

Around the world, people talk to each other in some 7000 different languages. In recent publications, leading linguistic typologists make a plea to take this huge cross-linguistic variation seriously: If we want to understand human language, we should take diversity as our point of departure, just like biologists and cognitive scientists. This message flies in the face of the basic idea that is still pervasive in linguistic theory, namely that all human languages share fundamentally the same structure (Haspelmath 2007; Newmeyer 2007). In fact, there are very few remaining candidates for true linguistic universals of the type ‘every language has X’. Yet, one of the most stubborn ones is: Every language has distinct classes of nouns and verbs. As Evans and Levinson (2009: 434) put it: ‘Here, controversy still rages on among linguists [and] no definite consensus has been reached’.

In view of typologists’ celebration of cross-linguistic differences, it is unexpected that even the most diversity-minded among them are reluctant to relinquish the universal noun-verb distinction. While they happily accept that languages get by without articles, without a passive construction, without tense marking, or without a word for ‘blue’, they are far less comfortable with the idea that some languages do without separate categories of nouns and verbs. One reason for this is that nouns and verbs constitute fundamental building blocks of influential theories about the architecture of human language. Moreover, nouns and verbs can be thought of as the linguistic counterparts of the cognitive categories of objects and actions, respectively. However, recent studies show that linguistic and cognitive categories can map onto each other in a myriad of different ways (Croft 2001, 2009; Kemmerer & Eggleston 2010; Boroditsky 2011).

In Samoan, for instance, the word *uō* can be used as a noun meaning ‘friend’ or as a verb meaning ‘to be a friend’. Put differently, the ‘verbal’ meaning of this word is ‘to be X’, where X corresponds to the ‘nominal’ meaning of the same word. Some linguists contend that this holds for all content words<sup>1</sup> in the Samoan language: they are neither verbs nor nouns, and their meaning is compositionally derived on the basis of the syntactic context (nominal or verbal) in which they are used (Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992). Other scholars, however, would claim that Samoan has two words *uō*, each of which is stored in the mental dictionary with its own meaning and function, one as a verb and the other as a noun (cf. Evans & Osada 2005). According to this view, Samoan differs from English only in the number of lexical items that happen to be phonologically identical as a noun and as a verb (cf. English *hammer*). Thus, to decide if languages without nouns and verbs really exist, it is crucial to find out whether different meanings of single words are compositionally derivable, or if they are not, and must ultimately be divided into separate categories.

My project constitutes an in-depth study of the issue sketched above, in a group of sister languages of Samoan: the Central-Eastern Oceanic languages. It tests whether or not various types of content words have compositional meanings when used in different syntactic contexts. If they do, this would be evidence against a universal noun-verb distinction. Using existing language descriptions in combination with new fieldwork, this study brings an unprecedented amount of cross-linguistic data into the fierce debate about the (non-)universality of nouns and verbs. As such, it will make an important contribution to understanding human language diversity in its full splendour.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *content word* refers to words like ‘friend’, ‘hammer’, and ‘walk’, and contrasts with *function words*, such as articles and conjunctions.

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