

The Pragmatics of “Semantic” Classification: a Cross-Linguistic Perspective

Our aim will be to show that biological classification nomenclatures can be much better understood once the pragmatic constraints associated with in-situ identification and discursive characterization are spelled out, and once the cultural common ground which backs the different systems of classification, including the scientific taxonomic one, are made explicit.

We shall do so with constant reference to first-hand field studies of biological classificatory systems in Palikur (Arawakan/Maipurean), Wajãpi (Tupi) and of other Amazonian languages such as Wayana (Karib), including a study of the patterns of use of numeral classifiers for biological entities in Palikur, a language with a complex system of classifiers and numeral classifiers (Aikhenvald & Green, 1998).

We shall first show that classification comes in language use under three pragmatics forms, identificational, discursive and holistic, and that many features of the latter form (the only form considered in semantic studies of classification system) cannot be understood without understanding first the pragmatic constraints which have to be satisfied in the two other forms.

We shall show first that real-life identificational utterances of animals is a process which is ruled both by the constraints of quantity and quality (associated with Gricean maxims of conversation), and by varying standards concerning the definition of what sufficient information is. We shall point first to the fact that words used to name the widest hyperonymic classes are to be considered primarily as partial identifiers (providing less information than is required, due to limited evidence). We shall show then that discrepancies in terms of granularity between the Amazonian systems of classification must be analyzed as reflecting different pragmatic standards concerning identification.

We shall then describe discursive lateral classification and the pragmatics of serialization and their relation with common ground in actual language use, define the notions of characterization and denominative patterns and explain the methodology used to describe them. Turning to the differences that are observable in the different languages considered in this respect, We shall show that the capacity of languages to shape the way the world is seen must not be considered as a matter of shaping perception but a matter of shaping attention, and thus related to controlled attention (i.e. ostensive-inferential communication and pragmatics) and attentional norms.

We shall finally show by comparing the three systems with Western scientific classification that denominative and characterization patterns (convergent in the case of Western & Wayampi) are the product of logics of classification whose backing is social and cultural assumptions which are part of the common ground of each society.

We shall conclude by showing that linguistic semantic encoding and pragmatic attentional-inferential communication should not be opposed, given that the former ultimately reflects the latter.

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