



Principles, challenges, and prospects in classifying Russian parts of speech

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Park, Su-bin. 2025. Principles, challenges, and prospects in classifying Russian parts of speech. *Linguistic Research* 42(2): 423-442. The classification of parts of speech remains a fundamental and unresolved issue in contemporary linguistics. As typological research expands beyond the Indo-European language family, it has become increasingly clear that traditional classification principles—primarily grounded in morphological patterns—prove insufficient to account for the full range of structural variation across the world's languages. Comparative studies suggest that syntactic functions tend to display more cross-linguistic similarity than morphological or word-formation patterns. Still, the most decisive criterion lies in the shared grammatical meaning that underpins each word class. This study examines the historical and theoretical development of part-of-speech classification in Russian, focusing on semantic, morphological, and syntactic approaches proposed by key scholars such as Fortunatov, Šahmatov, Šerba, and Vinogradov. Through a critical analysis of each framework, the study reveals the inconsistencies and limitations inherent in single-criterion models and advocates for a lexico-grammatical approach that integrates form, function, and meaning. Rather than rejecting traditional systems outright, the study aims to expose their internal contradictions and propose a more coherent and inclusive classification model—one capable of capturing both the internal specificity of Russian and the broader demands of cross-linguistic comparability. Only through such an integrative framework can the category of parts of speech be described with both theoretical precision and typological relevance. (Yonsei University)

Keywords part-of-speech classification, morphological criteria, semantic criteria, syntactic criteria, Russian

1. Introduction

The classification of parts of speech has remained a central and enduring concern in linguistic scholarship, yet achieving broad consensus on their precise definitions and systematic organization remains a challenge. Attempts to categorize lexical classes according to a single, consistent principle have repeatedly encountered both theoretical and empirical difficulties, underscoring the complexity of this issue in contemporary linguistic inquiry. Although a variety of frameworks have been proposed—based on semantic, morphological, and syntactic criteria—none has gained universal acceptance.

This lack of consensus is particularly evident in the study of Russian, where influential linguists such as Lomonosov (1755), Fortunatov (1956), Šahmatov (1927), Šerba (1928), and Vinogradov (1986) have each introduced distinct classificatory models with lasting impact.¹

Building on these seminal works, the present study offers a systematic analysis of the major approaches to part-of-speech classification in Russian. It investigates the structural principles underlying each framework and assesses their inherent limitations. Special attention is given to the role of morphological form, semantic content, and syntactic behavior within the Russian grammatical system, as well as to their interaction with broader issues of linguistic universality and typological specificity. Through this examination, the study seeks to advance a more coherent and theoretically grounded model of the Russian part-of-speech system, situated within both its historical development and present-day structure.

2. Theoretical criteria for part-of-speech classification

Words are widely recognized as the primary units of morphological analysis, functioning as complex linguistic entities that encode both lexical and grammatical meaning. These meanings are typically realized through grammatical forms, which enable the categorization of words into distinct lexical classes—namely, parts of speech. Traditionally, a part of speech is defined as a set of words that exhibit shared grammatical properties, semantic features, and syntactic behaviors. The classification

¹ All Russian words in this paper are transliterated according to the ISO 9 standard, which provides an unambiguous, reversible mapping from Cyrillic to Latin script.

of word classes has conventionally relied on three principal criteria: semantic, morphological, and syntactic. These three criteria have long been considered separately, but early attempts to consolidate them into a unified theoretical framework can be found in Sunik (1966), who sought to define parts of speech as functional-semantic categories grounded in their grammatical behavior.

The semantic criterion groups words according to their conceptual meaning: nouns generally refer to entities or objects, verbs to actions or states, and adjectives to attributes or qualities. The morphological criterion emphasizes inflectional variation and the grammatical categories associated with it—such as gender, number, and case in nouns, or aspect, tense, and person in verbs. The syntactic criterion focuses on the functional role a word plays in sentence structure and the types of elements it typically combines with—whether it most often serves as a subject, predicate, or modifier.

