A Crosslinguistic Perspective on Clear and Approximate Categorization

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Edited by

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A	adjective
ACC	accusative case
ADJ	adjunct
AHC	ad hoc category
ARG	argument
AUG	augmentative
CCD	comprehensively collected dataset
CO	coordinative segmental item
CND	complex nominal determiner
CP	clause phrase
CPEC	categorizing polynomial evaluative construction
D	deferential construal
DET	determinant
DIM	diminutive
DP	determinant phrase
ES	externalist semantics
FE	foundational externalism
FM	focus marker
GE	general extender
GEN	genitive structures
END	endearment
INDF	indefinite
LC	list construction
LOC	speaker
MSA	modern standard Arabic
N	(base) noun
N^{em}	base noun marked by evaluative morphology
NP	noun phrase
OBL	oblique
OPP	oppositive
PE	psychological externalism
PEJ	pejorative
PL	plural
PP	pragmatic pole
PPBs	pseudo-partitive binominals

PRED   predicate
PREP   preposition
QN   quantifying noun
RP   referential pole
SG   singular
TNBs   type noun binominals
V   verb
VE   vagueness expression

Linguistic symbols

*   Asterisk indicates a sentence's syntactic ill-formedness
                (agrammaticality)
?   Question mark indicates a sentence which abides by the
                grammatical rules of a language but which native
                speakers consider unfit for use (acceptability)
/…/   Slashes are used to note the phonemic transcription of a
                word

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FOREWORD

CATEGORIZATION AS AN AD HOC PROCESS IN DISCOURSE

CATERINA MAURI

When speakers interact, they constantly co-construct categories, guiding each other towards an incremental and dialogic process of reference identification. Yet what do we know about the actual role played by *language* in category construction?

Ad hoc categorization

After Rosch (1973, 1975), our view of categories and categorization has radically changed and is now invariably connected to the role played by context. Even more so after Barsalou's research on *ad hoc categories* (Barsalou 1983, 1991, 2003, 2010), that is, categories which are created on the fly and dismissed once their function in discourse has been achieved (see also Mauri and Sansò 2018, 2020). The sound psychological evidence for the role played by context in category construction (see Smith and Samuelson 1997) has favoured the development of several studies on categorization in linguistics, both within cognitive approaches (Lakoff 1987; Wilson and Carston 2007; Carston 2010) and in typological research (Levinson 2003). Linguistic categorization theories have predominantly focused on the mechanisms underlying the pragmatic adjustment of word meanings in context whereby the intended category is different (typically narrower or broader) from the lexically encoded sense (Lakoff and Sweetser 1994; Croft and Cruse 2004; Carston 2010). According to Croft and Cruse (2004: 92), categories are always created as needed and situated in the here-and-now of the speech act (Croft and Cruse 2004: 92). Consequently, words and phrases are not to be treated as labels for concepts, but rather as clues to the intended abstractions, on a par with non-linguistic clues, such as shared knowledge and contextual information.

In linguistics, it is important to remember that our objects of analysis are speakers' linguistic choices rather than their mental representations, therefore what we are primarily called to do is to identify the semantic and pragmatic contributions that different linguistic strategies make towards the process of category construction and category communication in discourse. We must switch from inquiring about the nature of the categories being built, namely cognitive entities identified and studied in the field of experimental psychology, to inquiring how categories are conveyed in discourse.

While the cognitive literature on categorization has mainly understood language as reflecting categorization and providing (more or less precise) labels to *name* concepts, a closer look at naturally-occurring data shows that the role of language goes far beyond mirroring cognition. Speakers' morphological, syntactic, and discursive choices indeed crucially contribute to category construction, creatively modifying 'labels' available in the lexicon and incrementally leading interlocutors to a shared target. Depending on the discourse aims, a category can be referred to by means of a ready-made word (e.g., *mosquito*), or it can be conveyed through gradual approximation (e.g., *a sort of mosquito*), labelled by means of a new compound created on the fly (e.g., *prick-and-go insect*) or identified by listing exemplars and incrementally approaching the intended concept (e.g., for furniture: *we still need to buy tables, chairs, the sofa, and so on…*). Moreover, speakers may want to communicate their attitudes towards the very process of category construction, by emphasizing the exact correspondence between a given linguistic expression and the intended concept (e.g., *chair chair*, to convey a typical chair), or, on the contrary, by hedging their commitment to the chosen strategy (e.g., *It is – I guess – a chair*). Finally, category communication in discourse can be realized within specific utterances or across turns, and may be crucially influenced by speakers' expectations regarding their shared knowledge or the mutual relations they aim to maintain or construe. In such a joint venture, interlocutors typically have recourse to a redundant set of strategies, undertaking a complex shared activity of formulation, reformulation, exemplification, approximation, negotiation, abstraction and reference, which increases the occasions of mutual understanding and reflects the (possibly unplanned) process of category construction (see Mauri 2017, 2021), as shown in (1):

