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Word-class-based and construction-based approaches to language description William Croft, University of New Mexico

Most reference grammars introduce their description of syntax with a chapter on word classes, and word classes play an essential role in the description of the syntactic constructions of the language.

Word-class-based approaches to language description presuppose a building-block model of syntax: syntactic constructions are built out of smaller syntactic units, ultimately word classes. The building block model also forms the basis of textbooks of syntax used to train linguistics students. However, the building block model is seriously problematic as a model of language description (and for teaching syntax). Both language descriptions and theoretical articles are preoccupied with debates as to whether a language has a particular word class, or whether a particular set of words belongs to a specific word class. The fundamental problem is that word classes are defined by constructions or sets of constructions, and language descriptions are not explicit about this fact. One consequence of this problem is that word class terms in language descriptions (and in grammatical terminology) are used ambiguously, to refer to either a semantic class that is (proto)typically associated with a particular constructional function, or to all words used in that constructional function, or to a compromise between these two definitions. For example, "adjective" in "predicate adjective" refers to property concept words, but "adjective" in "demonstrative adjective" refers to the modification function that the deictic expression is used in. This ambiguity is not often recognized because word classes and the constructions that define them are assumed to be "formal". Another consequence of this latter assumption is that even existing functional-typological surveys of syntax do not provide organized frameworks for syntactic description.

In fact, constructions perform information-packaging functions (a.k.a. discourse function, information structure), described by familiar terms such as reference/arguments, predication, and modification, as well as other less widely recognized or accepted functions. A constructional approach to language description explicitly describes the basis for language-specific "word classes", and provides a framework for syntactic description in terms of the information-packaging functions of constructions, the forms that those constructions take, and the (complex) ways in which semantic classes of words occur in those constructions. Nevertheless, the vast majority of descriptions of languages that are now extinct or moribund are cast in word-class terms.

The identification of crosslinguistic patterns to advance language typology and language documentation requires understanding how word class terms such as "predicate adjective" and "demonstrative adjective" have been used in language descriptions and theoretical analyses.