

R.M.W. Dixon and Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald (eds.) *Adjective Classes: A Cross-linguistic Typology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004. xxii + 370 pp. (ISBN 0–19–927093–7)

Adjective Classes: A Cross-linguistic Typology is the latest addition to the series of publications that have come out of the annual workshops organized by the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology at La Trobe University in Melbourne. The collection features papers based on fourteen of the sixteen presentations at the 2002 Workshop on Adjective Classes. Like previous volumes in the series, this book showcases original work on languages from a wide range of genetic groupings and geographic areas, each penned by a recognized expert in that language and linguistic family. In total, the volume includes thirteen studies of unrelated languages from eight different regions:

North-East Ambae by Catriona Hyslop (Oceanic, Vanuatu)

Japanese (isolate, East Asia) by Anthony E. Backhouse

Korean (isolate, East Asia) by Ho-min Sohn

Qiang (Tibeto-Burman, East Asia) by Randy J. LaPolla and Chenglong Huang

Semelai (Southern Aslian group of Mon-Khmer, South-East Asia) by Nicole Kruspe

Lao (Tai, South-East Asia) by N.J. Enfield.

Manange (Tibeto-Burman, Nepal) by Carol Genetti and Kristine Hildebrandt

Russian (Indo-European, Eurasia) by Greville G. Corbett

Wolof (Niger-Congo, West Africa) by Fiona McLaughlin

Mam (Mayan, Mesoamerica) by Nora C. England,

Papantla Totonac (Totonac-Tepihua, Mesoamerica) by Paulette Levy

Tariana (North Arawak, Amazon Basin) by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald

Jarawara (Arawá, Amazon Basin) by R.M.W. Dixon

The articles are of consistently high quality and the range of language types represented, like the calibre of the researchers themselves, is impressive. One might have wished for the inclusion of a North American language from the Pacific Northwest or the Algonkian or Iroquoian family — where the existence of adjectives has been controversial — but 100% coverage of all the linguistic families and areas of the world is, of course, impossible in a single volume, and Dixon and Aikhenvald are to be congratulated on bringing together (once again) a first-rate cast of linguists working on such a diverse set of the world's languages.

In addition to the descriptive studies, the volume contains a summary chapter by John Hajek and an introduction by Dixon himself where he sets out the theoretical framework within which the individual authors were asked to cast their contributions. The introductory article presents a thorough survey of the morphosyntactic properties of what Dixon deems to be adjectives in a broad range of languages, and attempts to provide a universally-valid cross-linguistic definition of the adjective class. On the basis of this definition, Dixon puts forward what is surely the most controversial claim of this volume: that all languages have a class of words that can be characterized as adjectives. Although this position is not unique in the literature (e.g., Baker 2003), it does go against the grain of many typological studies (e.g., Hengeveld 1992a, 1992b; Bhat 1994; Beck 2002), including an earlier work of Dixon's own (Dixon 1982), considered by many to be a seminal work for the field of lexical-class typology. Of all the aspects of this book, this claim is arguably the one that deserves the closest scrutiny, and it is the one to which I will devote most of my attention here.

THEORIES OF LEXICAL CLASSES

When evaluating any proposal for a theoretical definition of a lexical class, it is important to be clear about what our expectations for a successful definition would be. Although there are a

number of these, I will focus my discussion on two in particular. The first is that of *theoretical utility*: given that a part of speech is essentially a label applied to a set of words which specifies their distributional and other morphosyntactic properties, we would expect a definition of a part of speech to make substantial predictions about the possible syntactic functions of the words picked out by that definition. Secondly, a definition should be *typologically generalizable* — that is, the definition of the class of adjective should be such that it creates an appropriate (and constrained) set of expectations about the class of words it is applied to in every language which is claimed to have them. Naturally, an adequate definition also has to achieve these ends without sacrificing the flexibility needed to accommodate the wide range of variation observed in the behaviour of the classes it singles out as adjectives across the world’s languages.

