A Unified Account of Essentially Contested Concepts

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0. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics has taken as one of its main challenges the explanation of category structure. By and large, the discipline has been up to the task. But a particular kind of category has eluded optimally clear explication: what W.B. Gallie (1956) originally called “essentially contested concepts”, concepts such as democracy and art, which by nature invite disagreement over their meanings. For our purposes, the topic is best referred to as “essentially contested categories”, since cognitive linguistics as a whole has a more well-problematized notion of *category* than of *concept*. For primarily stylistic reasons I will normally refer simply to *contested categories*.

Gallie’s work aroused some interest in philosophical circles, but was largely ignored by social scientists until William E. Connolly, a political scientist, applied some of Gallie’s notions to categories in his discipline (1993/1974). Eventually, contested categories caught the eye of George Lakoff, who in some unpublished remarks gave a first pass at a cognitive-linguistic analysis of their structure. These unpublished remarks were then cited by two other linguists—Alan Schwartz (1992) and Pamela Morgan (1992, 1998)—and some misconceptions from Lakoff’s original work on the topic have been perpetuated as a result. The goal of this paper is to correct these misconceptions, ultimately yielding, I hope, an analysis that is more rigorous than previous analyses in the application of the tools of cognitive linguistics.

1. Theoretical Background and Terminology

One of George Lakoff’s contributions to the world of linguistics has been his notion of *radial category*. Radial categories received their most thorough explication in Lakoff (1987). The relatively simple example he gives of a radial category is *mother* (Lakoff 1987:74-76). The overall idea is this: there are several frames, or submodels, that constitute the category. Given a person, say Chris, the mother of Chris could be the person who contributed half of Chris’s genetic material; gave birth to Chris; is the primary female nurturer of Chris; or is married to Chris’s father. There are thus four submodels: genetic, birth, nurturance, and

marital. The *prototype* of the category is where all the submodels converge. That is, in the prototypical case, Chris's mother gave birth to him, provided half of his genes, is Chris's primary female nurturer, and is married to Chris's father. Non-prototypical, or peripheral, cases involve only some of the submodels. For example, Chris's stepmother only adheres to the marital model (though nurturance is probably involved as well), whereas his birth mother adheres to the birth model, probably the genetic model, and possibly provides some nurturance, but the marital model doesn't hold.

Crucially for our purposes, there is agreement at the center and contestedness at the periphery: no one would disagree that a woman adhering to all four submodels is Chris's "real mother," whereas there is plenty of room for disagreement about who the "real mother" is if we have a choice, say, among surrogate mother, birth mother, stepmother and adoptive mother.

This category-structure principle of convergence-plus-agreement at the center and reduction-plus-contestedness at the periphery is a useful one to bear in mind throughout the paper.

2. *Racism: A Case Study*

Not all of Gallie's original criteria for determining whether something is a contested category are relevant for this paper, but three certainly are. What follows is a brief description of the sort of category Gallie had in mind, focusing on these three criteria. (Here, I substitute cognitive-linguistic terminology for Gallie's original wording.) A contested category is one in which value judgments inhere; which is composed of a complex matrix of submodels; and in disagreements over which people's differences stem from the differential weighting of the submodels.

By these criteria, *racism* is a good example of a contested category. Labeling someone or something as "racist" certainly implies a value judgment, and as we will see in a moment the category is composed of a rich set of submodels that are differentially weighted for different types of racism—not all of which would be agreed upon as instances of the category.

Figure 1 below is intended to represent the structure of *racism* from this perspective. Note that in Figure 1, the submodels constituting each subtype—bulleted in each box—are assessed from the viewpoint of the person using the label *racism*, rather than from the viewpoint of the person holding the racist belief and/or committing the racist act.

Figure 1. Racism as a radial category

First, a caveat: this is severely oversimplified. Hopefully, though, there is enough here to make the point I want to make about contested categories and how linguists should go about analyzing them.

Let's start by looking at prototypical racism at the center. An example of this form of racism is a lynching by the Ku Klux Klan. It adheres to (at least these) seven submodels (referring here to the person whose racism is under consideration as R):

1. It involves a negative judgment by R of a person or group of people based on racial category membership.¹
2. There is a power asymmetry in which R belongs to a societal group historically more enfranchised than the person against whom the act is being perpetrated.
3. R intends to cause harm.
4. R causes harm.
5. R holds certain derogatory, stereotype-based beliefs about members of a racial group.
6. R acts on these beliefs.
7. These beliefs are conscious.

