

Omnipredicativity – a useful concept stemming from Amerindian language analysis

Katharina Haude

(CNRS – *Structure et Dynamique des Langues*)

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Some concepts first conceived for the description of native American languages are today established in linguistic typology, such as “polysynthesis” (Du Ponceau 1838) or “obviation” (Cuoq 1866). A more recently introduced concept is “omnipredicativity” (Launey 1994). It is based on the observation that in Classical Nahuatl, nouns can function as predicates and verbs can function as arguments without morphological modification. The term has since been used by typologists in different ways. Some use it to characterize languages in which all lexical categories can be used as predicates (e.g. Van Lier 2016: 219), leaving aside their potential to function as arguments. Others use the term to refer to the absence of a lexical noun-verb distinction (Evans & Osada 2005: 359). Still others interpret omnipredicativity as referring to languages with only verbs (Bisang 2013: 277). These definitions link omnipredicativity directly to the question of lexical categories, which is more adequately captured by notions such as “flexible” or “rigid” (Hengeveld 1992).

While the question of whether some Amerindian languages lack a noun-verb distinction has been a matter of debate (see Beck & Gerdts 2017: 15), the usefulness of the concept of omnipredicativity lies precisely in the fact that it is largely independent of the classification of content words. Omnipredicativity means that no matter which categories there are in a language, any content word is a predicate. When occurring in an argument phrase, it is a subordinate predicate (Launey 2004: 55).

I will illustrate this with data from Movima (isolate, Bolivia). Here, the morphological distinction between nouns and verbs is not always straightforward. At least for some portions of the lexicon one can argue whether they are, in terms of Hengeveld, “flexible” (i.e. verbs and nouns functioning as both predicates and arguments) or “rigid” (i.e. all content words belonging to a single lexical class). However, this is not relevant for analyzing the language as omnipredicative. What counts is that all content words are predicates, either main or embedded ones. In Movima, evidence for the embedded status of content words in argument function comes from the fact that they can be negated, shown in (1) for a verb and in (2) for a noun.

- (1) *kos* *loy* *tijkarim-wa*
 ART NEG.SUB work-NMLZ.DYN
 ‘the one/someone (who) does not work’
- (2) *kos* *loy* *rey* *mowimaj-ʔe*
 art neg.sub epist Movima-nmlz.st
 ‘the one/ someone (who is) not Movima’

This talk illustrates how research on Native American languages has contributed to the toolkit of descriptive concepts that help to understand the properties of formerly undescribed linguistic systems.

Abbreviations

ART=article; DYN=dynamic; EPIST=epistemic marker; NEG=negation; NMLZ=nominalization; ST=stative;
SUB= of subordinate clause

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