10.1515/THLI.2009.007 Walter de Gruyter.

* We wish to thank Henry Davis for helpful discussion. This research has been made possible by Kinkade and Jacobs Research Grants from the Jacobs Research Fund, as well as funding from NSERC, SSHRC, and the DAAD, and by our ever-patient Salish language consultants.
Kroeger 1998), they share several typological features with Tagalog. Moreover, scholars of Salish languages have had their own lexical category debate (see references in Davis and Matthewson in press). While several researchers famously argued that noun and verb were not distinguished in Salish (e.g., Kuipers 1968, Kinkade 1983, Jelinek and Demers 1994, Jelinek 1995), it is now generally accepted that noun and verb are distinguished both by morphology and syntax, albeit much more subtly than in languages like English (e.g., van Eijk and Hess 1986, Demirdache and Matthewson 1995, Davis and Matthewson 1999, Montler 2003).

As Salishanists, we are naturally skeptical of some of the morphosyntactic evidence that Kaufman adduces to support his claim that Tagalog lacks a verbal category. This is because some of the same evidence holds in Salishan, yet Salish languages systematically do distinguish noun and verb at both lexical and syntactic levels. Precisely because the noun/verb distinction is so subtly marked in some languages, we feel it is a robust universal phenomenon.

2. The lack of a noun/verb distinction in Salish?

2.1. Morphology

Like Tagalog, Salish inflectional morphology does not generally distinguish lexical roots as nouns or verbs (e.g., Kuipers 1968, Kinkade 1983). What appears to be prototypical nouns can be inflected with tense (1b), transitivity and subject/object agreement (2b), clause type markers (3b), and aspectual modifiers (4b).1

(1) a. t'loam=la'=sxw (Straits, Jelinek 1995)
   sing=PAST=2SG.NOM
   ‘You sang.’

   b. swi’qoal=lo’=sxw (ibid)
   young.man=PAST=2SG.NOM
   ‘You were a young man.’

1 Salish data are given in the orthographies of the original sources.
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(2) a. qʷǝlt-n脾胃-s (Shuswap, Gibson 1973: 60)
    talk-TRANS-1SG.OBJ-3SUBJ
    ‘S/he talked to me.’

b. meʔ xmen-y-n脾胃-s-t (Shuswap, Kinkade 1983: 28)
    expectation fly-TRANS-2SG.OBJ-PASSIVE
    ‘You’ll be flied (i.e. covered in flies).’

(3) a. lʔi=q-as (Squamish, Kuipers 1968: 622)
    arrive=3SUBJ.SUBLJUNCTIVE
    ‘if he/she/it arrives’

b. pu̱sʔ-as (ibid)
    cat=3SUBJ.SUBLJUNCTIVE
    ‘if he/she/it is a cat’

(4) a. ʔit ʔln=q-c (Upper Chehalis, Kinkade 1964: 33)
    completive sing=2SG.SUBLJ.COMPLETIVE
    ‘You sang.’

b. ʔit qʷalán=q-c (Upper Chehalis, Kinkade 1983: 28)
    completive eat=2SG.SUBLJ.COMPLETIVE
    ‘You’re all ears.’

However, below we will show that Salish roots do maintain the distinction between noun and verb; these inflectional data therefore do not constitute definitive evidence for the absence of categorical distinctions in the languages.

2.2. Syntax

Like Tagalog, Salish languages are famous for predicate-argument flexibility. Compare Kaufman’s (19) to (5), where the verb ‘go’ and the noun ‘coyote’ alternate between the initial predicate position, and the argument position following the determiner:

(5) a. ʔu̱xʷ ti sbiaw (Lushootseed, van Eijk and Hess 1986: 324)
    go DET coyote
    ‘The coyote goes.’

b. sbiaw ti ʔu̱xʷ (ibid)
    coyote DET go
    ‘The one who goes is a coyote.’
Even prototypical referential items such as emphatic pronouns or proper names can occupy the predicate position:

(6) a. . . . usu nawi=kn (Cowlitz, Kinkade 1983: 28)
   ' . . . if 2SG.PROPNOUN=1SG.SUBJ
   ' . . . if I were you.'

b. Rose=lhkacw=ha (Lillooet, Demirdache and Matthewson 1995: 81)
   Rose=2SG.SUBJ=YES-NO
   'Are you Rose?'

