

'Wet' and 'dry': a cross-linguistic study

Category: oral

Theme session: Lexical typology of qualitative concepts

The talk deals with adjectives referring to the presence or absence of moisture on the surface or in layers of objects.

Unlike most other groups of qualities, these adjectives show rather different compatibility potential in regard to the nouns they determine. Generally, each of the synonyms covering a selected semantic field (e.g. speed, length, etc.) tends to have a restricted range of subjects it can be combined with, and the same noun rarely may appear in the context of two or more such adjectives with alike meaning. That is, criteria and restrictions of use for every item in the group of synonyms is preset by the semantic class of a noun, cf. the Spanish counterparts of 'sharp': *afilado* for tools with blade (*cuchillo afilado* 'sharp knife') and *puntiagudo* for pointed tools (*lanza puntiaguda* 'sharp spear').

Yet, adjectives of the domain 'wet' seem to deviate from this apparently standard scheme. For this domain, we encounter a significant number of intersecting contexts, cf. in English *wet/damp/moist floor*, *wet/damp/moist towel*, *wet/damp/moist hair*, etc. This property holds for many other languages as well. Dictionaries seem to give a plausible explanation for this fact, differentiating in various languages the adjectives under discussion mainly in terms of degree of humidity they suppose, i.e., for instance, in German *feucht* 'damp, moist' is explained as *ein wenig nass* 'a little wet', in Spanish *húmedo* as *ligeramente mojado* 'slightly wet', etc.

Having compared up to 4 lexical items for excessive wetness in 11 languages (Russian, German, Spanish, English, Chinese, Arabic, Hebrew, Hausa, Swahili, Turkish, Khanty), we can state that the peculiarities of their use cannot be accounted for by the degree of humidity taken alone. Rather, the latter gets a specific interpretation depending on the noun modified. Thus, if applied to 'hands', the adjective 'wet' (i.e. referring to a higher degree of moisture) denotes the situation of washed hands, while 'damp/moist' (i.e. a lower degree of moisture) implies the idea of sweating, cf. German *nasse* vs. *feuchte Hände*, Russian *mokrye* vs. *vlažnye ruki*, etc. When speaking about firewood, 'wet' gives the rain as a cause, while 'damp/moist' stands for a freshly felled tree, cf. Khanty *jinki* vs. *nar juχ*. For a forest, higher intensity supposes rather a temporary state, while lower denotes a permanent feature (cf. Spanish *el bosque mojado* 'forest wet after the rain' vs. *húmedo* 'rainforest').

Apart from degree which is understood in quite different ways, those languages that have more than two terms for the 'wet' domain reveal several additional oppositions, cf., among others, the speaker's attitude to the situation (e.g., English *moist* VS. *damp soil*, for the Russian cf. Apresyan (ed.) 2004, Tolstaya 2005).

The 'dry' domain in our sample is poorer than that of 'wet' and contains two lexical items at most. The opposition between them concerns the origin of the lacking liquid – it may be either inherent ('dry brook') or due to some external effect ('dry clothes'), cf. Arabic *jaaff-un* vs. *yaabis-un*.

References

- Apresyan Yu.D. (ed.) 2004. *Novyj ob"jasnitel'nyj slovar' sinonimov russkogo jazyka*. Moscow.
Tolstaya S. M. 2008. *Prostranstvo slova. Leksičeskaja semantika v obščeslavjanskoj perspective*. Moscow.