These distinctions are most clearly illustrated in the major lexical classes. Nouns refer to both concrete and abstract referents and are inflected for grammatical categories such as gender (*kot* “tomcat”, *koška* “female cat”, *okno* “window”), number (*kot* – *koty* “cat” – “cats”), and case (*kot* [nom.], *kota* [gen./acc.], *kotu* [dat.], etc.), typically functioning as subjects or objects. Verbs denote temporally extended actions or states and reflect distinctions in aspect (*delat’* “to do [imperfective]” – *sdelat’* “to do [perfective]”), voice (*â napišu* “I will write” – *byl napisan* “was written”), tense (*pišu* “write” – *pisal* “wrote” – *budu pisat’* “will write”), and person (*â pišu* “I write”, *ty pišeš’* “you write”, *on pišet* “he writes”). Adjectives express qualities and agree with the noun they modify in gender, number, and case, functioning primarily as modifiers.

In sum, parts of speech are best understood as composite grammatical categories that emerge from the interplay of form, meaning, and function. Their classification is not a matter of merely organizing a vocabulary list, but a foundational analytic task that reveals the underlying logic and systematic structure of language. A theoretically sound classification system enhances descriptive clarity and provides a crucial basis for meaningful cross-linguistic comparison.

3. Historical development of part-of-speech theory

The concept of parts of speech has figured prominently in linguistic traditions

since antiquity. The classification of words into distinct grammatical categories has long served as both a practical tool and an intuitive framework for analyzing language structure. This endeavor can be traced to the grammatical systems of ancient India and the linguistic philosophy of Aristotle, both of which sought to categorize words based on typological distinctions. In his study of Ancient Greek, Aristotle proposed a three-part system—nouns, verbs, and conjunctions—the latter encompassing what we would now identify as articles, pronouns, and copular elements. The Alexandrian school later expanded this model into an eight-part taxonomy: noun, verb, participle, article, pronoun, adverb, preposition, and conjunction. In the Roman tradition, where Latin lacked articles, interjections were introduced in place of articles, reshaping the classical model. By the post-medieval period, the grammatical status of adjectives had risen considerably, prompting further refinements to the system (Krivonosov 2001: 18).

In early grammatical theory, parts of speech were closely aligned with categories of logic. They were seen not only as elements of sentence structure but also as components of logical judgment (*suždenie*), thus uniting grammatical and philosophical reasoning. Verbs, for instance, were understood as grammatical expressions of action or state, defined by inflectional features such as tense, number, and person. This logic-based framework remained dominant from the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. Over time, however, it faced growing criticism due to the internal inconsistencies and conceptual incoherence of traditional classifications. The lack of a unified principle, structural asymmetries, and conceptual overlaps increasingly drew scrutiny—particularly with the emergence of morphology as a distinct field of study.

From the nineteenth century onward, Russian linguistic scholarship tended to favor morphological criteria for part-of-speech classification. A prominent example is Fortunatov's framework, which conceptualized parts of speech as *formal'nye klassy* ("formal classes"), determined by whether a word undergoes inflection within specific grammatical paradigms. Fortunatov proposed a threefold classification: words inflected for case (*sklonâemye slova*), those inflected for person (*sprâgaemye slova*), and non-inflected words (*nesklonâemye / nesprâgaemye slova*). Under this model, nouns were identified by case inflection, and adjectives by agreement in gender, number, and case (Fortunatov 1956: 134–136).

Later developments in Russian grammar incorporated syntactic and logical

considerations alongside morphological ones. From a syntactic perspective, words that performed similar functions in sentence structure were grouped into the same grammatical category. For instance, modifiers and definers were classified as adjectives. This more holistic approach—which integrated lexical semantics, inflectional behavior, and syntactic distribution—paved the way for the reconceptualization of parts of speech as *leksiko-grammatičeskaâ kategoriâ* (“lexico-grammatical categories”) (Kočergina 1970: 88). Kočergina (1970) emphasized that such lexico-grammatical categories emerge not from isolated formal features but from the systemic interaction of morphology, syntax, and lexical semantics, reflecting a move toward structural-functional integration in Russian grammatical theory.

In sum, the theoretical understanding of parts of speech in Russian linguistics evolved from a morphology-centered framework into a multi-dimensional model that incorporates semantic, syntactic, and logical dimensions. This progression culminated in the comprehensive lexico-grammatical system formalized by Vinogradov (1986), which continues to provide a nuanced and analytically rigorous framework for the description of Russian grammar.

In recent years, Russian linguistics has seen renewed interest in the dynamic and hybrid nature of parts of speech. For instance, Šigurov and Šigurova (2016) developed a framework of transpositional grammar, which explores the mechanisms by which lexical items shift between grammatical categories, often producing syncretic or functionally ambiguous forms. Similarly, Murâsov (2019) has drawn attention to peripheral and synsemantic elements such as prepositions, conjunctions, and particles, arguing that their categorical status can only be determined in relation to discourse functions and pragmatic context.

