Theme session 3: Lexical typology of qualitative concepts

The semantic fields 'sharp' and 'blunt' are of interest for lexical typology since (a) they are frequently used physical qualitatives rich in polysemy (cf. Koch & Marzo 2007: 278); (b) they demonstrate a non-trivial combination of tactile and visual perceptual fields, which varies from language to language ('sharp knife' vs. 'sharp nose')[i].
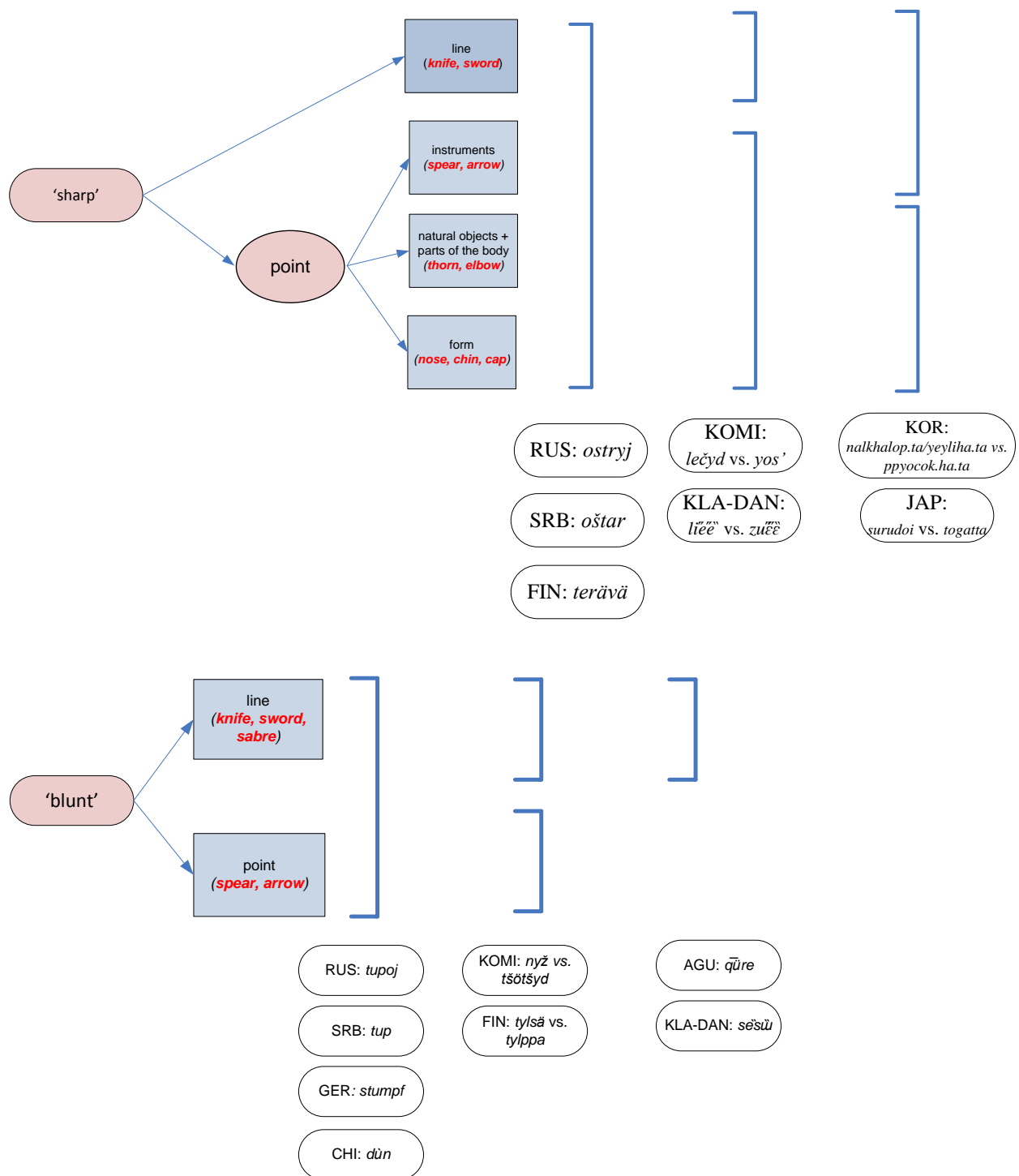
Our primary sample consisted of 15 languages: Russian, Serbian, French, Italian, English, German, Welsh, Finnish, Komi-Zyrian (Permic branch of the Uralic languages), Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Aghul (Lezgic branch of the Northeast Caucasian languages), Malay (Austronesian), Basque and Kla-Dan (South branch of Mande languages). The findings were further tested on five more languages: Hindi, Welsh[ii], Spanish, Armenian and Russian sign languages. Our data sources are corpora and questionnaires filled in by native speakers, as well as previous research as presented for example in ([Fritz 1995], [Fritz 2005: 118-130]).

Our first result is the demonstration of an asymmetrical lexicalization for an antonymous relationship: the field 'blunt' is secondary to the field 'sharp' and is much less developed, i.e. this field is regularly covered with less lexemes, and these usually have less figurative meanings.

Three parameters were found that describe the differences between lexemes within each of the fields:

1. The type of instrument: that with a **cutting edge** ('knife', 'saw', 'sword') vs. that with a **piercing point** ('needle', 'spear', 'arrow'). This parameter is relevant for both fields and explains the existence of different lexemes for the description of two types of instruments in Italian, French, Chinese, Kla-Dan, Komi-Zyrian and Finnish.
2. Perceptual field: **tactile** vs. **visual perception**, in other words the description of an object according to its **function** ('sharp knife' – a knife that cuts well) or to its **form** ('sharp nose' – a nose with a certain form). This opposition is lexicalized in German, Japanese and Korean.
3. Type of sharpness: **functional** vs. **nonfunctional**. The first is attested in instruments that are intentionally sharpened to improve their functional potential ('arrow', 'saw', 'knife'). The second is attested in objects (primarily natural), whose sharpness is not functionally useful for humans and can rather hurt them ('thorn', 'heel', 'horns'). Specialized adjectives to describe objects of the last type are found in many languages, i.e. Basque and Italian. This parameter is irrelevant for 'blunt'.

The following "lexical map" shows possible combinations of meanings within one lexical item:

'sharp' → line (*knife, sword*)

'sharp' → point → instruments (*spear, arrow*); natural objects + parts of the body (*thorn, elbow*); form (*nose, chin, cap*)

RUS: *ostryj*
SRB: *oštar*
FIN: *terävä*

KOMI: *lečyd* vs. *yos'*
KLA-DAN: *líe̋e̋̀* vs. *zűe̋̋*

KOR: *nalkhalop.ta/yeyliha.ta* vs. *ppyocok.ha.ta*
JAP: *surudoi* vs. *togatta*

'blunt' → line (*knife, sword, sabre*); point (*spear, arrow*)

RUS: *tupoj*
SRB: *tup*
GER: *stumpf*
CHI: *dùn*

KOMI: *nyž vs. tšötšyd*
FIN: *tylsä vs. tylppa*

AGU: *q̄ure*
KLA-DAN: *se̋s̏ü*

Different classes of direct meanings develop different metaphors that recur from language to language. Thus, adjectives for instruments with a cutting edge describe clear lines, borders and metonymically images, adjectives for pointed instruments describe good hearing or sight and adjectives for sharp natural objects denote a durable but not very intensive pain (cf. Reznikova et al. 2012).

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