Canonical NP positions, such as the final constituent in a complex DP, can seemingly be occupied by either nouns (7a) or inflected verbs. In (7b), the verb pupn’ ‘find’ is inflected with clausal nominalization morphology (cf. Kaufman’s 21–24). We will show below that, unlike in Kaufman’s analysis of Tagalog, relative clauses in Salish are headed by a nominal, which is null in (7b). 2

(7) Context: The speaker was hungry and looked for something to eat in the fridge.
   a. ləxǐns=kn [l [c’šl] ↓ [NP sqyetn]]
      eat=1SG.SUBJ DET cold.INCH LNK salmon
      'I ate some cold salmon.' (Thompson)

   b. ləxǐns=kn [l [c’šl] ↓ [NP Ø] ↓
      eat=1SG.SUBJ DET cold.INCH Ø LNK
      [n=s=pupn’ n=e=npài’wmn]]
      1SG.POSS=NMZ=find in=DET=fridge
      'I ate something cold that I found in the fridge.' (Thompson)

Again similar to Tagalog, cleft constructions allow both prototypical nominal (8a) or verbal arguments (8b) in final position (cf. Kaufman’s 26–27):

(8) a. cē=xce? [c=Jánét Wébster] [c=kw’uk’pi n=ɪ=λ’q’emcɪn]
    CLEFT=DEM DET=Janet Webster DET=chief in=DET=Lytton
    'Janet Webster is the chief in Lytton.' (Thompson)

b. cē=xce? [c=Jánét Wébster] [c=kw’uk’pi n=ɪ=λ’q’emcɪn]
    CLEFT=DEM DET=Janet Webster DET=chief in=DET=Lytton
    'Janet Webster is the chief in Lytton.' (Thompson)

2 We use lnk to mark functional elements between modifiers and NP, paralleling Kaufman’s gloss. See Kroeber (1997, 1999), Davis (2004), Koch (2008) for discussion. As in Tagalog, there is much overlap between determiners, complementizers and relative pronouns in Salish.
Despite this widespread overt evidence for category neutrality, parallel to much of the Tagalog data, there are both morphological and syntactic tests which clearly and consistently distinguish the category noun from verb, in all the Salish languages in which the relevant tests have been carried out. Note that not all tests distinguish lexical categories in every language, which means that the available evidence for the noun/verb distinction for a child learner of any given language is even more subtle than the general picture presented here, especially in the face of the overt evidence for category neutrality. Therefore, following Demirdache and Matthewson (1995), we take the noun/verb distinction to be a basic universal property of natural language. The presence of a categorical distinction, in the absence of obvious evidence, is a well-known argument for a hardwired language universal (cf. Crain and Pietroski 2001).

3. Morphological evidence for a noun-verb distinction

In this section, we argue that Salish roots are not precategorial, since there are categorial restrictions on derivational morphology. Close parallels in Tagalog suggest that Tagalog roots are not precategorial either (De Guzman 1996, Himmelmann 2008).

We restrict our discussion to aspectual morphology, since this targets the event variable, an inherent property of v, as Kaufman notes (his 50). It is not clear to us how Kaufman proposes that the event variable is introduced in Tagalog. Since his roots are precategorial, they may have a conceptual “timeline” (his fn. 9) but presumably no event variable

3 Witschko (2005) argues for precategorial roots in Salish, but (unlike Kaufman) allows category-sensitive derivation following the introduction of n and v. Witschko’s analysis does not seem to explain why reduplicative processes which target precategorial roots have meanings which systematically target properties either of the event (Thompson 2007) or the noun’s referential argument (plural), and not other conceptual properties of the bare root (cf. Haag 1998 for this argument).
specified in their lexical representation. (Otherwise, the introduction of a
timeline’ looks to us just like a disguised categorial distinction.) And
since all roots merge with n, which lacks the capacity for an event vari-
able, we are unclear how Tagalog could have any aspectual morphology
at all under Kaufman’s analysis.

3.1. Morphological evidence in Salishan

A common pan-Salish prefix is the stative, an aspectual marker recon-
structed as proto-Salish *ʌc-/*ʌs- (Kroeber 1999: 11). Stative prefixes
can only attach to verbs, and their aspectual reading targets the event
variable.

(9) a. mı´ce?q ‘sit down’ (Thompson)
b. ?es-mı´ce?q ‘sitting down’ (Thompson)

Yet, in several Salish languages, a homophonous prefix can also attach
to nouns (10). This can give the appearance of category neutrality.

(10) a. cı´txw ‘house’ (Thompson)
    ?es-cı´txw ‘have a house’ / **sheltered’
    b. t’a´t’akws ‘gun’ (Sechelt, Beaumont 1973,
s-t’a´t’akws ‘have a gun’ / **armed’ cited in Kroeber 1999: 36)

However, it is clear we are actually dealing with two prefixes, which dis-

First, when attached to nouns, the prefix in (10) produces a ‘have a N’ reading, rather than an aspectual interpretation.
Secondly, their distribution differs: in Lillooet, for example, possessive
es- attaches to the first element of a complex nominal predicate, while sta-
tive es- always attaches to a verb stem (Davis 2006). Thirdly, comparative
evidence shows that the stative prefix cannot attach to nouns. In
Okanagan, Lushootseed, Northern Straits, Kalispel and Shuswap, the
‘have a N’ reading is produced with a distinct prefix which may only at-
tach to nouns (11a) (Kroeber 1999: 12, 35). The proto-Salish stative,
meanwhile, may only attach to verbs (11b).

