

Towards A Unified Structural Theory of Parts of Speech in Modern Linguistics

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Received: 15 May 2025; **Accepted:** 11 June 2025; **Published:** 13 July 2025

Abstract: This paper presents a unified structural theory of parts of speech, integrating comparative evidence from English, Uzbek, and Russian. It addresses the longstanding debate on word-class categorization by combining distributional, syntactic, morphological, and semantic criteria into a comprehensive framework. Utilizing descriptive grammars and typological studies, we identify universally communicative "primary" parts of speech common across these languages, alongside "secondary" categories specific to individual linguistic structures. Our analysis emphasizes the importance of clearly distinguishing semantic and formal criteria to avoid theoretical ambiguity. The unified model effectively accounts for cross-linguistic variations, such as differing usage of articles, pronoun case systems, and morphological distinctions, ensuring theoretical coherence.

Keywords: Parts of speech, structural linguistics, linguistic universals, unique characteristics, systemic-structural analysis, language theory.

Introduction: The classification of words into parts of speech remains a contentious issue in linguistics, unresolved despite extensive historical examination. Traditionally, grammarians identified parts of speech primarily through semantic (meaning-based), syntactic (sentence-function-based), and morphological (form-based) criteria. This multiplicity—exemplified by the Western classical tradition, which inconsistently recognized categories like articles and adjectives—illustrates the challenge in universally defining parts of speech.

Modern structural linguistics defines parts of speech by their distribution and syntactic behavior within grammatical systems. Charles C. Fries (1952) notably categorized English words based on their distributional positions, marking a significant shift away from semantic criteria [4.118-119]. However, purely formal classifications often fail to capture cross-linguistic nuances. Christian Lehmann highlights the essential independence and intersection of semantic and structural aspects, shaped significantly by historical and cultural factors, resulting in language-specific systems

[11.123].

Universally, languages distinguish core categories—primarily nouns (reference to entities) and verbs (predication of actions or states)—but other categories like adjectives and adverbs vary widely. While English clearly marks adjectives as a separate class, many languages merge their function with nouns or verbs [2.53].

This article proposes a unified structural theory by systematically comparing parts-of-speech systems in English, Russian, and Uzbek. These languages illustrate diverse structural realizations of universal functions, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding both universal elements and language-specific distinctions. Our comparative approach aims to enhance theoretical coherence within linguistic typology and the broader theory of language.

METHODS

This study uses descriptive grammars and linguistic resources for English, Russian, and Uzbek. For English, sources include structuralist descriptions by B. A. Ilyish [8.5] and comprehensive grammars by Quirk et al.

(1985) [12.67]. For Russian, cognitive-semantic analyses by E. S. Kubryakova [10.33] and standard Russian grammars [18.37-40] were used. Uzbek materials include Uzbek Grammar, Vol. I: Morphology (1995) [13.25] and comparative typology lectures by G. M. Hoshimov [7.5]. Additionally, typological studies highlighting isomorphic (shared) and allomorphic (language-specific) features (Jalalova, 2023 [9.49-52]) and seminal works by Fries (1952) [4.118], Hockett (1958), Croft (1991), and Baker (2003) were integrated into the theoretical framework.

The research employs comparative structural analysis, considering three criteria: semantic (meaning), morphological (inflectional and derivational properties), and syntactic (sentence function) [12.136-137]. Each language's part-of-speech system was analyzed to identify common and distinctive features, focusing on isomorphic elements (e.g., universally distinguished nouns and verbs [5.75]) and allomorphic elements (e.g., presence or absence of articles [4.251-254]). The analysis included: (1) descriptive alignment of each language's categories, (2) structural synthesis informed by Baker's (2003) formal syntactic criteria [1.68] and Croft's (1991) functional-cognitive continuum [2.169], and (3) theoretical modeling to propose a unified classification framework. Interpretive discussion accompanied the analysis, ensuring both theoretical coherence and empirical validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Major Criteria for Parts of Speech: Toward an Integrated Definition

This study addresses the challenge of defining parts of speech by integrating semantic, morphological, and syntactic criteria into a unified theoretical framework. Traditional grammar offers simplistic definitions (noun as "person, place, or thing," verb as "action or state"), which are often insufficient. Purely formal approaches, like Fries' distributional method, may be too language-specific. An effective unified theory requires combining semantic meaning, morphological forms, and syntactic functions.

Nouns typically denote entities or "thingness" [12.136-136], marked morphologically for number and case in languages like Russian and Uzbek, and positionally by determiners in English. Nouns universally serve as propositional arguments (subjects or objects), although case and number marking vary across languages [9.49-52; 18.49-52].

Verbs universally denote predication (actions, processes, states) and syntactically function as predicates. They exhibit significant morphological variability, with English relying on auxiliary verbs for

tense/aspect, while Russian and Uzbek utilize extensive inflectional paradigms [11.197-204].

