

Foreword

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The cognitive principles which govern linguistic behavior seem to be the same as those that govern any other kind of human behavior.

Most of the issues investigating the intriguing subject of natural categories, though inspired by Wittgenstein's linguistic thought, have essentially been stimulated by linguistics and its recent contribution to cognitive psychology. Namely, the starting point of this field of research can be seen in the pioneering book on color terms in the languages of the world by Berlin and Kay.

The taxonomy by means of which a speakers community represents and classifies the colors of the outside world varies from one language to another: some shades of green can also be perceived as a gradation of yellow, and a shade of orange can be interpreted as a gradation of red. According to the results presented in Berlin and Kay's (1969) innovating book, speakers substantially agree in recognizing the basic color prototypes. In other words, if we ask many different speakers to mark the exactly boundary between red and yellow, everyone will probably indicate a different point in the color shade; otherwise, everyone will surely mark the same points when asked to recognize a good example of red or yellow. It follows that color categories are fuzzy categories with a center - the prototype - and some marginal areas (the periphery). The center is discrete, whereas the periphery is fuzziest. A peripheral member can be assigned to one category or another, which is to say that it can be interpreted and classified as a shade of a color or as a contiguous shade, depending on many different and varying conditions (such as, *i.a.*, the individual encyclopedic knowledge of the speakers). The bat can be classified as a bird, but also as a mouse: in German, in fact, bat is *Fledermaus*, that is to say 'a fluttering mouse'.

It is undoubtedly easier to grasp lexical instances because of their macroscopic character. But morphological categories seem to be governed by the same cognitive principles which have been observed at lexical level. Italian, it is well-known, has a very productive class of diminutive suffixes, such as *-ino*, *-ello*, *-etto*. The central meaning of the morpheme is obvious: it expresses the smallness of a physical referent

(*paese* "village" > *paesino* 'small village', Taylor 1989:145). But the diminutive can also metaphorically designate "an attitude of affection or tenderness on the part of the speaker" (Taylor 1989:145) or, in some other cases, an attitude of depreciation. Therefore, the Italian diminutive *librino* can be interpreted, depending on the context, as an interesting but short book, as well as a book not very worthy of publication. On the basis of previous examples, one may argue that the noetic values of the diminutive represent a scalar category whose prototypical and central sense is smallness. The peripheral meanings of the diminutive are associated to this core sense by metaphorical or metonymic links.

The most innovating property of polysemous categories lies in the particular kind of relationship which links individual members to the category: each member can be arranged in a gradual scale, whereas the classical pattern was built around an axiomatic assumption (each member either belongs to the category or does not: there are no ambiguous cases). Depending on this property, the peripheral areas of different categories may approach each other, or sometimes even overlap. In this way, the marginal entities may be classified in a probabilistic manner. This approach makes it easier to understand - and sometimes solve - some intricate questions of synchronic and diachronic linguistics.

The present issue has been conceived to demonstrate the usefulness of the prototype pattern in linguistics. In order to make the volume as comprehensive as possible on the matter of prototype theory and its crucial contributions to linguistic description and classification, we have selected contributions which affect the various levels of grammar (phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon and semantics), sharing the basic point of view of prototype category.

Some of the papers verify the applicability of cognitive principles to the study of lexicon. D.A. Cruse focusses on the problem of lexical relations, proposing a theoretical distinction between a 'core' feature which controls membership and a set of 'cosmetic' features, related only to 'goodness' of category. D. Geeraerts' contribution discusses the problem of lexical definability (and the connected problems of monosemy and polysemy), on the basis of a corpus consisting of 9000 Dutch clothing terms. G. Kleiber analyzes the psychological notion of *niveau de base* and its relationship with lexical semantics, in an attempt to discover the linguistic properties of the basic lexical terms. A. Wierzbicka, illustrating her conclusions with some data from the so-called 'primitive' languages, treats the conceptual and linguistic notion of 'kind of' and its crucial role in the taxonomic and linguistic representation of the real world.

Another set of papers applies prototype theory to morphological problems of nominal and verbal systems and to the complex question of defining grammatical categories. S. Giannini examines the diachronic process of grammatical polarization in evolution of some Italian dialects

gender systems, reconstructing its Late Latin roots. R. Lazzeroni proposes a reinterpretation of person category in the Indo-European verbal system, analyzing the modal functions it normally expresses. P. Ramat and D. Ricca explore the possibility of a prototypical definition of the conflicting category of adverb, testing its theoretical validity through a crosslinguistic and typological study.

Two of the articles discussed are concerned with the applicability of the notion of prototype to syntactic categories. J.R. Taylor shows how some syntactic constructions, namely possessives and nominal compounds in English, may exhibit the same properties as the prototype categories of lexical semantics. M.E. Winters illustrates differences (but also surprising similarities) between two theories of syntax (Government and Binding and Cognitive Linguistics), examining the evolution of English interrogative/relative pronouns.

G.S. Nathan finally explores the internal structure of phonological inventories, demonstrating that prototypicality principles are responsible for the fact that inventories have shapes.

Passing proofs, we would sincerely like to thank the scholars who accepted our invitation: their participation has made it possible to collect a rich and articulated volume, providing the reader with a real 'state of the art' in the field of cognitive linguistics. It is our belief that the data and interpretive solutions proposed here clearly testify that cognitive and prototype theory represents more than a promise for theoretical linguistics, both at a synchronic and at a diachronic level.