(11) a. kn=kl-p’ina? (Okanagan, Mattina 1996: 166f.,
    lsg.subj=have-basket cited in Kroeber 1999: 35)
    ‘I have a basket.’
More broadly, van Eijk and Hess (1986) argue for Lilooet and Lushootseed that a whole range of aspectual morphology targets only verbs, and does not attach to nouns. Since aspectual morphology targets properties of the event, an inherent component of verbs, we take this morphological distinction to indicate that Salish languages do distinguish nominal and verbal roots.

3.2. Relevance for Tagalog

In Tagalog, a reduplicative prefix induces an ‘imperfective’ aspectual interpretation. We repeat Kaufman’s (27) here:

(12) Ito ang-dalawa (ŋ#na) nag-tú-túrò
   ‘these are the two (who are) teaching’

If bare roots, as Kaufman argues, are entity-denoting, then how does the IMPRF prefix in (12) induce an aspectual reading, especially since it attaches directly to the bare root? We would like to know if the IMPRF prefix can attach to prototypical nouns like bato ‘rock’, and if so, what interpretations are possible.

Kaufman also notes a root doubling construction with an iterative reading (his fn. 17):

(13) Súlat=siya nang=súlat.
   ‘S/he’s writing and writing’

Again, if bare roots are entity-denoting, why must this construction be interpreted aspectually, that is, targeting properties of the event variable? According to De Guzman (1996), this predicate doubling is only possible with verbs, and not nouns (or adjectives), suggesting that roots are specified for lexical category.

Finally, several of Kaufman’s examples include a ‘stative’ prefix ma-(his 35). Himmelmann (2008) notes that ma- induces a ‘have a N’ reading
with nouns, but yields a ‘become X’ reading with adjectives. What happens when /ma/- combines with apparently prototypical verbs like /takbo/ ‘run’? Does it distinguish nouns and verbs like the Salish stative?

Based on the available evidence, we suggest that Tagalog roots may not be precategorial (see De Guzman 1996 and Himmelmann 2008). Rather, they are specified as nominal and verbal, and verbal roots have an event variable in their denotation.

4. Syntactic evidence for a noun/verb distinction

We will review three contexts which show that there is also a syntactic category distinction between noun and verb in Salish. Two environments select only for the category noun, while the third cannot select for nouns.

4.1. Syntactic evidence in Salishan

Relative clauses must be headed by an NP. This is shown in (14) for a head-final relative clause (Demirdache and Matthewson 1995; Matthewson and Davis 1995 for head-initial relatives, and Davis 2002, 2004 for both).

(14) a. . . . ti=zác-al’qwem’Ø=a [NP sqaycw] (Lillooet)
   ... DET=long-appear-3ABS=DET man
   ‘. . . the man who left’

   b. *. . . ti=sqáycw-Ø=a [VP zác-al’qwem’] (Lillooet)
   ... DET=man-3ABS=DET long-appear

Similarly, the head of a complex nominal predicate must be a root of the category noun (/smúłhats/ ‘woman’ in 15a); complex NPs are head-final in Lillooet (see Montler 2003: 129 for identical facts in Klallam and Straits Salish, and Davis et al. 1997 for Shuswap and Lillooet).

(15) a. [án’was [NP smúłhats]] [i=qwatsáts=a] (Lillooet, Demirdache
   two woman PL.DET=leave=DET and Matthewson 1995)
   ‘The ones who left were two women.’
Thirdly, Salish languages have a range of auxiliaries which typically precede the main predicate, and select for the category verb (16a). Montler (2003) shows for Klallam and Straits Salish that certain classes of auxiliaries may not select for the category noun (or adjective) (16b).

(16) a. \(\text{húy}=\text{cn} \quad [\text{VP t'iym}] \quad \text{(Klallam, Montler 2003: 116)}\)
   \[\text{finish}=1\text{subj} \quad \text{sing} \]
   ‘I finished singing.’

   b. * \(\text{húy}=\text{cn} \quad [\text{NP n-ʔáʔin}] \quad \text{(ibid)}\)
   \[\text{finish}=1\text{subj} \quad \text{my-house} \]

4.2. Relevance for Tagalog

Since Tagalog has both head-initial and head-final relative clauses, as well as complex nominal predicates (e.g., Kroeger 1998), the above tests may be applicable in Tagalog. We treat one case from Kaufman’s paper here. In Kaufman’s (28), repeated below, we see a difference in grammaticality between a possessed DP with an overt nominal head, and one with only an overt resultative. In out-of-the-blue contexts, the form without an overt nominal is infelicitous, and Kaufman takes this to mean that there is no null nominal head in (17a).

