A NEW APPROACH IN *'OLD'* STUDIES

Category: oral
Theme session: Lexical typology of qualitative concepts

This paper is an extensive typological investigation of 'old' on the basis of about a hundred languages. Unlike the previous projects (study of aquamotion predicates in Maisak, Rakhilina 2007, or predicates of pain in Reznikova, Rakhilina, Bonch-Osmolovskaya 2012), this research is dictionary-based, and the question is whether it is possible to carry out a reliable typological analysis using only dictionary entries (supported by expert comments where needed), if a researcher has a strong hypothesis of what a semantic field in question looks like.

The semantics of 'old' has been studied for Russian (Rakhilina 1999), English (Taylor 1992, Partee 1995) and Mandarin Chinese (Kuzmina 2011). It has been proven that there are four basic interpretations (frames) of 'old' depending on internal aspectual characteristics that different constructions "*old* + N" possess:

1. 'such that came into being long before the moment of speech [and has changed]' (e.g. "old oak")

2. 'created long before the moment of speech' (e.g. "old clothes")

3. 'such that came into being or was created long before the moment of speech and is no longer in use' (e.g. "old flat")

4. 'such that came into being or was created long before the moment of speech and is no longer in use: the epoch related to its creation has already passed away' (e.g. "old coins")

Further analysis has shown that these frames can be differently combined within a certain "basic" lexical item in different languages. These combinations are diverse and non-trivial, but certain regularities can also be arrived at. Three lexical systems appear to be most widespread: a "dominant" system, a "binary" system and a "rich" system. In dominant systems, all the four semantic frames are included in the meaning of a single lexeme; it is typical for Slavic and Germanic languages, as well as for Mandarin Chinese. There can also be additional semantic properties which influence the lexical choice (consider Chinese, where two words lǎo and jiù have a positive and a negative connotation respectively). Binary systems can be found, among others, in Mari and Tatar and have two lexemes which are complementarily distributed to express a certain semantic opposition, e.g. animate-inanimate. In rich systems the four frames are distributed among four separate lexical items (examples are Quechua and Evenki). Note that different systems can be found even within one and the same language group: thus, among Turkic languages, Tatar andTurkish tend towards a binary system, while Yakut has a rich system (typical for other Siberian languages as well).

References

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