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WORD MEANING AND CULTURAL CONCEPTUALIZATION: CROSS-LINGUISTIC VARIATION AND THE ROLE OF CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

A language is not simply a tool for communication but it is also a cognitive device. Its function is to serve the communication and transfer of mental content between speakers in a cultural community. This is based on the conceptual category system represented by the lexicon of a language shared by the members of a culture. But this system changes with time due to the speakers' changing perspectives related to their natural and socio-cultural environment, and this will yield culturally influenced conceptualizations embodied in the linguistic system of conceptual categories. As a result, there are often considerable cross-linguistic differences in the semantics of seemingly corresponding lexical items because due to the perspectival nature of lexical meaning there is often no complete overlap in the conceptualizations comprised in these lexical elements.

KEYWORDS

lexical semantics, categorization, conceptualization, cultural perspectives, cross-linguistic differences

INTRODUCTION

In cognitive linguistics the approach to semantics is founded on the explanation that "meaning is identified as the conceptualization associated with linguistic expressions" (Langacker, 2013, p. 4). Based on this, the function of the lexicon of a language is to code a relatively well-defined and finite system of culturally significant conceptual categories relying on the conceptualizations of the speakers of the language (Blank, 1999; Tomasello, 1999, pp. 169-170; Tomasello, 2003, p. 51). Thus, in cognitive approaches to language it is a common view that language is an instrument for the categorization of experience (Geeraerts, 1997, pp. 7-8, 20; Tomasello, 1999, p. 166). In line with this, Croft and Cruse (2004, p. 74) explain the relation between language and categorization in the following way: "Language works in terms of generalities, that is, in terms of categories. Any linguistic expression, however detailed, in the end represents only a category of referents.

All lexical elements categorize, that is, content words clearly name categories, but the fact that language is a system of categories is apparent not only in the case of content words. Functional elements (e.g., articles, prepositions, suffixes, etc.) also categorize reality, as they are very general categorizations of relations between non-linguistic phenomena as we functionally perceive them. As Anderson (1988, p. 93) points out, the categorizing function of language reveals itself especially in the fact that it stabilizes conceptual structure against fragmentation.

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Phenomena of reality must be designated not only for the sake of discourse but fixed conceptualizations and stabilized conceptual structures are essential for economical and effective thought. Coding in language evidently facilitates the activation of the appropriate cognitive routines and thus contributes to a category reaching a degree of entrenchment, through which it achieves unit status (Langacker, 1987, p. 100).

This function of language is true not only from a cognitive but also from a socio-cultural perspective. The linguistic coding of conceptual categories of cultural significance contributes to the creation of a "social super-model" (Csányi, 1992, p. 38), that is, a cognitive model of reality shared by all members of a social group. The common repertoire of conceptual categories stored in a linguistic form in the minds of the individuals of a speech community provides the 'building blocks' of this model, which essentially constitutes a huge part of the culture of the community. Not only are humans able to share their conceptualizations of individual experiences through this common model, but language serves the cultural inheritance of an adaptive system of conceptual categories, which comprises the experience and knowledge of earlier generations (Tomasello, 1999, p. 8).

However, the well-definedness and finiteness of linguistically coded cultural categories is only theoretically true, since the category system coded in the lexicon of a language can never be captured in a completely motionless state, since changes in the environment will influence the ways speakers conceptualize the entities of their natural and socio-cultural environment (Croft, 2000). Therefore, new expressions continuously emerge in the lexicon and existing expressions tend to acquire new meanings as a result of the synchronic language use of the speakers reflecting their conceptualizations, which gives rise through this to new conceptual categories that are shared by a whole speech community and have thus cultural validity (e.g., Blank, 2003; Geeraerts, 1997, 2010; Traugott & Dasher, 2002; Winters 2010). Tomasello, 1999, pp. 8-9) explains this in the following way: "Linguistic symbols [...] embody the ways that previous generations of human beings in a social group [...] chose to construe things out of a number of other ways they might have construed them [...]." As it follows from this, the conceptual category system representing cultural knowledge is inherited across generations via language (Clark, 2005). These circumstances provide the source for cross-linguistic differences in lexical semantic structure and account for the fact that in many cases, when contrasting languages, there is no complete overlap in meaning between lexical items seemingly corresponding in their semantics.