(1) 1 A: *essendo sempre stata abituata comunque a parlare nella mia lingua*
        'Having always been used to speak anyway with eh in my language'

2   *dover eh mh chiedere anche* [*per le minime cose*]ₐ₁ ***ad esempio*** *eh mh*
     'when you have to mh ask even the smallest things, like for instance, eh
     mh'

3   [*a che ora si mangia a cena perché poi dobbiamo uscire*]♭ *o* **non lo so**
     'at what time we have dinner because then we have to go out or I don't
     know'

4   [*la carta igienica in bagno*]꜀ ***ad esempio***, [*proprio piccole cose*]ₐ₂
     'toilet paper in the bathroom, for instance, truly little things'

5 B: *mhmh sì*
     'mhmh yes'

(Corpus KIParla, TOD2011)[1]

Speaker A is talking about her study experience abroad, arguing that she had to learn how to say little things in a different language, which was something that she had not learnt in class. She starts by explicitly formulating the category she is aiming at by means of the generic label "the smallest things" ((a1) line 2), which is too generic and needs to be exemplified, built up in an ad hoc way to achieve the discourse aims. The first example that Speaker A provides is 'at what time we have dinner' ((b), lines 2-3), and the second is 'toilet paper in the bathroom' ((c), line 4): how can these situations be taken as a starting point for abstracting the category "smallest things"? They belong to the "everyday life" frame, the former being more acceptable in a public situation, the latter being more intimate and linked to a familiar context. While Example (b) could occur in a textbook and could easily be learnt in a foreign language class, thus constituting a rather prototypical case, (c) is intentionally chosen as an example of things that are less likely to be mentioned when studying a foreign language. Example (c) is thus chosen with a specific aim, namely to build the category borders in an unexpected way, so as to include 'truly little things' ((a2), line 4), whereby *proprio* 'truly' focalizes the fact that the example just mentioned is an exceptionally small thing and can *still* be included in the category. The category formulation "smallest things" ((a1), line 2) and its reformulation "truly little things" ((a2), line 4) encapsulate the online process of category construction, achieved by means of precise exemplification choices. In line 5 Speaker B acknowledges that the category communication has been felicitous. In this exchange we may also observe the use of *I don't know*, which reveals at the same time some hedging and the online search for the best example to choose.

Linguistic interaction can thus be analysed as an ever-changing process of reciprocal fine-tuning, in which speakers cooperate and frequently

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[1] The KIParla Corpus of Spoken Italian (Mauri et al. 2019) is freely available at www.kiparla.it.

negotiate the process of category construction: if they agree on how a category is to be construed, they agree on the set of referents to be identified, and this essentially means that they agree on what they are talking about. As a consequence, all categorization is construed *online,* in a context-dependent way according to the speakers needs and expectations. In other words, every categorization process in discourse is conducted *ad hoc*.

Linguistic strategies for ad hoc categorization

The linguistic strategies through which speakers overtly signal ad hoc categorization vary across languages, but not in a random way, as shown by typological studies (Mauri and Sansò 2018, 2019). In order for a linguistic construction to convey ad hoc categorization, it is necessary to have a categorization *trigger*, namely a prosodic, morphological or syntactic element activating a reference to a larger, or different, category beyond the mentioned items (e.g., exemplifiers, general extenders, non-exhaustivity markers). It is this element that triggers the abstractive inferential process, which, based on some shared context, leads to the identification of the relevant property defining the intended category.