The definition proposed by Dixon, like some other recent proposals in the literature (Croft 1991; Beck 2002), seeks to meet these objectives by marrying semantic and syntactic criteria. This approach reflects, on the one hand, the widely-held position that parts of speech systems constitute a taxonomy of the building blocks of syntactic structures (e.g., Mel’çuk 1988; Hengeveld 1992a, 1992b; Baker 2003). On the other hand, it recognizes the fact that, in spite of the widespread variation in the meanings of words belonging to particular parts of speech across languages, there are sets of prototypical meanings that are consistently found in each of the major word classes (Wierzbicka 1986, 1995; Langacker 1987; Croft 1991). This was first established for adjectives by Dixon himself (1982) when he demonstrated that, cross-linguistically, adjectives tend to express meanings falling in to one of the following seven categories, later christened “Property Concepts” in Thompson (1988):

DIMENSION — *big, little, long, wide...*
PHYSICAL PROPERTIES — *hard, heavy, smooth...*
COLOUR
HUMAN PROPENSITY — *jealous, happy, clever, generous, proud...*
AGE — *new, young, old...*

VALUE — *good, bad, pure, delicious...*
SPEED — *fast, slow, quick...*

(Thompson 1988: 168)

In this volume, Dixon draws upon his original insight to define adjectives (p. 44) as

- (1) a word class distinct from nouns and verbs which
 - a. includes some or all of the words denoting Property Concepts (henceforth PCWs) of a language; and
 - b. can function as either
 - i. an intransitive predicate or complement of a copula, and/or
 - ii. the modifier of the head of an NP.

Although this definition seems rather straightforward and coincides with what we know about the meanings and syntactic functions of adjectives in a wide range of the world's languages, as a definition of a lexical class it is actually quite problematic. As noted above, the primary function of parts of speech in grammatical theory is to allow linguists to make general statements about the syntactic functions and subsidiary morphosyntactic properties of classes of words recognized in the lexicon. Rather than choosing one syntactic function as definitive of the class, however, Dixon presents two, either or both of which could pertain to adjectives in a given language. As Dixon himself points out (p. 28), this allows for words called adjectives in one language to have both functions (b-i) and (b-ii), but also for words called adjectives in a second language to have only (b-i) and in a third to have only (b-ii). For a general syntactic theory, this makes specific statements about the distribution of adjectives impossible — or possible only on a language-specific basis, thereby undermining both the definition's theoretical utility and its claim to universality. The only thing universal about the definition — that is, the only thing in common between the adjectives of a language where they have property (b-i) but not (b-ii) and those where they have (b-ii) but not (b-i) — would be their meanings. Both would refer to Property

Concepts. Indeed, given that the definition allows for adjectives in two different languages to share no distributional properties at all, one wonders why Dixon needs the term “adjective” in the first place and doesn’t simply speak of PCWs. PCWs naturally have a typical range of syntactic functions — precisely those singled out in (1b). But the fact that this a *range* of functions might lead one to suppose that PCWs are amenable to a *range* of lexical classifications across the world’s languages.

Seen in this light, it is not surprising that the definition in (1) leads Dixon to conclude that what he calls adjectives (a group of PCWs distinct from nouns and verbs that are used as either intransitive/copular predicates and/or adnominal modifiers) are universal. All languages will have words denoting Property Concepts and ways of predicating these concepts of, or attributing them to, the referents of NPs. Given that PCWs form a readily identifiable semantic class, it seems likely that some subset (or subsets) of them will have some morphosyntactic properties in common that might group them against non-PCWs and which will allow them to be differentiated from nouns and verbs. The problem with this is that, if the properties used to differentiate one lexical class from other lexical classes are not to some extent theoretically pre-defined or constrained, then the part of speech they define lacks typological generalizability: the use of a term like “adjective” defined in this open-ended way no longer has the power to create any particular set of expectations as to the morphosyntactic properties of a word class designated “adjectives” in any particular language. Adjectives in language A might well have nothing in common with adjectives in language B, and a researcher approaching a language with a word class identified as adjectives using Dixon’s definition can not assume anything about that class other than a) the semantic domain from which its meanings must be drawn and b) that its members must share some *ad hoc* set of morphosyntactic properties.