It follows from the above, that the most conspicuous function of language is the communication of conceptual structures that have been coordinated through speaker-hearer interaction and have thus become conventionalized in a speech community (Clark, 1996, pp. 325; Traugott 1999, 2012; Traugott & Dasher 2002, p. 5). While communication is by definition social activity, cognition as such is a subjective process within an individual's mind. However, it can be made social to the extent to which individually acquired knowledge can be made collective in a culture. The sharing of such knowledge is based on information transfer via linguistic communication, and the members of a culture participate in social cognition to the extent that they rely on social interaction for efficient contact with their environment. Social cognition is "[t]he application of intelligence to the review of social information and the exploitation and management of social relationships toward attainment of short- and long-term goals" (Quiatt & Reynolds, 1993, p. 141).

Thus, language is the most powerful instrument of social cognition and as such it is an adaptation for the representation and transmission of cultural categories (Tomasello, 2000, p. 42). These categories represent a community's shared knowledge of their natural and socio-

cultural environment necessary for functional and adaptive interaction. Environment in this context means the segment of reality that a social group or an individual experiences and interacts with, including other individuals and interactions of and with them. The categorization will be based on the perspectives the community takes on these changes (and in fact on any aspect of reality in general) in an effort of interpreting and understanding the world. Furthermore, trying to make sense of the world may lead to 'subjective' changes when novel perspectives towards familiar phenomena are adopted, or the mental reality of the community may change due to the dynamism of culture, even without changes in objective reality (Tomasello, 1999, p. 12).

COGNITION AND CATEGORIZATION AND THEIR RELATION TO LANGUAGE

Cognition " is the activity of knowing: the acquisition, organization and use of knowledge" (Neisser, 1976, p. 1). This knowledge is stored in categories, and categorization involves the cognitive processes of acquisition and organization of knowledge, that is, the processes of recognizing and sorting entities of the environment into types according to similarities, which is crucial for interaction with and orientation in our environment. "Categorization, the most basic of cognitive processes" (Bybee, 2010, p. 201), is primarily based on sensory data, that is, on perception: at the most basic level of categorization similarities are primarily recognized on the basis of the perceptual features of the entities of the environment. Consequently, cognition must be of a relativistic nature as far as the environmental information relevant for our interaction with our environment is concerned. The reason for this is that even the same environment may require different functional interactions and thus different 'views' of it on different occasions depending on a multitude of various internal and external factors. In order for our cognitive system to be able to efficiently cope with these requirements, perception cannot be a simple objective amassing of information about the world but must function as a selective filtering process. Hence, cognition is not merely knowing reality, but organizing and using the acquired knowledge of reality in a way that facilitates our most optimal adaptation to the particular circumstances. This necessarily involves an interpretation of reality in accordance with our specific human way of interactive functioning in the environment, and in addition, the particular components of the culture we live in and the actual role they play in that culture. This is the basis of Rosch's (1978: 29) explanation of how language categorizes basic level physical objects, which she formulated in the following way:

> […] the perceived world [... is ...] not a metaphysical world without a knower. What kinds of attributes can be perceived are [...] species-specific. [...] What attributes will be perceived [...] is undoubtedly determined by many factors having to do with the functional needs of the knower interacting with the physical and social environment.

Thus, as already mentioned above, cognition has the function of facilitating and guiding the orientation and interaction in both the natural and socio-cultural environment in which the speakers of a language live. This means that human cognition, being largely based on language, is special with respect to its task of processing knowledge. Language plays an important cognitive role by providing the functional knowledge necessary for adaptive behavior in that environment depending on the varying conditions and circumstances that operate in any human cultural environment. Therefore, the categories in which we see the world do not reflect "the convergence of our ideas and the truth about the world", as Chomsky (1988, p. 158) claimed, but the cognitive function of language is to provide the particular cultural perspective that is

appropriate for our functional interaction in and with our environment. Thus, human categorization is not only based on experience with and perception of the objective world but to a large part also on cultural conceptualization: "Human categorization is essentially a matter of both human experience and imagination – of perception, motor activity, and culture" (Lakoff, 1987, p. 8). This is the reason why linguistic categorization reflects conventionalized perspectives on our environment that are shared by a whole cultural community and have become conventionalized in the form of linguistic meaning, which is based on conceptualizations of reality not objectively corresponding to it but reflecting a characteristic human way of understanding (Johnson 1987, p. 175; Lakoff 1987, p. 280). These conceptualizations originate in the cognitive functioning starting out from perception and expounding to complex abstract conceptual structures in language (Langacker, 1987, p. 98; Langacker, 1991, p. 2).