The phenomenon described here would be largely agreed upon as an instance of *racism*. From the perspective of radial-category analysis, this results from the overlap of so many of the submodels that are relevant to the category *racism*.

But what of cases where such overlap isn't present? We can look to the peripheral examples in Figure 1. For instance, institutional racism, in the upper right-hand box, involves either five or six of the submodels: it is conceivable that someone would argue that institutional racism isn't racism because it doesn't involve intent to harm. To take another example, affirmative action—which some claim is a form of “reverse racism”—adheres to only four of the seven submodels. From the standpoint of someone labeling it as “racist,” affirmative action: (i) involves negative judgment of a person based on racial category membership (“negative” in the sense of “less qualified” by whatever relevant criteria), (ii) has a harmful effect on members of a racial category, (iii) is a set of acts carried out (as opposed to simply a belief), and (iv) is consciously applied. But three submodels are missing or crucially modified. First, the original power asymmetry is reversed; second, there is no intent to harm anyone because of his or her membership in a racial category;² and third, while based on “belief” of some sort, “reverse racism” isn't based on the same sort of derogatory racial category-based stereotyping of prototypical racism.

¹ How racial category membership is determined is itself an enormously complex issue deserving of separate treatment. I have taken a preliminary look at some of the relevant issues in Patent (1997).

² Though it is possible to imagine diehard affirmative action opponents disagreeing.

While many of the details of *how* this category is structured are debatable, the overall point is to show *that* radial categories can be represented this way: sub-model overlap and agreement maximized at the center and lessened at the periphery.

Another way to represent the structure of *racism* is given below, in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Racism as schema and subtype

In this Langackerian (1987) representation, subtypes of racism are categorized as subordinate to a schematic representation that generalizes over all the subcases.

What we will see below is that any contested category can be represented either as a radial category, as in Figure 1, or as a schema, as in Figure 2. This allows us to eliminate a troubling dichotomy that has persisted for years in the study of contested categories within cognitive linguistics.

3. Problems with Previous Analyses

In some unpublished remarks,³ George Lakoff proposed a distinction between two types of contested categories (referred to in his remarks as "contested concepts"). Of the first, Type 1, he said:

There is an underspecified central model that is generally shared. Different belief systems give rise to extensions of the central model. The extensions are the contested versions of the concept...the concept is defined with respect to a relatively underspecified cognitive model—that is, a model that imposes relatively few constraints on the concept.

Of Type 2, Lakoff said that there is:

³ In citing unpublished remarks, I am going against standard academic practice, and in doing so am being unfair to George Lakoff. I do this only because these remarks have in turn been cited by Schwartz and Morgan in their work on contested categories, and have thus become part of the literature that needs to be addressed in any study of contested categories.

...a very rich central model defined by a large cluster of simple models. The contested versions of the central model are extensions defined by one or more members of the cluster. The concept is contested because different people believe that different members of the cluster “correctly” define the concept.

Something inherently unsatisfying about this account is that, if we take the term *central* to mean the same thing for both types of contested categories, we seem to be faced with two fundamentally different sorts of categories: one with an underspecified center, whose peripheral members add specifications, and one with a rich center, whose peripheral members sift away specifications. This is troubling: why should there be two radically different *kinds* of categories, especially when one of them (Type 1) flies in the face of what we know of radial category structures, namely that the center is where the structure is richest?

To help sort this out, I now introduce a theoretical distinction from cognitive anthropology: *intrapersonal* versus *extrapersonal*. The terms come from Strauss and Quinn (1997), but these ideas under different names also figure prominently in Shore (1996). *Intrapersonal* refers to the cognitive content of an individual; *extrapersonal* refers to what is shared among individuals in a cultural community.⁴ These are two fundamentally different perspectives on category structure, and need to be kept distinct.

We can look at both Figure 1 and Figure 2 from either perspective. From an intrapersonal standpoint, Figure 1 focuses on the submodels that converge to structure a prototype *in the mind of an individual*, and how lack of convergence of submodels yields peripheral category members, members that would likely get lower category ratings in Rosch-style (1975) prototype experiments. Figure 2, on the other hand, emphasizes, as Langacker (1987) has pointed out, that we can store knowledge at different levels of schematicity.

Turning to an extrapersonal perspective, Figures 1 and 2 mean something different. The prototype at the center of Figure 1 represents the version least likely to be contested, and most likely to be shared—contrarywise for the extensions. Figure 2 represents what is shared across all versions of *racism* held by anyone.

