CONCEPTION OF CATEGORIZATION IN THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS

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Annotation: This historiographical article maps out the way the concept of categorization has been treated in the history of linguistics.

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INTRODUCTION

Categorization in its most general sense can be seen as a process of systematization of acquired knowledge. Each time we come across something new in our worlds—concrete entities, as well as abstract concepts—we try to accommodate it by assigning it to some category or other. This phenomenon is especially common in early childhood when children progressively acquaint themselves with the world around them, However, knowledge systematization in fact occurs throughout the lives of all human beings. Conceived in this way, as knowledge systematization, categorization is a cognitive process which allows human beings to make sense of the world by carving it up, in order for it to become more orderly and manageable for the mind.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In linguistics, too, categorization is of paramount importance. Language in its spoken form is no more than a stream of sounds, and traditionally linguistics has been concerned with the mapping of these sounds on to meaning. This process is mediated by syntax which is concerned with the segmentation of linguistic matter into units, namely categories of various sorts, and groupings of one or more of these categories into constituents. In present-day linguistics, it is safe to say, no grammatical framework can do without categories, however conceived. All working linguists recognize one set or other of word classes and relational categories, be they innate or not. It is for this reason that categorization is of central concern to the study of language. Indeed, for the American linguist Labov ''[i]f linguistics can be said to be any one thing it is the study of categories: that is, the study of how language translates meaning into sound through the categorization of reality into discrete units and sets of units'' (1973, p. 342).

MAIN PART

Categorization is no trivial matter. As Lyons (1968, p. 270) notes, ''there is very little consistency or uniformity in the use of the term 'category' in modern treatments of grammatical theory'': different linguists have used wider or narrower definitions of what they regard as linguistic categories. For some, the categories of language are the word classes. For others, tense, mood, person, number, etc., are also categories. Categorization raises a variety of problems mostly having to do with the determination and delimitation of class membership. For example, on grounds of elegance and economy, in setting up a system of parts of speech, ideally the number of postulated categories is maximally restricted. A more commodious system leads to generalizations being missed, and flies in the face of Occam's razor, in that entities are multiplied beyond necessity. Throughout the history of grammar-writing, from antiquity onwards, the problem of setting up an adequate system of parts of speech has been paramount. For the Greeks the noun and the verb were primary. Adjectives were regarded by Plato and Aristotle as verbs, but as nouns by the Alexandrians and later grammarians (Lyons, 1968, p. 323). There was some debate over the question whether or not there should be a separate class of participles, which have both verbal and nominal characteristics (Robins, 1990, p. 39). In the two centuries or so leading up to 1800 the deliberations of English grammarians resulted in almost 60 different systems of parts of speech (see Michael, 1970, pp. 521–529, 1987, p. 344)! In present-day grammatical frameworks there is still a great deal of discussion about issues of classification, as we will see. This article will look at a number of approaches to categorization.

Turning now to categorization in the study of language, there has been a long tradition of classifying the elements of language into groupings of units, such as word classes, phrases and clauses. Indeed, for grammarians the concern has always been to set up a taxonomy of the linguistic elements of particular languages, and to describe how they interrelate. Linguistic categorization, especially as far as the word classes are concerned, has been heavily influenced by the thinking of Aristotle, who stressed the disjunctive nature of language:

Of quantities some are discrete, others continuous; and some are composed of parts which have position in relation to one another, others are not composed of parts which have position. Discrete are number and language. (*The categories*, 6, p. 8)

Aristotle's views on categories harmonize with his stance in the debate in antiquity on *analogy* vs. *anomaly* (Robins, 1990, 21f; Seuren 1998, pp. 23–27). Adherents of the former—Aristotle among them—stressed the regularities in

language and its propensity for order and systematicity, while adherents of the latter pointed out the 'messiness' of language.

Renaissance scholars reacted against speculative grammar ''as being philosophicallytedious, educationally undesirable, and couched in a barbarous degeneration of the Latin language'' (Robins, 1990, p. 122). As has been chronicled by Robins, the period was characterized by a greater attention to languages other than Greek and Latin (e.g. Arabic and Hebrew) and by the writing of grammars of vernacular and exotic languages. These descriptions were increasingly written without slavish recourse to Latin and Greek models, and began to use principles of description still in use today, for example by using distributional evidence, as in the work of Petrus Ramus.

For a 20th century pre-structuralist linguist like Bloomfield categories are *form classes* (1933, p. 146). Thus: ''[l]arge form-classes which completely subdivide either the whole lexicon or some important form class into form classes of approximately equal size, are calledcategories'' (*op cit*.: 270).The parts of speech are cited as examples of form classes, as arenumber, gender, case and tense.

In any one form class, every form contains an element, the *class meaning*, which isthe same for all forms of this form class. Thus, all English substantives belong to aform class, and each English substantive, accordingly, has a meaning, which, once itis defined for us (say, as 'object'), we can attribute to every substantive form in the language. (*op. cit*. p. 146)

Bloomfield allows for a certain degree of fluidity of classification in remarking that ''[f]orm-classes are not mutually exclusive, but cross each other and overlap and are included one within the other, and so on.'' (1933, p. 269). Trask (1999, pp. 279–280) notesthat with the exception of Fries, Gleason and Hockett, American structuralists were not very interested in the parts of speech. As is well-known, the post-Bloomfidians developeda rigorous—some would say dogmatic—methodology which incorporated 'discovery procedures', a strict separation of linguistic levels, etc.

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