4. Approaches to part-of-speech classification in Russian

The classification of parts of speech has remained a foundational concern in the development of linguistic theory, giving rise to a wide array of methodological approaches shaped by differing historical and theoretical contexts. Within the Russian linguistic tradition, several leading figures—most notably Fortunatov, Šahmatov, Peškovskij, Šerba, and Vinogradov—have each proposed influential models that reflect distinct priorities in analysis and classification.

This section examines their respective contributions, focusing on the principles and criteria they employed in constructing part-of-speech systems specific to the Russian language. By analyzing the theoretical frameworks and structural assumptions underpinning each model, the discussion seeks to highlight both the diversity and the complexity inherent in Russian grammatical thought. In doing so, it illustrates how these varying approaches have not only shaped the trajectory of Russian linguistic scholarship but also contributed to broader debates about the nature and classification of word classes.

4.1 The logical-grammatical approach

One of the earliest and most philosophically grounded frameworks in the Russian grammatical tradition is the logical-grammatical approach, which classifies words according to their conceptual meaning. This method groups lexical items into abstract semantic categories—such as “entity,” “action,” and “attribute”—aligning grammatical classification with the structure of logical judgment. In contrast to morphology- or syntax-based approaches, the logical-grammatical model places primary emphasis on the semantic essence of a word, rather than its formal properties or syntactic distribution.

The most systematic articulation of this approach appears in Lomonosov’s *Rossijskaâ grammatika* (1755), where he proposed an eight-part taxonomy:

- names denoting entities (nouns),
- substitutes for names (pronouns),
- words expressing actions (verbs),
- participial forms combining verbal and nominal features,
- adverbs succinctly describing circumstances,
- prepositions indicating relationships between entities or actions,
- conjunctions linking concepts, and
- interjections conveying emotional responses.

This classification—based on a correlation between conceptual meaning and grammatical function—is widely regarded as the first comprehensive system of parts

of speech in Russian grammar. It has exerted a lasting influence on the intellectual history of Russian linguistic theory.

Lomonosov's system was later refined by grammarians such as Vostokov and Buslaev (1959), and his core triadic structure—nouns for entities, verbs for actions, and adjectives for attributes—remained a foundational model well into the early twentieth century.

Despite its historical significance, however, the concept-based model reveals critical limitations. Lexical meaning is not inherently stable and may shift according to context, rendering categorical boundaries fluid and sometimes ambiguous. Moreover, certain words resist neat classification into abstract semantic categories, resulting in inconsistencies and overlap. These challenges have led many Russian linguists to advocate for more integrated models—ones that account not only for semantic properties, but also for morphological form and syntactic function.

4.2 The morphological approach

In the Russian linguistic tradition, the morphological approach to part-of-speech classification centers on the formal realization of grammatical categories, with particular emphasis on patterns of inflection. This method was systematically developed by Fortunatov and later refined by scholars such as Ušakov (active in the 1930s) and Peterson (active in the mid-20th century). Fortunatov criticized earlier models for conflating semantic, syntactic, and morphological criteria, and instead advocated for a classification grounded strictly in formal morphological markers.

He proposed three overarching categories:

- Complete words (*polnye slova*), which exhibit inflection and possess independent lexical meaning. This category includes nouns, adjectives, and verbs, each further distinguished by specific inflectional features — such as person and tense for verbs, case for nouns, and gender– number–case agreement for adjectives.
- Partial words (*častičnye slova*), which lack inflection and function as grammatical operators. This group encompasses prepositions, conjunctions, and particles.
- Interjections (*meždometiâ*), which stand outside the grammatical system entirely,

functioning as autonomous lexical units that express emotional or reactive content.

This framework clarified the structural hierarchy of parts of speech by distinguishing content words from function words based on their inflectional behavior. Ušakov and Peterson further elaborated this model, underscoring inflectional potential and combinatory capacity as central diagnostic features. Their revised taxonomy reduced the traditional system to three streamlined categories—complete words, partial words, and interjections—providing a more transparent and formally coherent classification.

