

Towards a typology of zero-marked noun+noun-sequences

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Zero-marked noun+noun-sequences, that is, structures consisting of two juxtaposed nouns, are cross-linguistically common. These sequences have functions in various structures across languages: possessive noun phrases (1), copular constructions (2), arguments of (di)transitive verbs (3), apposition (4), conjunction (5), and compounding (6). In earlier typological research, the zero-marked noun+noun-sequences have been identified as one coding strategy within these specific functional domains – for example, Stassen (1997) explores zero copulas, whereas Nichols & Bickel (2013) explore the morphological marking patterns of possessive noun phrases. No systematic cross-linguistic survey focusing specifically on the zero-marked noun+noun-sequences and the variety of structures and functions they can be used in exists.

(1) Indonesian (Sneddon 1996:144)

rumah Tomo

house Tomo

‘Tomo’s house’

(2) Pitjantjatjara (Douglas 1959:55, via Stassen 2013)

wait nglayayala

man doctor

‘The man is/was a doctor’

(3) Nivkh (Nedjalkov et al. 1995:78, via Kittilä 2007:472)

ōla lep p^hanak ximd'

child bread his.oldersister give.FIN

‘The child gave his older sister the bread’

(4) Kolyma Yukaghir (Maslova 2003:293)

puttuØ pulun-die-ŋin qol-l'el-ŋi

Puttuo old.man-DIM-DAT go-INFR-3PL:INTR

‘They came to old man Puttuo’

(5) Kolyma Yukaghir (Maslova 2003:316)

mēmē čugurubie

bear chipmunk

‘the bear and the chipmunk’

(6) Vietnamese (Nguyen 1997:72)

chân trời
foot sky
'horizon'

The present study focuses on examining these zero-marked noun+noun-sequences from a typological perspective. Based on a pilot study using a genealogically and geographically balanced sample of 30 languages, part of an ongoing PhD project, I provide a preliminary overview of the sequences and their functions. The purpose is to find out about the cross-linguistic distribution of the sequences, and whether it is common for languages to use the sequence for more than one function. The initial results suggest that languages do commonly use the sequence for more than one function: there are many languages with two, three, and four functions. The most common function appears to be compound nouns, and zero copulas, possessive noun phrases, and conjunctions are relatively common as well.

The study provides another perspective to linguistic typology by employing a formal starting point instead of a functional one. The results will shed new light on the coding efficiency of language: it is generally assumed that languages use such linguistic units that are easy to produce and process for multiple purposes (Piantadosi et al. 2012) – due to the lack of overt marking, the zero-marked noun+noun-sequences are efficient, and therefore it is expected that they would be widely used across and within languages.

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