It is the *ad hoc* nature of the morphosyntactic criteria used to differentiate adjectives from other lexical classes that most seriously undermines Dixon's proposal. Given a sufficiently fine-grained approach, there are a myriad of morphosyntactic properties — paradigmatic irregularities, collocational possibilities, effects of quantification, limited inflectional possibilities, etc. — that can be used to group increasingly small sets of words against others that differ from them along these dimensions. Without theoretically-motivated constraints on the type of properties that can be used to differentiate parts of speech, the potential number of word classes that can be defined in this way becomes enormous and theoretically intractable. According to Dixon's approach, any set of PCWs that fulfills criterion (1b) and shares any morphosyntactic property not found in nouns and verbs qualifies as a class of adjectives, even in those languages where many words that are not PCWs also meet criterion (1b) (as is the case in 5 of the 13 languages described in this volume). Having recourse to an unconstrained set of criteria has the net effect of allowing any property of a group of PCWs that might fall out from their semantic structure to define those words as a part of speech, irrespective of whether or not that property is relevant to their syntactic function. This is a virtual guarantee that a language will have adjectives, but it is a radical departure from the usual use of the term as a label for a particular class of words in the lexicon that has a pre-definable set of syntactic and/or morphological behaviours.

Even with the cards stacked in this way, there do appear to be languages where this approach would fail to find adjectives. For example, in Seneca, an Iroquoian language described in Wallace Chafe's contribution to the original workshop (not included in the published volume, cited here as Chafe 2004), both verbs and adjectives meet criterion (1b), but any morphosyntactic property that one might wish to apply to differentiate PCWs from verbs (thereby creating a sepa-

rate class of adjectives) also applies to words that are not PCWs — and, in fact, any one criterion singles out different sets of words subsuming different PCWs and different semantic types of verb. In the case of the Salishan language Bella Coola (Beck 2002, Ch. 4.1.1.4), all verbs and PCWs meet criterion (b-i), but only intransitive verbs and PCWs meet (b-ii). Although I am unaware of any, it might be possible to find in Bella Coola some property of, say, aspect-marking or the semantics of reduplication that differentiates some of the PCWs from the less static intransitives such as verbs of motion, but it seems unlikely that these would be applicable only to PCWs and to no other intransitive verbs — and even if this were the case, there would be no meaningful statement to be made about the syntactic functions and distributions of “adjectives” in Bella Coola that would not also apply to all expressions of intransitive predicates. Once again, this seems to reduce the notion of “adjective” in this language to that of “a group of PCWs that have some properties in common,” but the class thus singled out would not be distinguishable from the larger class of verbs in their overall distribution.

Indeed, languages where both verbs and PCWs meet criterion (b) are so problematic for Dixon’s claim of the universality of adjectives that, as noted above, five of the languages with this profile described in the volume (Wolof, Ambae, Semelai, Qiang, and Lao, Chs. 10 – 14, respectively) are described by the authors of the individual articles as not having a separate class of adjectives. As in Seneca and Bella Coola, in these languages anything that can be said about the major syntactic functions of PCWs also applies to verbs. Unlike Bella Coola and Seneca, there are differentiating characteristics that group a set of PCWs against verbs — however, for these authors, the characteristics in question are considered to be more appropriate for the definition of lexical *sub*-classes than for the differentiation of a major part of speech. Dixon, of course, takes a different view. Unfortunately, because of his failure to define what morphosyntactic properties

are or are not admissible for making parts of speech distinctions, Dixon seems unable to respond to the position taken by the authors of Chapters 10 – 14 in a convincing manner. Instead, he attributes their views to a Euro-Centric reluctance to recognize an adjective class which is similar to verbs (p. 42), a theme taken up again by John Hajek (Ch. 15) in his otherwise insightful closing commentary to this volume.