Separately, Peškovskij (1938) proposed a five-part model comprising nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and non-inflected words. Notably, he excluded infinitives as a separate part of speech and avoided further subdivision of function words. His classification, building on the form-focused model initiated by Durnovo (1925), emphasized structural economy and formal consistency.

Despite its merits, the morphological approach is not without limitations. Morphological markers, though valuable, do not adequately capture the full complexity of linguistic categorization. Šerba (1928), for example, cautioned that an exclusively form-based approach risks conflating distinct syntactic types—such as past-tense verbs and short-form adjectives—due to superficial formal resemblance, despite their fundamentally different syntactic roles. Similarly, numerals, while semantically indicating quantity, often lack regular inflection or mimic nominal forms, resulting in blurred categorial boundaries and occasional treatment as "mass nouns" or quasi-nominal expressions.

In conclusion, the morphological approach makes an important contribution to the theoretical understanding of part-of-speech classification, particularly in distinguishing lexical from functional categories through formal features. However, since grammatical form does not always align with semantic function or syntactic role, morphology alone cannot provide a complete or definitive account. A more comprehensive taxonomy requires the integration of morphological, semantic, and syntactic principles.

4.3 The syntactic approach

The syntactic approach classifies parts of speech based on the roles that words play within sentence structure. In Russian grammatical theory, this perspective was most comprehensively developed by Šahmatov, whose work had a lasting influence on subsequent grammatical inquiry. Rejecting reliance on morphological features alone, Šahmatov (1927) defined parts of speech in terms of their syntactic functions within the sentence, emphasizing their role in actual usage rather than relying solely on morphological features. Within this model, nouns are identified as words that fulfill naming functions, verbs as those expressing predication, and adjectives as modifiers or attributive elements. Thus, classification is anchored in a word's functional position within the syntactic architecture of the sentence.

Šahmatov outlined a four-way typology:

- *znamenatel'nye slova* (“meaningful words”),
- *neznamenatel'nye slova* (“non-meaningful words”),
- *služebnye slova* (“function words”), and
- *meždometiâ* (“interjections”).

The first group includes nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—lexical items that convey core semantic content. The second comprises pronouns and numerals, which function analogously to content words but lack independent lexical referentiality. The third group consists of grammatical operators such as prepositions, copulas, conjunctions, particles, and prefixes. The fourth, interjections, stands apart from the grammatical system altogether, serving primarily expressing emotional or reactive meaning.

This syntactic framework was designed to address the shortcomings of morphology-based classification and offers distinct advantages, particularly for typological comparison and diachronic analysis. A similar emphasis on syntactic function as a basis for grammatical categorization can also be found in the work of Mešaninov (1978), who examined the role of sentence elements in shaping word-class distinctions across various language stages. Syntactic functions tend to exhibit greater cross-linguistic regularity than morphological inflection. For example,

attributive roles may be fulfilled not only by adjectives but also by pronominal modifiers and ordinal numerals. Similarly, temporal and locative meanings may be conveyed through either adverbs or nominal constructions. Notably, comparative nanosyntactic analyses across English, Korean, and Russian highlight the variability of syntactic realization for similar semantic roles. Such analyses provide a fine-grained perspective on cross-linguistic categorization (Cho and Jung 2025).

Yet, despite its strengths, the syntactic approach is not without its limitations. Morphological form and syntactic function do not always align neatly, and disregarding semantic or morphological cues may result in misclassification. For instance, the nominative case typically signals the subject, but it may also appear in other syntactic roles; likewise, the accusative case can mark not only direct objects but also predicate complements. These overlaps complicate the mapping between syntactic roles and grammatical categories, often leading to ambiguous classifications. This is consistent with observations from ellipsis-focused studies, where the interface between syntactic structure and semantic interpretation proves crucial even when surface material is reduced or absent (Kim and Nykiel 2020). Furthermore, Šahmatov's strong emphasis on syntax has drawn criticism—most notably from Vinogradov—for downplaying the significance of morphological analysis and thereby disrupting the broader theoretical balance of grammatical description.

In sum, the syntactic approach provides a valuable framework for examining parts of speech as functional components within sentence structure. However, because syntactic behavior frequently interacts with—and occasionally contradicts—morphological and semantic properties, this approach is most effective when employed as part of a broader, integrative classification model.

4.4 Lexico-grammatical approach

The lexico-grammatical approach offers a more holistic framework for classifying parts of speech by integrating lexical meaning with grammatical function. Unlike models that focus exclusively on morphological form or syntactic role, this approach considers how words behave semantically, how they are morphologically realized, and how they combine syntactically within the structure of a sentence.