Thus, linguistic meaning ultimately originates in the human interpretation of reality reflecting the functional categorization of our experience of the world, which results in various differences in semantic structure across languages. In this respect Johnson (1987, p. 174) explained that, "[m]eaning is always a matter of human understanding, which constitutes our experience of a common world that we can make some sense of", and therefore, the meanings of lexical items comprise "[c]ategories [... which …] involve imaginative structures of understanding [...] and their nature is such that they could not correspond directly to anything in reality external to human experience" (Johnson, 1987, p. xi). These "imaginative structures of understanding" are to a great extent influenced by cultural factors because the process of category formation is mostly functional in nature and serves a speech community's cultural adaptation to its environment relying on the cultural perspectives taken by the speakers. It follows from this, that "we cannot explain categorization simply as a cognitive process – culture plays an equally important role" (Kövecses, 2006, p. 46). Since linguistic categorization is largely a matter of cultural understanding of the world, or as Rosch (1978, p. 28) put it, "the formation of categories […] mean[s] their formation in a culture", the category systems found in different languages often show considerable variations (Sharafian, 2011, p. 48).

Thus, if categorization is 'subjective' and 'relative' in the sense of cognition being a process of developing an adaptive functional 'view' of the environment, and if categories are products of this cognitive adaptation, then linguistic meaning, the cultural manifestation of conceptual categories, will reflect the ways humans experience and understand reality, which will show differences across languages. Meanings will function as devices that help us understand particular aspects of our special human environment and the world around us. They categorize reality for us in an adaptive manner and facilitate our understanding and knowing the world in a way that is functional both for our human physical interaction with the environment and for our cultural and abstract mental life. Geeraerts (1997, p. 8) talks in this respect about "[t]he *perspectival nature of linguistic meaning* [, which] implies that the world is not objectively reflected in language". Words do not simply express conceptual categories, but their meanings represent social conventional perspectives on parts of our experiential reality (Tomasello, 1999, p. 116).

Since the cognitive function of language requires the socially shared category system to be an adaptive interpretation of reality, there must be good reasons why meanings of different languages specify the categories they do and not others (Clark, 1996, p. 340). What kind of conceptual categories will be socially adaptive and as a result achieve cultural significance to become coded in a language is influenced by several factors. Comparing the semantic structures of different languages, it becomes immediately obvious that different languages impose

different categorizations on the world (Clark 2005, p. 460). Due to the general function of cognition and the cognitive function of language, these differences result from the way different languages adapt to their environments. An appropriate cognitive orientation in a given socio-cultural environment requires a particular category system. Due to this even the same phenomenon may often be construed differently by different peoples and cultures because their different environments demand different ways of adapting to it. Because of this, linguistic categorization very often reflects a rather intricate and complex cognitive representation of the social and cultural environment (Tomasello, 1999, p. 167).

Thus, word meanings are culturally conventionalized conceptualizations, and this is true even in the case of basic level terms. These lexical items name physical objects that are supposed to be categorized via perception and thus are supposed to have an individual imagistic representation based mostly on shape perception, which suggests their universality. Therefore, in a taxonomic hierarchy the basic level of categorization is special with respect to its status in our perception, and as a result this level is the most inclusive level of classification at which shape perception plays a defining role (Rosch et al., 1976; Rosch, 1978). It is on this basis that Gallese and Lakoff (2005, p. 446) explain that "words for basic-level categories tend to be recognisable via gestalt perception". While it is true that gestalt perception plays an important role in their recognizability and therefore there is a great likelihood of identifying them in this manner, the effects of perception may often get modified through conceptualization in linguistic meaning, and so even the linguistic basic level often deviates from the perceptual basic level (Győri, 2017). This state of affairs is due to the fact that the way humans categorize reality via language is not only a matter of perception and motor activity with our physical world but also a matter of the culture we live in (Lakoff, 1987, p. 8). These are the conditions that will frequently cause conspicuous cross-linguistic differences between languages.

The above can be illustrated with the following obvious example. In English the categories expressed by the lexical items *wardrobe*, *cupboard*, *closet*, and *nightstand* clearly occupy the basic level right below the superordinate level conceptual category FURNITURE. As opposed to this, in Hungarian the corresponding terms for the four English lexical items are *ruhásszekrény* ('clothes wardrobe'), *konyhaszekrény* ('kitchen wardrobe'), *beépített szekrény* ('built in wardrobe'), and *éjjeliszekrény* ('night wardrobe'), evidently expressing subordinate categories below the basic level category SZEKRÉNY, to which BÚTOR (= FURNITURE) is the superordinate category. This is not only an example illustrating the incongruity between categorization through perception from which the imagistic representation derives, but it is also an illustration for the case when this incongruity causes a variation in the taxonomical structuring of a part of the lexical field between different languages. Thus, cross-linguistic comparisons of different languages show that culture influences language, i.e., cultural conceptualizations often become encoded in the semantic structure of a language.