Adjectives and adverbs, considered "secondary" categories, display greater divergence. English adjectives are invariant and typically precede nouns; Russian adjectives agree morphologically with nouns; Uzbek adjectives remain invariant and often function predicatively without copulas. A unified definition categorizes adjectives as properties modifying nouns or predicates, reflecting cognitive linguistics' view of adjectives as intermediate between nouns and verbs [2.53; 7.31-34].

Functional categories like pronouns, numerals, conjunctions, and particles differ considerably across languages but fulfill universal grammatical roles. Pronouns function deictically or anaphorically, while numerals exhibit dual lexical-functional behavior. Russian-specific categories like "words of the category of state" highlight language-specific classifications, accommodated by the unified theory without enforcing universal categories.

The proposed unified theory uses a distributional prototype approach, identifying core prototypical instances of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, while allowing intermediate and language-specific cases. This model accommodates linguistic diversity and resolves theoretical debates through an integrated definition of parts of speech.

Comparative Analysis: English, Uzbek, and Russian Parts of Speech

By applying the above criteria and unified perspective, we derived a comparative overview of the parts of speech in English, Uzbek, and Russian, summarized as follows:

NOUN: Nouns are present in English, Russian, and Uzbek as a robust open class. English nouns inflect primarily for number (singular/plural) and possessive case (-'s), without extensive case marking or gender distinctions. Russian nouns inflect for number, gender (masculine, feminine, neuter), and six grammatical cases (nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, instrumental, locative). Uzbek nouns use suffixes for number (e.g., kitob "book", kitoblar "books") and six grammatical cases analogous to Russian (genitive -ning, dative -ga, accusative -ni, locative -da, ablative -dan), but lack gender. Each language exhibits language-specific phenomena, such as English mass vs. count nouns distinction, Uzbek's broad pluralization capability (e.g., ma'lumotlar "informations"), and Russian's singularia tantum and pluralia tantum (e.g., очки "glasses") [4.265-273]. The unified theory interprets these variations as language-specific features within the noun category.

PRONOUN: Pronouns differ significantly among the languages studied. English pronouns have a simplified two-case system (he/him), while Uzbek pronouns mirror noun declensions with six cases (men "I", meni "me", menga "to me"). Russian pronouns exhibit complex and irregular declensions (я/меня/мне). English distinguishes gender in third person singular (he, she), Russian distinguishes gender across third person pronouns (он, она), while Uzbek does not differentiate by gender. The unified theory categorizes pronouns structurally as noun-substitutes, highlighting their deictic and anaphoric functions [9.49-52].

VERB: Verbs universally denote actions, states, or events, functioning syntactically as predicates. English verbs employ auxiliaries (will, have, be) and minimal inflectional morphology (run/ran), whereas Russian verbs extensively inflect for person, number, tense, aspect, mood, and gender (бежать, бежал). Uzbek verbs use agglutinative suffixation indicating tense, mood, and person (bor-di-m "I went"). Despite morphological variation, verbs in all three languages share a common structural core: predication and thematic role assignment to noun phrases. Thus, the unified theory emphasizes verbs' predicate role, accommodating cross-linguistic morphological diversity as parameterized expressions of universal tense/aspect/mood functions [11.197-204].

ADJECTIVE: Adjectives differ considerably across languages. English adjectives typically do not inflect and occupy fixed syntactic positions before nouns or after copulas. Russian adjectives inflect extensively for gender, number, and case, aligning with nouns (большой дом, большая комната). Uzbek adjectives remain invariant (katta uy, katta xona) and often function predicatively without copulas (Havo issiq). The unified theory categorizes adjectives as words denoting properties that structurally modify nouns or predicate complements, acknowledging their intermediate semantic and syntactic status between nouns and verbs [2.53; 7.31-34].

ADVERB: Adverbs across languages form heterogeneous classes indicating manner, time, place, and degree. English primarily uses the morphological marker -ly (quickly), Russian uses suffixes -o or -e (быстро), and Uzbek relies largely on contextual cues, with many adverbs identical to adjectives (yaxshi "good/well"). The unified theory defines adverbs functionally, as modifiers of predicates, adjectives, or clauses, recognizing significant cross-linguistic variability and context-dependent usage [11.153-158].

OTHER CATEGORIES: Conjunctions (English: and, or, but; Russian: и, или, но; Uzbek: va, yoki, lekin), prepositions/postpositions (English: in, to, by; Russian:

в, к, через; Uzbek: bilan "with", uchun "for"), particles (English: no, indeed, even; Russian: -то, же; Uzbek: mi for questions, -ku for emphasis), and interjections (English: oh, wow; Russian: ой, ну; Uzbek: voy, mana) are present across English, Russian, and Uzbek, though categorized and utilized differently. These constitute closed-class items primarily serving grammatical or pragmatic functions.

