ABSTRACT

REVISITING WORD CLASSES: THE CASE OF HEBREW ADVERBS

The paper is offered as a tribute to Fillmore’s pioneering insights into lexical structure (e.g., 1975, 1978), the nature of grammatical constructions (Fillmore et al, 1988), and his view of the lexicon as inseparable from grammar. As such, Fillmore’s ideas from early on contrast markedly with the accepted division of lexical entries into content versus function words, open-class versus closed-class items, or grammatical versus lexical elements (Biber et al, 1999; Lyons, 1968; Talmy, 1985), as applied in typological as well as psycholinguistic research (Croft, 2001; Talmy, 2000; or Haveman, 1996; Landau & Gleitman, 1985, respectively). Following different suggestions to the effect that the open-class / closed-class (OC/CC) distinction is too sharply dichotomous (Gentner & Boroditsky, 2001; Hopper & Traugott, 1993; Slobin, 1997, 2001), our study proposes that linguistic elements be ranged along a cline rather than clearly divided between a “lexical” versus a “grammatical” area. More specifically, corpus-based research in different languages has demonstrated the need to re-examine how word-like units be characterized as “framed” by the context of extended discourse (Berman, 2002; Nir-Sagiv, Bar-Ilan, & Berman, 2008; Ravid & Berman, 2009).

Particularly problematic for attempts to cut up the lexical space are items grouped together under the mixed-bag heading of “adverbs”. Some treat these as OCs (Biber et al, 1999; Fromkin & Rodman, 1993; Radford et al, 1999), while others confine the OC category to nouns, verbs, and adjectives (Baker, 2003; Ouhalla, 1999; Stemmer & Whitaker, 1998). One problem is that in a language like Hebrew, both classical and contemporary, there is no class of morphologically identifiable adverbs, even in the case of manner adverbs like those marked by the suffixes –ly in English or –ment, -mente in French and Spanish. In Hebrew, these are typically expressed by Prepositional Phrase constructions with be- ‘in, with’ + De-adjectival Nominal (e.g., be-simxa ‘with-gladness = gladly’, be-racon ‘with-desire = willingly’, be-zehirut ‘with care(fullness) = carefully’.

Our study aims to shed light on the broad issue of word classes by considering these and other items lying in the gray area between clearly OC (e.g., concrete nouns) and clearly CC (e.g., morphologically bound markers of grammatical categories). We analyze these as “intermediate” constructions themselves ranging along a continuum, between expressions that have concrete conceptual content and those that activate an abstract grammatical schema (Schilperoord & Verhagen, 2006). Focus here is on Hebrew adverbs as part of a disparate group of “between-class” (BC) elements that are neither semantically autonomous open-class nor grammatically structure-dependent closed-class. Different types of adverbs in Hebrew are analyzed in structural terms as ranging from multi-lexemic to mono-morphemic expressions and functionally as manifesting variability of use in the context of extended discourse. We conclude by proposing that word-class distinctions in general, and “between-class” elements in particular, depend essentially on discourse-embedded considerations for their interpretation.

(470 Words)
REFERENCES