This method was developed within the Russian grammatical tradition by Šerba

and Vinogradov, both of whom argued that an adequate system of classification must move beyond surface-level grammatical features. They emphasized the importance of analyzing a word's semantic attributes, its paradigmatic morphological behavior, and its syntactic combinability as interconnected components. In doing so, they aimed to overcome the limitations of earlier frameworks that privileged either form or function in isolation. Instead, they advocated for a more nuanced and structurally coherent understanding of lexical categories—one that reflects the dynamic interplay between meaning, form, and usage in actual linguistic contexts.

4.4.1 Šerba's classification of parts of speech

In his influential 1928 study, Šerba challenged the adequacy of traditional part-of-speech classifications grounded in a single criterion, instead advocating for an experimental, structurally informed approach. He defined parts of speech as *leksiko-grammatičeskie razrâdy* (“lexico-grammatical categories”) and introduced a multidimensional framework that integrates both lexical semantics and grammatical behavior.

Šerba's model comprises three interrelated categories:

- *znamenatel'nye slova* (“meaningful words”), which include nouns, adverbs, verbs, numerals, and a distinctive class he termed the “category of state” (e.g., *žal'*, *pora*, *gotov*, *dolžen*);
- *služebnye slova* (“function words”), encompassing copulas (e.g., *byt'*), prepositions, particles, and conjunctions (coordinating, subordinating, additive, etc.);
- *meždometiâ* (“interjections”), consisting of words that convey subjective emotion and remain syntactically independent.

Of particular significance is Šerba's reclassification of items such as *žal'*, *pora*, *dolžen*, and *gotov*, which had previously been subsumed under predicative adverbs (*predikativnye narečîâ*). He argued that these constitute a distinct part of speech—the “category of state” (*kategoriâ sostoâniâ*)—because they function as predicates while exhibiting morphological and syntactic properties that set them apart from both verbs and adverbs.

For Šerba, the essence of a part of speech lies not in any single formal characteristic, but in a “bundle of formal features” (*pučok formal’nykh priznakov*). As he emphasized, no part of speech is completely uniform in its morphological structure. He therefore prioritized syntactic combinability and semantic distribution over strictly morphemic form. For example, although *kakadu* (“cockatoo”) lacks typical Russian noun endings, its syntactic behavior—*moj Kakadu* (“my cockatoo”), *kakadu sidit* (“the cockatoo is sitting”), *kakadu moego brata* (“my brother’s cockatoo”)—clearly marks it as a noun.

This line of reasoning led Šerba to a pivotal conclusion: parts of speech should not be viewed as fixed or universally applicable categories, but as outcomes of interaction among semantic, morphological, and syntactic dimensions. He further asserted that any classification scheme inevitably involves interpretive judgment, and thus, part-of-speech categorization should be regarded as a descriptive and heuristic instrument—practical in nature and inherently context-dependent, rather than strictly scientific.

4.4.2 Vinogradov’s classification of parts of speech

Among twentieth-century Russian linguists, Vinogradov is particularly notable for his emphasis on the integrated use of morphological, syntactic, and semantic criteria in part-of-speech classification. Rejecting models grounded solely in form or function, he proposed a reconstructed framework based on a comprehensive analysis of a word’s internal structure and meaning. As he observed (Vinogradov 1986: 29), any precise definition of a part of speech must begin with a typological analysis of word classes—one that considers lexical composition, grammatical realization, syntactic role, and the ways in which language encodes reality.

Vinogradov defined a part of speech as a *leksiko-grammatičeskij razrâd slova* (“lexico-grammatical class of a word”) and outlined four primary categories (Vinogradov 1986: 34–35):

- *Slova-nazvaniâ* (“naming words”): This category includes nouns and pronouns, both of which denote concrete or abstract entities.
- *Časticy reči* (“grammatical particles”): Encompassing copulas and auxiliaries, these words do not carry referential meaning but serve essential grammatical functions. They occupy a transitional space between vocabulary and syntax.

- *Modal'nye slova* ("modal words"): These express the speaker's attitude or the modality of the statement. Typically used parenthetically, they operate outside the core syntactic structure.
- *meždometiâ* ("interjections"): These function independently of grammatical structure, conveying emotional or expressive content.