According to the level at which the trigger lies, we can identify syntactic and morphological categorization triggers across languages. Syntactic strategies include open lists (Barotto and Mauri 2018), general extenders (e.g., *et cetera*, see Benigni 2018; Fiorentini and Magni 2021), non-exhaustivity markers (Barotto and Mauri 2022), exemplifying constructions (Barotto 2018, 2021; Barotto and Lo Baido 2021), similative expressions (Voghera 2013 this volume; Mihatsch and Hennecke this volume), and binominal constructions (Masini 2016). Languages also frequently rely on reduplication and morphological strategies, including heterogeneous plurals (associative and similative, see Daniel and Moravcsik 2013; Mauri and Sansò 2021), collective and aggregate nouns (see Magni 2018; Benigni and Ruvoletto this volume), evaluative affixes (Grandi and Körtvélyessy 2015; Amiot and Stosic this volume; Buoniconto this volume), approximating affixes (e.g., *quasi-* or *simil-*, Masini and Micheli 2020), and compounding (Arcodia and Mauri 2020; Alexandrova and Benigni 2021).

A categorization trigger either has scope over an overt category member, i.e. one or more exemplars, or over an overt *non*-member, namely an item which is not part of the category but is relevantly associated to category members (e.g., through similarity, as in the case of approximation). In both cases, the overt (non-)member is processed as the starting point for abstraction, based on the identification of some context-relevant property characterizing the intended category. The more morphological the strategy,

the more the (non-)exemplar is likely to be one and to play a pivotal role in the category abstraction, leading to an exemplar-driven category *label*. The more syntactic the strategy, the more we observe the ongoing process of approximation and incremental set construction, rather than category naming, with the speaker providing open lists of exemplars, reformulations and appeals to the hearer's attention (as shown in (1)).

Approximation and ad hoc categorization

If we consider categorization to be an ad hoc process in discourse, approximation can be analysed as one of the strategies that speakers employ to build and communicate categories in a context-dependent way, overtly signalling their hedging attitude towards the linguistic choice just made and identifying the item in scope as sufficiently relevant for abstracting the intended concept. Contrary to exemplification or non-exhaustive listing, where the category is abstracted away from items that are recognized as category members, in the case of approximation the mentioned item is explicitly identified as a *non*-member, being sufficiently similar and, at the same time, sufficiently different from typical category members.

As ad hoc categorization devices, approximating constructions contain a categorization trigger having scope over a context-relevant item (e.g., evaluative morphology, see Amiot and Stosic this volume; Buoniconto this volume; or sortal constructions, as in binominal expressions, see Müller this volume; Vladimiska and Gridina this volume; Mihatsch and Hennecke this volume). Such items are identified as relevant due to some *difference* and some *similarity* with respect to the intended category: *a sort of mosquito* is not exactly a mosquito, therefore its *not* being a category member is what triggers the correct abstraction, but the abstraction itself relies on the very possibility of identifying a sufficient number of analogies. Just as every categorization process is based on the possibility of grouping together elements that are sufficiently similar to each other and sufficiently different from the rest, so approximation also relies on the identification of differences and similarities. If in the case of exemplification (see Example (1)) speakers have to identify the property that the mentioned examples have in common, in the case of approximation speakers have to identify two properties: the context-relevant property on the basis of which the mentioned item and the intended concept are similar, *and* the property based on which they differ. Under what respect is *a sort of mosquito* different from a mosquito (e.g., it is smaller and does not make an annoying sound)? Under what respect is it similar to a mosquito (e.g., it bites)? The accessibility and

identification of these two properties, either in the context or in shared knowledge, is what allows approximation to be successful in discourse.

As already mentioned, approximation is frequently employed in discourse to convey the speaker's attitude towards the linguistic choice just made to refer to a category, which can be an attitude of dissatisfaction or hedging. What is crucial is the explicit reference to some possible distance and difference between the mentioned item and the intended concept, which allows for a reduction in the speaker's commitment. Interestingly, as pointed out by Voghera (this volume), the same linguistic expression may be used to convey a different attitude, namely one of focus and emphasis on the reference being constructed, thus reversing the perspective.

The question of how approximation relates to ad hoc categorization is complex and interesting and pertains to the core issue of how speakers incrementally build reference in discourse. This volume thus makes a crucial contribution to the general debate on the role played by language in categorization processes, and the fact that many languages are considered offers precious evidence for the cross-linguistic validity of the analyses provided. To the two editors, Hélène Vassiliadou and Marie Lammert, goes my gratitude for having undertaken such an important enterprise.

