

Noun and verb in Iroquoian languages: Multicategorisation from multiple criteria

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1. Introduction

Recent typologies of lexical categories have pointed to the Iroquoian languages as counter-examples to the universality of the noun-verb distinction. In fact the distinction is particularly robust in these languages. The languages do, however, show us the importance of considering a full range of criteria in categorisation.

Several kinds of criteria are typically considered in the identification of lexical categories. Often judgements are first made on the basis of meaning: words for objects are classified as nouns, and words for actions are classified as verbs. Next may be morphological structure: words containing markers of number, gender, and/or case are identified as nouns, while those containing markers of tense and/or aspect are identified as verbs. Finally, syntactic function may be taken into account. Words used as nominals to refer are often classified as nouns, and those used to predicate are classified as verbs. The three criteria may not be equally diagnostic for a particular language, since details of morphological and syntactic structure vary so widely from one language to the next. Furthermore, all criteria may not yield the same classification for a given language. What might be identified as a verb on formal morphological grounds, for example, might function semantically or syntactically as a nominal to designate an object. The Iroquoian languages show just this situation.

2. The Iroquoian language family

The Iroquoian family covers a wide area in eastern North America. The lone attested representative of the Southern branch, Cherokee, is now spoken primarily in North Carolina and Oklahoma. The Northern languages are centred in the Northeast, primarily present Ontario, New York State, and Quebec. Oneida is spoken in Wisconsin as well, and Wyandot was spoken until recently in Oklahoma. Additional Iro-

