

On the Noun-Verb Distinction in Wayampi

The most traditional and widespread view in descriptive linguistics consists in favoring a purely morphological definition of lexical classes. On the other hand, some linguists adopt the opposite view, especially for isolating languages, according to which categorial status is determined by the syntactic environment of an item. For Wayampi, a lesser-known language of Northern Amazonia that belongs to the Tupi-Guarani family, I claim that these two approaches can be used simultaneously to define parts of speech since they do not apply to elements of the same level of complexity. On the basis of the syntactic roles of predicate, argument and adjunct I recognize the major types of phrases in Wayampi and I define in purely distributional terms the major syntactic classes of words (predicates, nominals and postpositions) that can be found in this language. Morphosyntactic criteria are then applied to distinguish lexical classes as well as subclasses within them. Contrary to what is often assumed in Tupi-Guarani linguistics, the present study shows that for Wayampi, despite a great morphological overlap and the possibility for nouns to be used as predicates of an unusual type, nouns and verbs manifest a clear-cut distinction once syntactic classes have been clearly defined at a strictly functional level.