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INTRODUCTION

CLEAR AND APPROXIMATE CATEGORIZATION: AN OVERVIEW

HÉLÈNE VASSILIADOU AND MARIE LAMMERT

By investigating syntactic, morphological and semantic correlations between type noun binominals and other constructions in various languages (French, Arabic, Latvian, Polish, Russian, Italian, Danish, etc.), the aim of this volume is to provide an overview of the current state of research on the subject in order to help scholars and students grasp the meaning and the cognitive foundations of approximation and categorization as well as their interrelationship.

In recent decades, research on clear and approximate categorization and their manifestations in language has generated several studies in syntax, semantics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, philosophy, logic and other areas. In this introduction, we highlight the fact that clear and approximate categorization have formally similar realizations within many languages, even in languages belonging to different families, and that this possible similarity of their modes of expression gives rise to a number of difficulties or interpretative blurs in the languages studied and therefore also in the transposition from one language to another.

The existence of a large number of "metalinguistic nouns" (i.e. nouns serving to place an X in a more or less pre-established superordinate category; Flaux and Van de Velde 2000: 26) in French and in other languages testifies to the productivity of these realizations. Examples in French include *sorte* 'sort', *type*, *espèce* lit. 'species; type/kind', *forme* 'form', *genre* lit. '*genus*; type/kind', *manière* 'manner', *mode* 'mode', *variété* 'variety', *façon* 'way', and in other languages as in Russian *вроде* lit. 'in the genus; sort/like' and *tipa* lit. 'in the category; like/sort', in Modern Greek *είδος ίδos* lit. 'species; kind/sort' and *τύπος tipos* 'type', in Polish

jakby 'quasi/like', in English *sort* and *kind*, in Latvian *tips* 'type', *suga* 'species', in Norwegian and Swedish *slags* 'kind', etc.[1]

If these nouns serve both to categorize and approximate, the fundamental question one can raise is that of identifying the processes of interpretation concerned, since there is not always a consensus on interpretation. The parameters of specification are not always clearly established, thus leaving much to intuition. In fact, besides the highly grammaticalized or pragmaticalized cases, such as certain uses of *genre* in modern French (1), or *tipo* in Italian (2) and Russian (3), it is hard to find criteria, especially in syntax, which would distinguish the two processes: clear categorization and categorization by approximation.

(1) *Fais pas **genre** tu t'y connais en catégorisation, hein?*
    'Don't act like you know anything about categorization, ok?'
(2) *Questa è una prova // **tipo*** (Voghera 2017: 387)
    'This is a proof/test, sort of'
(3) *khakhakha nuvyponili? Tupyye gumonetarei **tipo**:))* (Kolyaseva 2018: 83)
    'hahaha have you got it? Dumb humanities (that is to say) [tipo]:))'

The number and the nature of interpretations or of semantic and pragmatic effects are also still to be clarified. In the following examples, with no other form of specification, (4) and (5) potentially correspond to three types of situations: clear categorization, non-prototypical categorization (doubtful inclusion into a category) and approximate categorization (non-inclusion in a category). We can also add that in some cases it is impossible to choose one option over another, because there is nothing in the context that allows us to be sure whether (the token of) X belongs to the category of Y or not (in a clear or doubtful manner):

(4) *I saw **a kind of** greyhound dog.*
(5) ***A kind of** greyhound dog bit a child.* (Vassiliadou et al. 2023)

From a conceptual point of view, a number of questions are pending: if we can categorize either in a strict manner or by approximation, where is the line to be drawn? What does it mean to approximate (see among others Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot et al. 2014, 2016; Gerhard and Vassiliadou 2014,

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[1] See Rosier (2002), Denison (2005), Aijmer et al. (2006), Keizer (2007), Mihatsch (2007, 2009, 2010, 2016), Brems (2011), Davidse et al. (2013), Benigni (2014), Gerhard-Krait and Vassiliadou (2014, 2017a), Voghera (2014, 2017), Adamczyk (2015), Kolyaseva and Davidse (2016), Sakhno (2017), Kolyaseva (2018), Odden (2019), Janebová and Martinkova (2023), Vassiliadou et al. (2023), Vassiliadou and Fotiadou (forth.).