CULTURAL CONCEPTUALIZATION AND CROSS-LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES IN THE SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF THE LEXICON

On the basis of the above, the question arises where the different perspectives and conceptualizations come from, that is, how and why they emerge in the different language. Since categorization is not an objective cognitive process, but it is always the environment of a given culture in which human conceptual categories emerge, and the attributes of phenomena considered important for categorization reflect the characteristics of this particular culture. The different cultural environments exert their effect on individual languages through cognition shaping the category structure of the particular language. This is the process when changes in

the environment relevant at the social and cultural level of a speech community will call for an adaptation of language to these changes. When cognizing reality, our conceptual system continuously exhibits an interplay between stability and flexibility in order to fit stable conditions but at the same time also to be able to adapt to novel ones (Glushko et al., 2008, p. 133; Medin & Barsalou, 1987, p. 468; Smith & Medin, 1981, p. 10). Language – due to its social cognitive role – must always reflect the changing reality of the particular culture in order to function as an efficient cognitive device. As such an instrument, language must possess the appropriate mechanisms for adapting to these changes and will thus always provide an interpretation of the world that proves to be functional in the environment of the given culture. Cognitive adaptation to such changes is accomplished through changes in the category system of the particular language, which means the emergence of new categories and – contingently – the dropping out of old ones.

If the changes prevail, the new conceptualization is likely to become current in a cultural community due to its usefulness and functionality. Such prevailing changes will change the old category system: new categories will be added while older ones might drop out of the system as their conceptualizations may lose their usefulness and hence their validity. In spite of this apparent circularity inherent in categorization, an established category system seems to be the more fundamental side of the coin because the ordering process, in both of its senses, must be rooted in such a system. Thus, categorizing novel entities and in this way taking novel perspectives and conceptualizing phenomena in novel ways always depend on familiar knowledge stored in already existing categories, perspectives and conceptualizations, i.e., on already existing knowledge in the form of the elements and structure of the lexicon of a language (Langacker, 2008, p. 17).

However, this experience and knowledge is subject to change over time contingent on changes of cultural relevance in the (natural and socio-cultural) environment of the speakers. For this reason language must be flexible enough to accommodate such changes and must entail mechanisms which can perpetually adapt the category system of the language to the changing communicative and cognitive needs of the speakers. Thus, although language is always in motion and changes are continuously going on in all parts of the system, it is the lexicon that appears to be the most unstable in this respect as compared to other parts. Naturally, such changes in the lexicon are simultaneously cognitive and linguistic processes (in addition to also being a socio-cultural process) and involve devices of both kinds. The linguistic tools for the adjustment of the category system are primarily derivation, compounding and meaning extension, depending also on the morphological typology of the particular language. The productivity of these mechanisms ensures the possibility of spontaneous creation of new expressions in the case of immediate communicative needs, which may arise due to the lack of appropriate conventional expressions in the given context. When none of the established conventional lexical items are deemed appropriate, the speaker resorts to the modification of the meanings of these lexemes by using them in a transferred and figurative sense, which happens most of the time unconsciously in language use (Geeraerts, 1997, p. 107). It is this process in which cross-linguistic differences mostly originate.

As Traugott (2012) has argued, it is always this type of synchronic linguistic activity that is ultimately responsible for changes in a language. Such creative language use codes new conceptual categories, most of the time for temporary application owing to the spontaneity of the expression, because the speaker wants to activate parallel cognitive routines in the hearer's mind. For this aim the speaker resorts to conversational implicature and invites specific inferences by this in the hearer through extending the conventional meaning of a word to obtain

an occasional new meaning (Traugott, 1999, 2012; Traugott & Dasher, 2002, p. 5). If contextual circumstances for the new usage persist as a result of enduring changes in the socio-cultural environment of the speech community, the newly applied expression may become conventionalized with time as a new lexical item and constitute a new meaning in the language. In this way new cultural categories will get established and coded in the process of lexical change.

