Polysemous Qualities and Universal Networks

The topic of this talk is a reflection about the conceptual organization of qualities involved in polysemous associations and about their universal nature. This analysis follows on from a study carried out by a Franco-German working group on polysemous qualities as expressed in twenty-two African languages. In this frame, I proposed a model of the semantic networks built by the polysemous qualities following the method of semantic maps (Haspelmath, 2003).

The results showed that what is common between each particular network of a specific African language is not exactly the high number of recurring cross-linguistic polysemous associations but rather several semantic networks made up by qualities involved in recurring polysemous associations (see the annex). Such networks seem be shared by each individual as an idealized cognitive model. That is why I called them "universal networks" - if we consider that the term "universal" does not refer to a systematic rule but a tendency (high or not).

The aim of this presentation so is to go deeper into the above-described results by the way of a confrontation with a sample of Indo-European languages in order to further justify the existence of these universal networks.

The study is based on a cognitive approach as developed by linguists and psycholinguists (Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1993; Lazard, 1992; Koch, 2004) as well as philosophers and psychologists (Proust, 1997; Searle, 1985). It will be shown how it is possible to observe cognitive correspondences between (a) the different universal networks, (b) some particular semantic domains - e.g. acrid taste, important dimension, small dimension, strong resistance, weak resistance… - which characterize these networks and (c) some linguistic and cognitive processes involved in the construction of meaning, i.e. inferential processes which are relative to symbolism, iconicity, pragmatism or conceptualization, on a larger cross-linguistic study.

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ACID SOUR BLUNT *SHINY* WHITE BEAUTIFUL CLEAN GOOD SWEET DOUX GENEROUS

STINGY BITTER *SALT* BAD WRONG PURE CLAIR RED CHEAP DELICIOUS DIRTY FEARFUL

ACTIVE *CALM* SHARP SPITZ TRUE SLOW STRAIGHT EMPTY MOU FLAT SMOOTH

PAINFUL *SHY* NEW *FRÉQUENT* *POLITE* WET *STUBBORN* *TIGHT* LOUD FAST

HANDICAPPED LITTLE SMALL *COOL* COLD LIÉ BENT ILL WARM HOT

UGLY POOR YOUNG SILENT SHORT SHALLOW RAW ROUND *TALL* DRY

NASTY OPEN ROUGH LAZY NEAR *DIFFICULT* STRONG HARD GESUND

COWARDLY *SUPERFICIAL* BOILED FAT DICK BRAVE EXPENSIVE SOLID

LOSE *RIPE* DENSE DICKFLUSSIG WIDE WEAK LÉGER *CONSTANT*

WISE BLACK DARK LIMPING LICHTER LARGE BIG OLD FRAGILE *EASY*

CLEVER ROTTEN FOOLISH GAY HEAVY LONG PROUD THIN NAKED

DRESSED RUDE STINKY FULL NUMEROUS FAR DEEP *MAIGRE* NARROW DROITE