The First Word Was Not a Noun

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Introduction

Research on the origin of language has placed constraints on the time, location, selection pressures, and in what steps language could have emerged. We can now ask questions such as, **"In the evolution of language, which syntactic category emerged first?"**

"Nouns came first."	**"Verbs came first."**
Adam Smith ([Smith 1767] Land 1977)	A. S. Diamond (1959)
Charles Li and	
Jean-Marie Hombert (2002)	
Erkki Luuk (2009)	

Luuk (2009) outlines eleven reasons why nouns would predate verbs, including:

• Verbs presuppose the nouns they act upon
• Children's early vocabularies are dominated by nouns (although he notes this might not be a universal trait)
• The first stage of second language learners' acquisition features noun-based utterances that lack verb/argument structure
• There are more nouns than verbs

There is a problem, though, with positing a 'first' syntactic category at all; this is the topic of this poster.
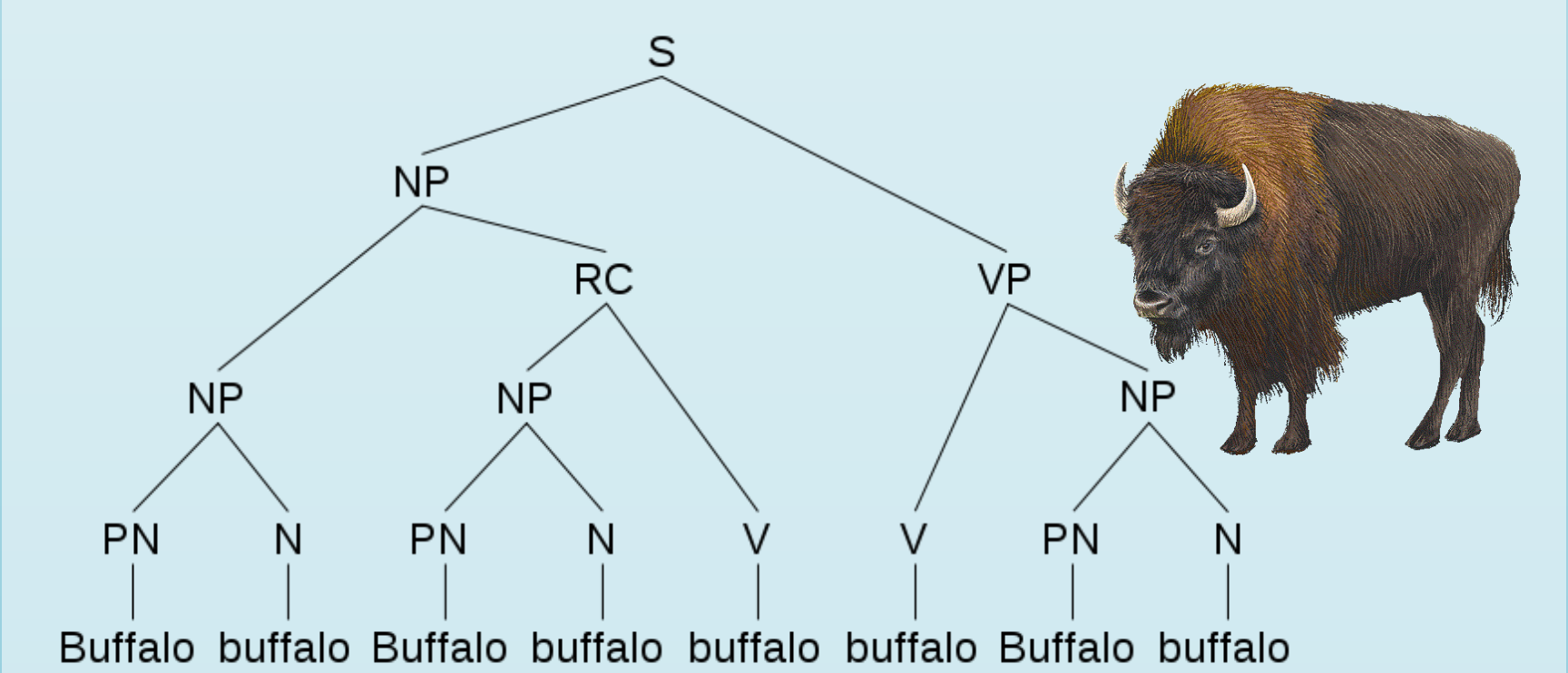
Fig 1. This sentence is grammatical. Can you understand it?

How to define 'syntactic category'?

All languages contain syntactic categories, although exactly which categories, as well as their behaviour, differ. Historically they have been distinguished in different ways (Evans and Green 2006):

1) Semantics   **2)** Morphology   **3)** Syntactic relations

In many languages, the same word can be used in different syntactic categories; for example, in Wakashan languages, almost any word root can exist in any open-class part of speech (Gil 2000). In English, too, words such as 'love' can exist as a noun, verb or adjective:

"All you need is **love**." (noun)
"I honestly **love** you." (verb)
"These are **love** songs." (adjective)

The semantics of a word therefore does not define its syntactic category. Because of this, syntactic categories are attributed to words by their relationships to other words in a sentence.

Hug!

Fig 2. Is it possible to know if this baby has uttered a noun or a verb?

A word in isolation is category-less.

If a word is attributed its syntactic category by its relationship to other words, and it is an isolated word, it is then simply without category. It is the use of a word that gives it its syntactic category, and outside of a syntactic situation it does not attain that category.

It wouldn't be until a category was juxtaposed with another, that a contrast would give rise to what we would call different parts of speech.

Conclusion: the first word

Luuk (2009) really only argues that verbs probably did not arise before nouns. These points do not rule out the fact that they could have emerged at the same time.

Because a word in isolation is category-less, I argue that there could be no 'first category', because a linguistic relationship is needed for a word to be attributed a category. When syntactic categories first arose, probably as a way of demonstrating these relationships between words, there would have to be a minimum of two to exist. Otherwise any utterance would be category-less.
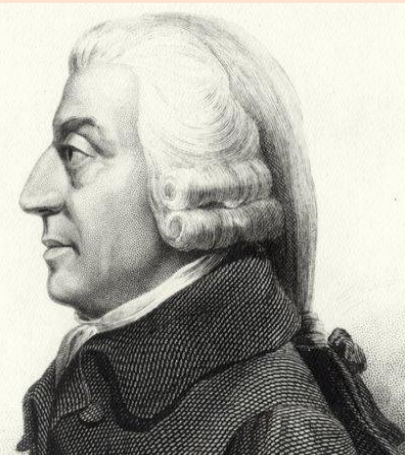
Fig 3. The economist Adam Smith wrote how nouns would have been the first to emerge.

So the first word was not a noun, or a verb, or an adjective... it would only acquire a syntactic category in relation to another utterance. That would mean the emergence of a syntactic category would have to coincide with another, and no language could exist that has simply 'one' syntactic category.

References

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