Vinogradov introduced this classification in response to earlier schemes that privileged either inflectional morphology or lexical semantics. Central to his model is the interaction between semantic content and grammatical function, which he articulated through five key criteria (Vinogradov 1986: 41):

- a. differences in syntactic function within the sentence;
- b. morphological structure and patterns of inflection;
- c. the conceptual specificity of lexical meaning;
- d. the way language reflects external reality; and
- e. the presence or absence of dependent grammatical categories.

A word, then, is assigned to a particular part of speech if it shares general grammatical meanings (e.g., substance, process, state), conforms to similar morphological patterns (e.g., gender, number, case), and occupies parallel syntactic positions (e.g., subject, predicate, object). Later developments in Russian grammatical theory, such as those by Polivanova (2008), expanded on Vinogradov's framework by formalizing the notion of morphological paradigms and further systematizing the relationships among word classes based on their formal and functional properties. Importantly, Vinogradov acknowledged that syntactic roles are context-sensitive and that the boundaries between categories are often fluid. For this reason, he rejected monolithic classification principles, advocating instead for a layered and integrative model. He also underscored the dynamic nature of grammatical systems, emphasizing that part-of-speech inventories evolve over time in response to internal structural change.

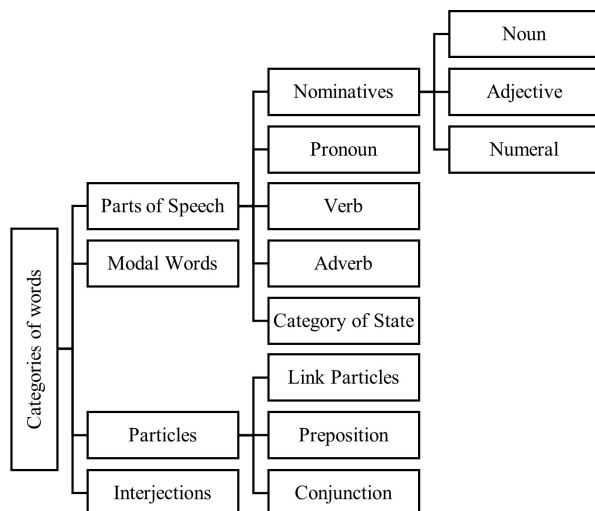


Figure 1. Lexico-grammatical classification of Russian word categories based on Vinogradov (1986)

Vinogradov's model, depicted in Figure 1, presents a hierarchical organization of Russian word categories informed by lexico-grammatical principles. It delineates four broad types—parts of speech, modal words, particles, and interjections—each further subdivided into specific lexical classes. Within the main class of parts of speech, for example, nouns, adjectives, and numerals form the nominative group; verbs and adverbs constitute separate categories, while the category of state (e.g., *žalko*, *pora*) is treated independently. Grammatical particles are broken down into copulas, prepositions, and conjunctions. This model clearly reflects Vinogradov's attempt to synthesize functional, morphological, and semantic dimensions into a unified classificatory framework.

Ultimately, Vinogradov viewed the part-of-speech system not as a static construct but as a dynamic and historically contingent aspect of grammar. Rather than merely preserving traditional taxonomies, he sought to build a more flexible and internally consistent model—one that better reflects the complexities of actual language use. His work remains a landmark contribution to the theoretical systematization of Russian grammar.

5. Limitations of traditional part-of-speech systems and the need for reevaluation

As the preceding sections have shown, parts of speech have traditionally been classified according to morphological, syntactic, and semantic criteria. Yet none of these approaches, when applied in isolation, has achieved universal acceptance. This has led to mounting skepticism about the very notion of “part of speech,” and has even prompted the fundamental question of whether words can be classified in any scientifically rigorous way at all.

The morphological criterion, while one of the most historically entrenched methods, encounters serious limitations—especially when applied to uninflected word classes such as adverbs, particles, and conjunctions. The syntactic criterion, though offering a relatively stable basis by appealing to sentence-level functions, is often undermined by functional overlaps: the same syntactic role can be performed by multiple lexical categories, and conversely, a single part of speech may serve multiple functions. The semantic criterion is no less problematic, as lexical meanings are often context-sensitive, fluid, and difficult to delimit in categorical terms.

