

THE PROBLEM OF THE ADVERB

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Key words : parts of speech, adverb, adverbial.

Workshop Description : The usefulness of parts of speech in the description of language is readily acknowledged (Haspelmath 2001: 16538), even though among these parts of speech there is one which, although less satisfactory than the others, is paradoxically no less useful: the adverb.

The adverb seems indeed to have been invented to lump together all the items that do not satisfy the definitions of the other parts of speech (Quirk et al. 1972: 267); it may even have been adopted as a very convenient way of maintaining a relatively stable number of parts of speech (Rauh 2015: 38).

The definition of this part of the speech has certainly evolved since Dionysius Thrax: the adverb is not only what applies to a verb, but a lexical category made up of invariable terms that can apply to a verb, an adjective, another adverb, or even a sentence. (See in particular Lyons 1968: 325, Abraham 1988: 19, Haspelmath 2001: 16544)

However, the shortcomings of this definition are comparable to those which already bothered ancient grammarians (Schmoe 2002: 3): indeed, the very heterogeneity of the class makes it the least satisfactory of all the parts of speech (Quirk et al., 1972: 267), so much so that one can agree with Gleason (1965: 129) that it corresponds to a set of items that have very little, if anything, in common. This peculiarity is underlined by so many authors that it has become almost a defining criterion of the notion of adverb. To this problem can be added the classical objection to the theory of the parts of speech, which is their non-universality: Hengeveld and Velsta (2010) have demonstrated, for example, the absence of adverbs in certain types of languages.

We are thus led to conclude that the adverb is a non-universal and heterogeneous part of speech that includes invariable terms applying to a verb, an adjective, another adverb, or even a sentence.

In order to solve this definitional problem, there are two solutions. The first of these is to simply do away with the category of adverb and replace it by the functional category of adverbial (Nølke [1990], Pittner [1999]), which may be defined in a purely syntactic way if necessary (Chomsky [1965], Steinitz [1969]). However this terminology is not very clear either (Eisenberg 2013: 212), as, like its cousin the adverb, the category of adverbial has ill-defined boundaries: if

the adverbial is a phrase that is not defined as a specific type of sentential component (Nølke 1990: 17), this means that any type of circumstantial, be it an adverb, a prepositional phrase, etc., falls into this category. This results in great heterogeneity (Nølke 1990: 18) and leads to similar classification problems to those posed by the category of adverb. Is this or that unit an adverbial? The debate could go on forever.

Opposed to this centrifugal approach, a centripetal perspective searches for a prototype of the category (Ramat/Ricca 1994). But based on what criteria is this prototype to be defined? Frequency? Meaning? If the latter criterion is utilized, the manner adverb would constitute the prototype and this would confirm Hengeveld's position (1992, 2004) that the class of adverbs should be reduced to the single category of manner adverbs.

The question is to see whether other approaches can be taken: can we deal with the adverb, as opposed to the adverbial, by dispensing with the criterion of invariability? Can we define the adverb based solely on syntax? Will traditional adverbs be adverbs in this case? Are there other adverbs than those which have been traditionally analyzed as such? Should we keep the term 'adverb' at all? And above all: Can we propose a universal definition of the adverb? These are all questions that deserve careful consideration, whether one is working within the limits of the study of a given language or in a typological framework.

Please send the proposal before November 5th to olivier-duplatre@wanadoo.fr. and pymodicom.ling@yahoo.fr.

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