Equipped now with the intrapersonal/extrapersonal distinction, we can make sense of Lakoff's positing two types of contested categories. A contested category looks like it belongs to Type 1 when seen from the extrapersonal perspective of generalizing over the category structures of many individuals. This inevitably leads to underspecification, yielding the Langackerian schema structure of Figure 2. A contested category looks like it belongs to Type 2 when seen from an intrapersonal radial-category perspective: submodels converge at the center to form an individual's prototype, and are winnowed away at the periphery to form non-prototypical category members.

⁴ This is actually not quite what is meant by *extrapersonal*. The term more properly refers to the dialectical counterpart of the intrapersonal—the publicly-available cultural forms that help construct, and are reconstructed by, the intrapersonal. Sharedness is thus but one aspect of the extrapersonal.

If we take a closer look at Lakoff's original remarks, we can see some confusion revealed in a lack of careful attention to terminology. First, Lakoff uses *central* in two very different ways: once meaning *schema* and once meaning *prototype*. Second, he mixes together terms from the ideally separate realms of the intrapersonal and the extrapersonal. In his discussion of Type 1, for instance, he writes of "different belief systems" and "contested versions"—squarely belonging with the extrapersonal—but then mentions an "underspecified cognitive model", which seems clearly to refer to the intrapersonal.

Unfortunately, this confusion persists in Alan Schwartz's (1992) study of contested categories. Schwartz (1992:26) writes: "A contested concept is a radial category which is generated by a central ICM which is subject to contention. The central model is extended in a number of possible ways, and these fully instantiated extensions are the versions of the concepts which conflict." This seems to be about the extrapersonal, but, if so, do we want to use the term *radial category* in this way? And what exactly does Schwartz mean by "central" here? Later, Schwartz writes: "At the core of the concept of feminism, then, is an underspecified propositional model" (55) and "These questions define the shape of the slots left unfilled in the underspecified model which stands at the core of the concept of feminism" (56). As with Lakoff, Schwartz doesn't explicitly use the term *prototype* here, but as a price the term *core* is left unproblematized. And if he means *prototype*, then do we want to talk about the "core" being "underspecified," given that prototypes generally are *richly* structured? Schwartz's case study on the structure of *feminism* is ultimately about the details of *different people's* ideas of feminism: clearly extrapersonal. So it seems that ultimately the "underspecified core" is an extrapersonal structure. If so, again: do we want to use terms such as *prototype* and *radial category* when referring to it?

Pamela Morgan, in her studies on contested categories (Morgan 1992, 1998), seems to sense some problems with the Type-1/Type-2 distinction. In her 1992 study on *science* as a contested category, Morgan cites Lakoff's definition of radial category, which rules out categories where the central case is simply more general than its subcases. She then adds that "it may be argued that the noncentral cases of 'science' in the periods with only an underspecified, and not a prototype, core do not have any different properties from the general central case, and hence the type of categorization should be considered classical (based on necessary and sufficient conditions) and not radial" (Morgan 1992:5, fn. 11). As with Schwartz, however, the notion of core isn't problematized. Morgan hints at the need to problematize, though, by using two different modifiers with "core": "underspecified" and "prototype".

Remaining skeptical in her dissertation, Morgan (1998) notes that her case study, *propaganda*, could, when looked at two different ways, be seen as either Type 1 or Type 2. In her explanation, Morgan notes that the "underspecified core"—shared by all—"is then conventionally filled out with certain mainstream culturally acceptable external belief structures concerning politics, economics, and so on, so that in actual usage the prototypical example of 'propaganda' seems

rich, like ‘art’” (286-7). In other words, from the extrapersonal perspective, *propaganda* looks like Type 1; from the intrapersonal perspective, it looks like Type 2.

4. Conclusion

By now, then, it should be apparent that we don’t need two types of contested category. If we look at any contested category from an extrapersonal perspective, it will look like Type 1, whereas from an intrapersonal perspective it will look like Type 2.

One question remains: what accounts for Lakoff’s original intuition that there are two different types of contested categories? Lakoff has explained (personal communication) that in early investigations, the cases of *democracy* and *art* seemed to behave quite differently, in that for *art* there was, after talking to enough people, nothing at all that was shared by everyone, whereas for *democracy* some schematic structure remained. From the perspective of this paper, the difference is again not a fundamental one of categories belonging to different “types,” but rather of categories that involve different degrees of sharedness being examined from two different angles: the intrapersonal and the extrapersonal.

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