Uzbek features a diverse array of modal particles (e.g., albatta "certainly", balki "perhaps"), occasionally classified separately. English and Russian similarly have modal words (English: perhaps, indeed; Russian: может быть "maybe", конечно "of course"), often variably classified as adverbs or particles. Minor categories beyond nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs differ among languages, such as Russian's "category of state" words, Uzbek's distinct postposition classification, and English's traditional separation of articles as a part of speech.

Our unified theory treats these minor classes as functional categories—closed-class elements signaling grammatical relationships or speaker attitudes rather than lexical content. It groups prepositions, postpositions, and case-marking clitics under "relational markers," emphasizing their semantic relational roles (location, instrument, etc.) rather than their formal status as independent words or affixes [4.251-254]. Coordinating and subordinating conjunctions are similarly viewed as language-specific manifestations of universal logical relations.

This approach aligns conceptually with Baker's (2003) distinction between lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives) and functional categories (determiners, complementizers, etc.) [1.68]. While agnostic to specific generative models, our theory supports this fundamental lexical vs. functional division, acknowledging cross-linguistic variations in classification practices.

Toward a Unified Structural Theory

This research proposes a unified structural theory of parts of speech based on comparative evidence from English, Russian, and Uzbek, outlining several key principles:

Universality of Core Functions: Every human language requires basic communicative functions, notably reference (nouns) and predication (verbs). Our theory begins with these universal functions, viewing other categories (adjectives, adverbs, etc.) as specialized expansions around these core roles.

Language-Specific Category Structures: While nouns and verbs are near-universal, categories like adjectives or adverbs depend on language-specific structures and

semantic distinctions. The theory recognizes conditional universality, meaning all languages perform similar functions but map these differently onto lexical categories [11.182-190].

Structural Criteria as the Basis: Parts of speech are defined primarily through structural properties (distributional, syntactic, morphological). For instance, adjectives differ structurally across English (pre-nominal, no inflection), Russian (gender, number, case agreement), and Uzbek (invariant form, predicative use without copula). Thus, our unified approach emphasizes structural criteria, acknowledging cross-linguistic variation [4.118-119].

Semantic Prototype Alignment: The theory employs semantic prototypes, where categories have central, prototypical meanings but also include peripheral members (e.g., event nouns, stative verbs). This approach accommodates lexical ambiguity and fuzzy category boundaries, reflecting cognitive linguistic insights and human categorization processes.

Comparative Insights – Isomorphic vs Allomorphic Features: Our comparative analysis identifies isomorphic features common to all languages studied (noun/verb distinction, pronouns, conjunctions) and allomorphic, language-specific features (English articles, Russian case, Uzbek postpositions) [4.251-254]. The theory incorporates these differences by emphasizing universal functional roles while allowing language-specific realization.

Theoretical Synthesis: The unified structural theory operates on two levels:

Level 1: Universal Functional Categories – abstract roles like Referential, Predicative, Attributive, Modifying, and Linking.

Level 2: Language-Specific Lexico-Grammatical Classes – actual parts of speech in each language (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), reflecting specific structural implementations of these universal functions.

Implications and Original Insights: Our unified theory aids comparative linguistics and language education by clarifying cross-linguistic differences (e.g., article use in English vs Uzbek, verb aspect in Russian vs English). It balances structural and cognitive perspectives, emphasizing that categories emerge from structural constraints and historical development rather than purely cognitive motivations [11.143-151].

Overall, the unified theory provides a coherent framework accommodating linguistic diversity and universal principles, offering practical implications for linguistic theory and pedagogy, and enhancing cross-linguistic understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study presents a unified structural theory of parts of speech, highlighting its applicability to English, Uzbek, and Russian. Our analysis demonstrates several key contributions:

We established that typologically diverse languages can be analyzed within a unified structural framework, highlighting nouns and verbs as universal core categories. Secondary categories (adjectives, adverbs, etc.) exhibit more language-specific traits but remain comparable through shared functional criteria.

Our theory integrates semantic, morphological, and syntactic criteria into a cohesive definition of parts of speech. This multi-dimensional approach reflects cognitive reality and avoids oversimplification, ensuring accurate cross-linguistic comparisons.

We affirmed a hierarchical relationship, with nouns and verbs serving as universal structural backbones, and adjectives, adverbs, numerals, and pronouns considered secondary or derived categories. This structural hierarchy explains linguistic stability and variability across languages.

By comparing English, Uzbek, and Russian, our theory accounts for language-specific phenomena, such as Uzbek's flexible use of adjectives as predicates and Russian's unique "category of state." The unified framework accommodates these anomalies by mapping them onto universal functional roles.

Our unified structural perspective supports linguistic education and cross-linguistic understanding, aiding students and educators in comprehending grammatical parallels and distinctions among English, Uzbek, and Russian.

We emphasized language fluidity, historical evolution of categories, and human cognitive processes, ensuring our analysis remains engaging and reflective of human categorization practices.

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