(17) a. \(\text{ang}=\text{basag} \quad (*\text{nang}=\text{babáe})\)
   \[\text{NOM}=\text{break}/\text{rslt} \quad \text{GEN}=\text{woman} \]
   ‘the (*woman’s) broken one’

   b. \(\text{ang}=\text{basag} \quad \text{na} \quad \text{bentána} \quad \text{nang}=\text{babáe}\)
   \[\text{NOM}=\text{break}/\text{rslt} \quad \text{LNK} \quad \text{window} \quad \text{GEN}=\text{woman} \]
   ‘the woman’s broken window’

We would like to offer a different interpretation, based on parallel evidence in Thompson and Lilooet. On our account, the acceptability difference derives from the out-of-the-blue context of (17a); it is pragmatically infelicitous to omit an overt referent out-of-the-blue. In (18a), we see a complex DP with an initial resultative modifier, like in Tagalog. The modifier is followed by the noun and a restrictive relative clause.
However, in out-of-the-blue contexts, removing the overt noun phrase results in rapidly degraded judgements, parallel to Kaufman’s (28a). 4

(18) Out-of-the-blue (Thompson)

a. . . . əs-kʷúc’ [NP n-seʔlis] Ɂ ex
    ... DET STAT-bend LNK 1SG.POSS-knife LNK PROG
    n=s=txʷ’úp n=l=λ’q’ämcin.
    ‘... the bent knife that I bought in Lytton.’

b. * . . . əs-kʷúc’ [NP Ø] Ɂ ex
    ... DET STAT-bend Ø LNK PROG
    n=s=txʷ’úp n=l=λ’q’ämcin.
    1SG.POSS=NMZ=buy in=DET=Lytton
    intended: ‘... the bent (one) that I bought in Lytton.’

Consultant’s comment: ‘You have to have the knife in there. You can’t say ‘the bent thing’ or you don’t know what it was.’

Since relative clauses must be headed by a noun (see 14 above), there must be a null nominal head in (18b). The acceptability difference arises because it is pragmatically infelicitous to omit the overt referent in out-of-the-blue contexts. The acceptability of (7b) above and (19) shows that it is pragmatically felicitous to omit the overt nominal head given the appropriate context.

(19) Context: Speaker is watching cars going by with friends.

(Thompson)

y’e-mı´n-ne [Ɂ [NP Ø] [ʔex λ’ék té?]|
like-TRANS-3OBJ.1SGSUBJ DET Ø PROG arrive there
pm-³p]
fast-INCH
‘I like that one that was going by fast.’

We wonder if a similar pragmatic explanation can account for the Tagalog distinction in (17).

4 See Davis (2003) for discussion of similar constructions in Lilooet. Davis argues that while headless relatives are acceptable in out-of-the-blue contexts, DPs involving adjectives and an elided noun are not.
5. Differences in root interpretation

In spite of the many parallels between Tagalog and Salish, there does seem to be a striking difference in bare root interpretation in the two language types. While Tagalog bare roots seem overwhelmingly to have nominal properties, the same claim has never been made for Salish. We can only offer brief speculations here about the source and implications of this difference.

The difference between Tagalog and Salish bare roots may correlate with a difference in nominalizing vs. verbalizing functional morphemes. Salish languages all possess a pervasive nominalizing prefix s-, which appears on a large proportion of lexical nouns but also serves productively as a syntactic nominalizer. Salish also possesses overt verbalizing affixes (e.g., the transitivizer in (2b) above), correlating with a basic lexical distinction between N and V. Tagalog, on the other hand, overwhelmingly seems to start with nominal roots and add voice/aspect morphology in the syntax. We might suppose that Tagalog possesses a null nominalizer, and that in the absence of overt voice/aspect morphology, all roots are interpreted as nominalized. However, we still need to assume that Tagalog roots can be lexically specified for event semantics (cf. Section 3). We realize that this directly contrasts with Kaufman’s view of voice-inflected forms as nominal, but we offer it as a suggestion to be considered.

6. Conclusion

We have reviewed some of the morphosyntactic contexts where the noun/verb distinction fails to be made in Salish, as in Tagalog. Nevertheless, we then showed that Salish languages do distinguish noun from verb, both lexically and syntactically, and suggested how similar analyses might perhaps be applicable to Tagalog.

On a syntactic level, we have seen that two typological properties appear to correlate with the illusion of category neutrality: the ability of any lexical category to act as a predicate without needing a copula, and the ability to employ headless relative clauses. Both Salish and Tagalog have these properties.
On the other hand, good syntactic diagnostics for nounhood appear to be the heads of relative clauses (see also Baker 2003), and the final position in complex nominal predicates. Similarly, selectional restrictions of auxiliaries in complex verbal predicates seem to be a good diagnostic for verbhood (Montler 2003).

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