These challenges are particularly evident in Russian grammatical scholarship. Šerba, Šahmatov, and Vinogradov each developed part-of-speech systems based on different organizing principles, yielding markedly divergent taxonomies. Šahmatov proposed a fourteen-part system; Kudrâvskij, only four; and the *Akademičeskaâ grammatika* recognizes ten. That such variation exists within analyses of a single language underscores the extent to which classification schemes are shaped more by theoretical commitments than by objective linguistic necessity.

Certain word classes pose persistent problems for categorization—notably pronouns, numerals, and infinitives. Pronouns frequently mirror the syntactic behavior of nouns or adjectives. Numerals may assume nominal or adjectival functions, depending on context. The status of infinitives remains particularly contested: should they be viewed as a distinct part of speech or as a subcategory of verbs? Such indeterminacies point to the inadequacy of treating parts of speech as fixed, discrete categories.

Steblyn-Kamenskij (1974) offered a forceful critique of such assumptions, asserting that “our understanding of the grammatical essence of words is not yet deep enough to allow us to classify them scientifically.” He likened conventional classifications to

sorting people by hair color or social rank—arguing that where the basis of categorization is arbitrary, scientific legitimacy is forfeited. Similarly, Šerba (1928) acknowledged that while word classes can indeed be identified, the very concept of a “part of speech” is not rooted in fully objective principles, but is inevitably shaped by the analyst’s interpretive choices.

From these considerations, three central conclusions emerge:

- Part-of-speech classification cannot rest on a single criterion; rather, it must synthesize lexical meaning, grammatical form, and syntactic behavior.
- Because languages differ structurally, no universally valid system of parts of speech can be applied across typological boundaries.
- Even within a single language, part-of-speech categories evolve historically; any classification scheme must remain adaptable to structural and diachronic change.

In short, while the concept of “part of speech” continues to serve as a useful heuristic for grammatical analysis, its status as an objective, immutable linguistic category remains deeply contested. Efforts to define and classify parts of speech must navigate a careful balance between descriptive utility and epistemological rigor—an ongoing tension that continues to inform and invigorate linguistic theory. As emphasized in Živov, Plotnikova, and Serebrennikov (1990), linguistic classification systems are inherently heuristic and reflect the theoretical assumptions of the analyst, rather than any universal ontological reality.

6. Conclusion

The classification of parts of speech remains a fundamental and unresolved issue in contemporary linguistic theory. As typological inquiry increasingly moves beyond the Indo-European language family and engages with a broader array of linguistic systems, it has become clear that traditional, Eurocentric classification models are inadequate for capturing the structural and functional diversity of human language. This expanded perspective calls for a critical reassessment of the principles by which word classes are defined and organized.

While cross-linguistic studies suggest that syntactic function displays greater

stability across languages than morphological form or word-formation processes, even this consistency is limited by language-specific constructions. Within this typological landscape, shared grammatical meaning—rather than formal similarity alone—emerges as the most promising criterion for classification. Yet traditional models have rarely applied this principle consistently, resulting in blurred boundaries and persistent overlap among major lexical classes such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

The comparative analysis presented in this study reveals that the core conflict among morphological, syntactic, and semantic approaches lies in their differing assumptions about what constitutes a part of speech. For example, Šahmatov's syntactic-functional framework classifies words based on sentence position and function, whereas Šerba's lexico-grammatical approach emphasizes the cumulative interaction of semantic invariants, morphological realization, and syntactic distribution. These divergent perspectives highlight the impossibility of a single-criterion system and underscore the need for a multi-parameter model that reconciles descriptive clarity with structural nuance.

A possible direction for future models is a hierarchical classification that anchors word classes in syntactic behavior, supplemented by morphological and semantic diagnostics. This would be particularly effective for analyzing borderline categories—such as modal words or the so-called “category of state”—which resist binary inclusion in traditional systems. Instead of rigid taxonomies, linguists might pursue models that account for prototypicality, gradient membership, and contextual function.

Ultimately, this study supports the view that parts of speech are not objective linguistic entities but interpretive constructs, shaped by theoretical orientation, descriptive goals, and language-internal dynamics. Rather than seeking definitive borders, linguists must acknowledge and articulate the fluidity and multiplicity of grammatical categories. A robust part-of-speech framework must therefore be both internally coherent and typologically flexible, grounded in the interplay of form, meaning, and use. Only through such an integrative model can parts of speech serve as reliable tools for grammatical analysis and broader theoretical insight into the nature of language.

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