Analyzability and semantic associations in referring expressions : a study in comparative lexicology

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Chapter 7

Prospects for Cross-Linguistic Research on the Lexicon

This study hopefully demonstrated two things: first, that the lexicon is not just merely "an appendix of the grammar, a list of basic irregularities" (Bloomfield 1933: 274), a doctrine that is still very much alive in many theoretical approaches to Linguistics, but that its formal structure is systematically determined by complexity of the roots and of the sound system. Neither are semantic structures completely random, but they are both amenable to areal influence in colexifying and analyzable terms, and, with regard to the latter, they co-vary to some extent with the type of word-formation most commonly used in individual languages.

However, this study is not the ultimate statement on comparative lexicology (as defined in the introductory chapter 1), but rather should be seen as a first attempt to probe largely uncharted terrain, at least from an explicitly cross-linguistic point of view (and this becomes especially, but not only, clear from the fact that it is restricted to a mere 160 meanings, while the lexicon in reality is of course much richer, a vast repository of linguistic and culture knowledge).

It does not discuss all possible matters, and surely many more interactions between grammar and lexicon as well as systematic tendencies in the lexicon are to be discovered in the future.

First, there are limitations on what can be achieved by extracting data from dictionaries. What is required are in-depth fieldwork-based studies to establish cross-linguistic variation. Heath and McPherson (2009) are exemplary in combining an in-depth investigation of individual languages with generalization across languages, thus bridging the divide between too narrow of a focus on phenomena in a single language (although, surely, also these can be interesting), and a necessarily more coarse-grained typological study based on extant materials. Such a marriage, though labour-intensive, is needed to be able to avoid, or at least to mitigate, some of the pitfalls described in chapter 3 that come along with working on extant sources.

But even within the framework of broad typological investigations, not all potentially relevant factors were in fact addressed in the present study. For one, an aspect of interaction between lexicon and grammar that has received unduly little attention are grammatical aspects that may render terms for, e.g. a body-part, less necessary. For instance, the Nuuchahnulth word for 'finger' *ċaċaɫaqńukum* is clearly morphologically complex, containing the root *ċaɫaq-* and *-ńukum* 'in or at the hand.' Now, Nuuchahnulth has a quite frequent prefix *k̓um-* 'point, poke, press with finger' (Davidson 2002: 63) that is prefixed to a verb when the action is carried out with the fingers, thus reducing the need to employ the morphologically complex term. For instance, *k̓um-ʔaqƛ* is 'have one's finger poked inside' (Davidson 2002: 64, *-ʔaqƛ* 'inside').

Another area in which it falls short is the investigation of specific patterns of colexification and possible correlations with structural properties of languages as claimed to exist by Klimov (1977) and Lehmann (2002) for active-stative languages. These clearly deserve further investigation under the perspective of interaction between grammar and lexicon (though this merely reiterates Nichols's 1992: 260 request). Somewhat similarly, Nichols (2008: 684) suggestion for "a new kind of typological classification of languages according to noun root lexical properties" is a promising avenue for further research.

This study paid attention to the nominal lexicon specifically, and certain findings are indeed restricted to referring expressions. As pointed out by Talmy (2000: 59endnote11), there is a complementary perspective on the verbal lexicon that would in principle be at least equally interesting to investigate.

Furthermore, it seems promising to investigate if research in Social Psychology discussed in § 5.7.6. on different kinds of reasoning and their prevalence in different parts of the world has effects on the semantic structuring of the lexicon, once a clearer picture of the distribution of that prevalence emerges.

In summary, cross-linguistic investigation of structures in the lexicon is a field wide open for new discoveries to be made. Since words, of course, represent concepts and are thus intimately linked with cognitive representations, such research has the potential to strengthen the interdisciplinary links between linguistics, in particular with a cross-linguistic orientation, and neighboring fields of research such as Cognitive and Social Psychology, and to engage the disciplines in a productive dialogue. The questions are in principle all open to empirical investigation.