2017a, 2017b)? Does a categorization by approximation cease to be a categorization? The issue becomes even more complex when we start questioning the meaning of categorization in general (placing an X in Y) and categorization in language (see Taxonomies below). In fact, the possibilities offered by language vary from denominated categories, lexically and semantically structured fields used to formulate realities, to ad hoc categorizations created spontaneously in discourse (see Mauri's foreword to this volume). Furthermore, psycholinguistic studies suggest that cognitive categories do not necessarily engage with their lexical counterparts (Kahlaoui et al. 2010).

Is it sufficient to take into account the communicative intentions which imply the use of one or the other of these types of categorization? Many reasons or factors can explain a speaker's inability to place an element X into a category Y: the absence of denomination, the difficulty of identifying a reality to denote, the complexity of the world, the hesitation of the speaker as to his knowledge of the world or the language, and value-based judgements (a good or bad copy of the category), adding to these more pragmatic phenomena, such as a tendency towards modality, which leads to approximate interpretations where clear categorization cannot be excluded.

Taxonomies

Taxonomies "allow us to structure a wide variety of objects", including "concrete objects designated by nouns" and also "events" (Saint-Dizier 2006; see also Prince et al. 1982; Kleiber 1987; Tversky 1990). In order to establish explicit taxonomic relations of the type 'X is a subclass of Y', language can make use of metalinguistic nouns, such as those listed above. When the relation between X and Y is lexical, the use of a taxonomic noun is useless and the formulation 'X is a Y' is enough to induce an inclusion in a class:

(6) *A Siamese (X) is **a kind of** cat (Y) / A Siamese is a cat.*

In very elaborate scientific taxonomies, the use of a particular taxonomic noun is constrained: *genus*, *species*, *variety* (note the different taxa for humans in Example (7)):

(7) *Domain* Eukaryota, *Kingdom* Animalia, *Phylum* Chordata, *Class* Mammalia, *Order* Primates, *Family* Hominidae, *Genus* Homo, *Species* Sapiens

In ordinary discourse the situation is different: the rigour and refinement of these hierarchies are not always respected. Indeed, ordinary speakers can use the word *fir tree* to designate any tree that vaguely resembles a conifer. While speakers may know that a fir is a conifer, and therefore know the superordinate category, they do not generally know the specific characteristics of its taxonomy.

Approximate readings

The approximate reading does not rely on the membership or inclusion of X in a class predefined by Y, but on a comparison of X with a categorial type defined by Y, and on the possibility of including a marginal individual in a Y category according to a principle of similarity. This type of categorization can be rendered by the schema 'X is approximately a Y' where Y denotes a category accommodating such an X that does not fulfil the prototypical categorial features of Y. Approximation is expressed through expressions that serve to loosen categorizations. It is often motivated by a "distress categorization" (Mihatsch 2006: 236), a lexical gap, a recategorization, or a comment by the speaker on the relevance of the item used:

(8) *They said it was a chalet but it was more like **a sort of** wooden hut.* (https://dictionary.cambridge.org)

Approximation can be achieved by means of metalinguistic nouns, as previously mentioned, but also by adverbs (*almost*), verbs or verbal locutions (*resemble / be like*, etc.), evaluative morphemes (*pseudo*, *quasi*), and other linguistic strategies.

Taxonomy and approximation, which are general linguistic phenomena, involve universal cognitive processes related to Gestalt (form), which each language translates in a specific way. The questions related to the organization of the nominal lexicon, to conceptual categories and to their approximation are crucial (Capin et al. 2020; Mihatsch and Hennecke this volume; Kisiel this volume; Voghera this volume). Finally, there is a terminological imbroglio that closely affects *approximation*, *imprecision*, *vagueness* and *categorization*: approximation is often correlated with vagueness, vagueness or fuzziness is correlated with pragmatics, and the boundaries of vagueness and indeterminacy are fuzzy in turn (Kleiber 1987; Lupu 2003; Bazzanella 2011). It seems that in recent years scholars have overlooked the fact that vagueness is also a semantic affair and prefer to associate it quasi-exclusively with pragmatics and context-dependencies.