The linguistic mechanisms that handle adaptation to the changing conditions of the particular environment and also to the changes in social attitudes and perspectives toward that environment are based on specific cognitive mechanisms. These mechanisms underlie the synchronic linguistic activity of spontaneous meaning creation in the innovative use of conventional expressions. It is with their help that we cognize our reality: we create new categories, introduce new perspectives, and re-arrange our conceptual structures. This flexible and adaptive linguistic categorizing behavior is manifest in the creation of new meanings comprising new culturally motivated conceptualizations of reality, which is also the source of the polysemous structure of the lexicon (Geeraerts, 1997, p. 123-124). Thus, it is no wonder that a cross-linguistic comparison will reveal that the polysemy of lexical elements shows a vast dissimilarity in different languages.

Since the work of Johnson (1987) and Lakoff (1987), it is commonly accepted that metaphor and metonymy are the fundamental cognitive devices (basically the linguistic manifestations of analogy and association) with the help of which we make sense of our world by creating new conceptualizations. These devices are the ones mostly involved in the creation of new meanings, which clearly relies on knowledge included in the conceptualizations of already existing lexical items (as mentioned above) in a given language, which further contributes to the cross-linguistic differences in the semantic structure of the lexicon deriving from this process of cultural category formation.

Thus, linguistically coded categories will provide the input to cognitive mechanisms of metaphorical and metonymical transfer when new experience or new perspectives are conceptualized. Consequently, lexical change does not only show how cognition influences what categories will be created in language. It also shows how the linguistically established categories exert their influence on further categorizations resulting in cross-linguistic differences, which may even generate a linguistic relativity effect (Győri, 2000). As Rosch (1978, p. 29) explains, “[o]ne influence on how attributes [in category formation] will be defined by humans is clearly the category system already existent in the culture at a given time”. Thus, while the linguistically coded categories are results of previous conceptualizations on the level of a whole culture, they also provide the input for the operation of cognitive processes that lie behind the altered usage of conventional expressions. This will necessarily constrain the choice of applicable and modifiable expressions, biasing by this the way new experience is described, and thus ultimately influencing the content of new conceptualizations of reality and thereby causing the differences in the semantic structure of different languages.

CONCLUSION

A comprehensive explanation of cultural categorization involves three aspects: cognitive, linguistic and socio-cultural. The synchronic linguistic behavior of speakers, from which changes originate, is based on cognitive processes in the mind of individual speakers. These processes are the motivations for the changes because the different mechanisms of change (e.g., metaphor, metonymy, etc.) originate in mental processes of taking various perspectives on reality. Thus, it is the cognitive aspects of change where cultural differences end discrepancies

across languages originate. From a linguistic point of view, lexical and semantic change will alter the composition of the lexicon of a language, which will cause changes in the semantic structure of the linguistic system by modifying the organization of lexical fields causing the cross-linguistic variations. The answer to the question why change happens at all can be found in the socio-cultural aspects of change. As we have seen, language is an instrument for modelling reality and thus the ultimate causes for any change affecting this model will originate in extra-linguistic factors, i.e., how the reality to be modelled by language changes. These factors operate in a socio-cultural setting, which also influences what perspectives speakers take on these changes and through these on their reality.

The cognitive, linguistic and socio-cultural aspects interact in special ways, mostly by feeding one another and thus forming a chain. Cognitive processes actuate lexical and semantic change, which will lead to the linguistic coding of categories, but only the ones that prove to be culturally valid will spread and become established in the language system. At the same time the cultural knowledge contained in language via these categories will serve as a major input for the cognitive processes, since the material exploited for the creation of new meanings through metaphorization and metonymization is the inventory of culturally valid and thus linguistically coded categories. It is predominantly the lexical-semantic structure of a language that will mirror the way human cognition filters the different specific and universal influences from the natural, social and cultural environment that affects speakers. But even meanings that appear to be about the external reality itself are not separable from the speakers' socio-cultural awareness in line with the cross-linguistic differences. Therefore, the functional character of the change always has a very strong socio-cultural background. The reason why the cognitive aspects of semantic change are strongly linked to socio-cultural ones is that the speakers' realistic cognition of their natural, social, cultural, etc. environment – and reflecting upon them in language in proper ways – serves their social and cultural success to a very large extent.

Whenever speakers use their language, they use it in such a way that it best describes and categorizes the environment of the culture in which they live for the purposes of both communicating about it and mentally representing it. Therefore, language use often involves a short-term (or synchronic) adaptation to the speakers' physical or socio-cultural reality. These either spontaneous or conscious linguistic innovations are triggered during everyday usage due to various environmental challenges. Furthermore, the process of speakers adapting their language repeatedly to the same circumstances in the same way will lead to the conventionalization of the new ways of reference and representation and with this to the emergence of new cultural categories embodying different cultural perspectives via variations in linguistic meaning.

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