Word classes in English and Dutch: Listening to phonological evidence

Within structuralist linguistics and its derivatives word classes have traditionally been seen as based on structural (distributional) facts (e.g. Palmer 1971, Aarts 2007). Cognitive linguistics, by contrast, usually emphasises the role of semantics (e.g. Langacker 1991, 2008) or semantics-pragmatics (Croft 2001). However, neither has paid much attention to relevant work in psycholinguistics, where in addition to structural and semantic factors the importance of phonological cues has been established for quite some time (e.g. Cassidy & Kelly 1991, Kelly 1992, Monaghan et al. 2005, Don & Erkelens 2008). This paper re-evaluates definitions of nouns and verbs in light of these psycholinguistic insights, specifically focusing on the suggestion that phonological generalisations are part of our knowledge of these categories.

Experimental data will be presented to shed light on this suggestion. Hollmann (2012, 2013) reports on an experiment involving the production of nonce nouns and verbs in English. This paper will present new data from a parallel experiment carried out on Dutch. The results from this experiment provide additional support for the relatively broad conception of word classes proposed by psycholinguists, as against the more narrow definitions of theoretical linguists in both the structuralist-generative and the cognitive tradition.

In defence of the very abstract characterisations offered by these theoretical approaches it appears to be true that some phonological cues are language-specific. An example of this is the preference for voiced vs. voiceless final obstruents in English verbs as compared to nouns, which of course does not obtain in Dutch as a result of its phonotactic constraint against word-final voiced consonants. This should thus not be considered to be part of a cross-linguistically valid characterisation. However, other properties, such as nouns prototypically having more syllables than verbs, hold in both English and Dutch, and may well represent strong tendencies that extend beyond those languages.

I propose a straightforward functional explanation for the robust finding concerning length: languages have considerably more nouns than verbs, and therefore the former need more phonological substance for purposes of differentiation than the latter. But more importantly, I argue that the evidence suggests that theoretical linguists have been mistaken in claiming that speakers' knowledge of the categories in question is purely distributional or purely semantic(-pragmatic): phonological properties play a role as well. On a more general level I conclude, with Kelly (1992:362-
3), that linguistic theory — both structuralist-generative and cognitive — has tended to downplay the importance of phonology on certain a priori, as opposed to properly empirical, grounds.

References