

Kuikuro: how and where Nouns and Verbs come from?

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Five hundred Kuikuro speak a Cariban language at the edge of Brazilian Southern Amazonia. It is a head final and dependent marking language, ergative from the point of view of typological morphosyntax and highly agglutinative, with a rich inflectional and derivational morphology. Inflectional morphological classes ‘organize’ many and different inflectional and derivational processes into classes explicitly ordered. Functional morphemes do a lot of job: rich and productive processes of nominalization and verbalization, detransitivization and transitivization. Nominal and Verbal inflections show a light distinction: structural parallelism between nominal and verbal phrases; the [Internal Argument S/O + Verb] unit is a case of the general relation between any head and its argument; a single set of proclitic person markers occurs with nouns, verbs and postpositions; any sentence whose Verb is inflected with Punctual Aspect can be argument of any head, without any nominalizing morphology.

The problem of polycategoriality and the Kuikuro data are nicely and convincingly handled in the framework Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz, 1993, 1994; Harley & Noyer, 1999): a-categorized roots, N and V derived in syntax through low level categorization and higher levels of re-categorization. Special attention will be deserved to the semantics of Roots and its implementation in syntax as N or V, as well as to the ‘nounness’ of verbs inflected for Punctual Aspect (Franchetto 2006, Santos 2007).

Evidence for our analysis also comes from data collected during a research on first language acquisition. The speech production of 11 Kuikuro children, with the age between 14 and 36 months, was recorded in 17 hours of digital video, always in different contexts of natural interaction with adults and other children. We will pay special attention to the nature of the ‘baby words’, used from 2 up to 2,8 years, and to the emergence of Verbs and Nouns through inflectional and derivational morphology (2,5 to 3,5 years).

References

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