

The Folk Classification of Ceramics

A STUDY OF COGNITIVE PROTOTYPES

WILLETT KEMPTON



LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND CULTURE
Advances in the Study of Cognition

**THE FOLK CLASSIFICATION
OF CERAMICS**

**LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND CULTURE: *Advances in the
Study of Cognition***

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A Study of Cognitive Prototypes

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FOREWORD

Advances in scientific understanding sometimes take us away from common-sense views, but at other times they return us to common sense. This book is an instance of the latter kind of development. A common-sense view of word meaning goes something like this: There are linguistic objects of various kinds, most conspicuously words; there is a world of nonlinguistic objects; words are related to nonlinguistic objects in such a way that if a speaker says a word he causes his hearer to think about some member(s) of the class of objects that word is specially related to; the relation between a word and the object(s) to which it is specially related is called the *meaning* of the word. The details of this thumbnail sketch of the common-sense or folk theory of word meaning are not important. What is important is that in the common-sense view meaning has to do with the connections between linguistic objects and nonlinguistic objects.

It may come as a surprise to some that the prevailing view of meaning among English-speaking linguists of the mid-twentieth century rejects this common-sense idea. The most widely received doctrine regarding linguistic meaning is shared by the generative approach, dominant in North America (and in many places outside the English speaking world), and by the most prominent British school, as represented by such scholars as G. Leech and, in a less extreme form, J. Lyons. According to this doctrine, linguistic meaning relates words or other linguistic signs not to nonlinguistic objects (either phenomenal or conceptual), but to other linguistic objects. The job of the semanticist is thus to explicate certain *language-internal* notions such as paraphrase, synonymy, contradiction, antonymy, entailment, and so on. On this view, meaning does not relate language to the world that language is used to talk about. Rather, the study of meaning is the study of a certain class of relations within the set of linguistic signs. The student of semantics, therefore, need not consider nonlinguistic facts in establishing the meaning of linguistic objects.

Once the linguist succeeds in believing that meaning is a language-internal matter, other comforting beliefs about meaning come easy. First, semantics not only can but should be studied independently of the society and culture of the people who speak the language. Second, since the mathematics of phonological and syntactic structure is generally thought to be discrete, the formal structure of the meaning part of language must also be discrete. In the domain of word meaning *per se*, the language-internal view of semantics conduces to the idea that the meaning (definition) of a word is the smallest set of discrete features (i.e., necessary and sufficient conditions on possible referents) that are needed to distinguish the target word from each other word of the language.

The language-internal view of word meaning, with its attendant assumptions of discreteness, necessity-and-sufficiency, and minimality, is at variance not only with common sense but with an increasing variety of scholarly challenges. These challenges have come both from within linguistics (as in recent works of C. Fillmore, W. Labov, and G. Lakoff) and from neighboring fields such as philosophy (following Wittgenstein), psychology (e.g., the work of E. Rosch), artificial intelligence (e.g., the work of Shank and Abelson), and — most significantly to the present work — anthropology. Kempton, himself an anthropologist, draws from all these fields, for example, the use of experiments defined over closed sets of stimuli is primarily a characteristic of psychology, but the one established tradition into which this eclectic and original work most nearly fits is the anthropological tradition of ethnographic semantics. The anthropologist undertakes the study of word meaning not as an end in itself or as a branch of grammar, but as an *entrée* into the ways of life and thought — the psyche, culture, and society, if you will — of the people under study. The anthropologist would never undertake the study of word meaning if he accepted the language-internal view, and the findings of anthropological linguistics are integral to the multidisciplinary effort to return our view of word meaning to something closer to common sense: where meaning relates words not only to things and concepts but to the entirety of human experience.

Anthropological linguists doing ethnographic semantics have specialized in the study of circumscribed lexical domains, such as words for kin relations, colors, or plants and animals. The present study continues the tradition of intensive study of single lexical domains while broadening that tradition in constituting what is surely the most comprehensive lexico-semantic study of a domain of human artifacts yet to appear. But the theoretical interest of the work goes beyond this substantive broadening of the ethnographic semantic tradition of empirical lexicography. Most of the major conceptual tools of empirical, world-involved semantics are put to use and sharpened here, including prototype, extension, and gradience of categories. The central problem of lex-

ical semantics, what kind of a concept a word is, receives valuable elucidation, as does also the issue of the relations between word meanings and the social, cultural, and temporal fabric in which they exist. Along the way ingenious methodological improvements are disclosed. This book answers the question “Can empirical semantics be done?” by doing it.

Paul Kay

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PREFACE

Several questions about folk classification brought me to this book. Do other cultures actually perceive the world differently from us? Can perceptions also vary among subcultural groups? When we encounter an object for the first time, how do we recognize it as an instance of a familiar category? When I began to study folk categories, I found that my attempt at a general understanding was limited by special-purpose field methods and theoretical structures, adequate only for a few domains. Volumes of studies of kinship and folk biology were not balanced by equally thorough research in other areas. This book contributes a study of a different domain, human-made objects, using field methods that I developed. The findings, in combination with previous work, allow movement toward a general understanding of folk classification.

Folk classification compares cognitive structures across cultures, through field studies by anthropologists. Scholars in disciplines other than anthropology also draw on this work. The recent organization of cognitive science has institutionalized the preexisting commonalities linking students of folk classification with their counterparts in cognitive psychology, linguistic semantics, artificial intelligence, and other related disciplines. The topic of this book, the structure and use of folk categories, is relevant to all the cognitive sciences, yet the book is distinctly anthropological in examining variation among subcultural groups and change through time. The study of variation and change illuminates aspects of category structure that would not have been envisioned from experiment or introspection. Since I chose to study the folk classification of artifacts, and since the bulk of the examples concern ceramic vessels, archaeologists may also find this work useful.

Some anthropological readers may find my ethnographic descriptions too brief. In linking culture with cognition, I have deliberately concentrated on the cognitive side. I work with gross social groupings such as “potters” or “traditional villages” to aggregate data from many individuals. Readers who prefer thicker ethnographic description can read the section in Chapter 5 describing a

father and daughter's argument over vessel naming.

The outline of my theoretical approach, in Chapter 1, could serve as an introduction for students; Chapters 1 and 2 can each stand as independent units. All but the first and last chapters begin with summaries. The reader will find an abundance of figures, many of which resemble topographic maps. These maps are pictures of categories, a visual supplement to the written and mathematical descriptions. Since my own conclusions are derived from pouring over many such maps, I have tried to select a subset of maps that will convey here a feeling for the data.

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