THE ACCUSATION OF EURO-CENTRISM

This, in my opinion, is the one sour note in what would otherwise have been an exemplary display of typological analysis and intellectual prowess. The notion of Euro-centrism — the idea that some linguistic analyses are based on the tacit assumption that all languages are structured the same way as the languages of Europe — is most commonly used as a rhetorical tool designed to draw attention to an unexpected feature of an “exotic” language. In this volume, both Dixon and Hajek use it as a rhetorical weapon to characterize the failure of the authors of Ch. 10 – 14 (McLaughlin, Hyslop, Kruspe, LaPolla and Huang, Enfield) to recognize a major class of adjectives in the languages they study, implying that they have failed to see the light of reason because they cling to the outmoded ways of 19th Century philologists. Like other forms of belittlement, however, the accusation cuts both ways: one might equally well qualify as “Euro-centric” the assertion that all languages must, like the languages of Europe, have three major classes of word — noun, verb, and adjective. The potential here for endless rounds of finger-pointing is obvious. Given that the ultimate goal of typological inquiry is a framework that has a certain measure of universality, any successful approach will be vulnerable to some form of this criticism, if for no other reason than that the set of human languages includes the familiar languages of Europe. A cross-linguistically valid syntactic or typological theory has to account for the properties of these languages as well, and the stance that their structure exemplifies no general properties of human

language seems just as implausible as does the antiquated assumption that they exemplify all (and only) those properties. The debate has moved beyond that long ago, and there is ample literature on parts of speech in general (e.g., Wierzbicka 1986; Croft 1991; Stassen 1992) and adjectives in particular (e.g., Dixon 1982; Hengeveld 1992a, 1992b; Bhat 1994; Wetzer 1996; Beck 2002) that is based on broad-based typological inquiry and/or synthesis of research on a wide range of the world's languages, some of which takes positions contrary to Dixon's and more like that of the authors of Chs. 10 – 14. Rather than lowering the tone of the debate by introducing this sort of *ad hominem* attack, it would have been preferable to see Dixon and Hajek stick to the otherwise impeccable standards of the volume and to find cogent theoretical arguments for their position that verb-like PCWs in languages like Wolof, Ambae, Semelai, Qiang, and Lao (not to mention Seneca and Bella Coola) should be grouped into a major class of adjective rather than classified as a minor sub-class of verb.

SETTING THE AGENDA

When all is said and done, the fact remains that Dixon and Aikhenvald have produced a remarkable volume. The range and depth of the data provided by the individual authors on languages from so many linguistic groupings and geographic areas are impressive and of immeasurable value to anyone with an interest in parts of speech typology. Dixon's introduction to the volume is a masterful synthesis of a remarkable range of typological data, and he stakes out a controversial position in the forceful, erudite, and provocative manner that we have come to expect from him. This volume and the papers in it represent a major advance in parts of speech typology and will surely frame the debate on the nature of adjectives, and lexical classes, and their role in grammatical and typological theory for years to come.

David Beck, University of Alberta

REFERENCES

- Baker, M. (2003). *Lexical categories: Verbs, nouns, and adjectives*. Cambridge (U.K.): Cambridge University Press.
- Beck, D. (2002) *The typology of parts of speech systems: The markedness of adjectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Bhat, D.N.S. (1994) *The adjectival category*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Chafe, W. (2004) Where do adjectives come from? Unpublished paper.
- Croft, W. (1991) *Syntactic categories and grammatical relations: The cognitive organization of information*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dixon, R.M.W. (1982) *Where have all the adjectives gone?* Berlin: Mouton.
- Hengeveld, K. (1992a) Parts of speech. In M. Fortescue, P. Harder, and L. Kristofferson (eds.) *Layered structure and reference in a functional perspective*, 29-56. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Hengeveld, K. (1992b) *Non-verbal predication: Theory, typology, diachrony*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, R.W. (1987) *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, Volume 1: Theoretical prerequisites*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mel'uk, I.A. (1988) *Dependency syntax: Theory and practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Stassen, L. (1992) A hierarchy of main predicate encoding. In M. Kefer and J. van der Auwera (eds.) *Meaning and grammar: Cross-linguistic perspectives*, 179-201. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Thompson, S. (1988) A discourse approach to the cross-linguistic category "adjective." In J.A. Hawkins (ed.) *Explaining language universals*, 167-185. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wetzer, H. (1996) *The typology of adjectival predication*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1986). What's in a noun? (or: How do nouns differ in meaning from adjectives?) *Studies in Language* 10: 353-389.

Wierzbicka, A. (1995) Adjectives vs. verbs: The iconicity of part-of-speech membership. In
M.E. Landsberg (ed.), *Syntactic iconicity and linguistic freezes*, 223-246. Berlin:
Mouton de Gruyter.