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Universality of Semantics

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**A noun is a noun is a noun—or is it?**

**Some reflections on the universality of semantics**

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1. INTRODUCTION. One of the central claims of cognitively oriented linguists, e.g. Dwight Bolinger, Anna Wierzbicka, Charles Fillmore, Ronald Langacker, George Lakoff etc., is the argument that different grammatical constructions that appear to be used to describe the “same” objective scene, construe or conceptualize that scene in different ways. Even differences attributable to purely grammatical processes, such as active vs. passive, dative shifted vs. unshifted clauses, and even the basic categories noun vs. adjective, appear to have a conceptual content, overlooked because they do not usually change the truth-conditional character of the description.<sup>1</sup> These observations, which are central to the cognitive linguistic principle that even the most “syntactic” structure has a semantic-pragmatic value associated with it, have not gone unnoticed in everyday life. The commercial world has found it useful to reconceptualize used cars as preowned cars, and a beauty salon in Ann Arbor advertises one of its services as “hair color correction”. On a more serious note, the periodic changes in the term used to refer to Americans of African descent over the past century represent a search for a new conceptualization of their identity as well as the avoidance of the connotations of the older term.

If we accept this hypothesis—a corollary of the principle of iconicity in language—as an accurate description of a fundamental property of language, then we must presumably accept its consequences if we are to believe in a coherent and consistent theory of language. And one of those consequences appears to be semantic relativism, a philosophical position that appears to be attracting more interest now than it has for some time. (Note that if one does not accept the hypothesis of differences in grammar or lexicon encoding alternative conceptualizations, then one cannot draw inferences about the relativity or universality of semantics from linguistic evidence.) This consequence has not gone undrawn by functionally and cognitively oriented linguists. For instance, Ronald Langacker, who has presented probably the most rigorous cognitive linguistic model currently in print, makes the following assertion near the beginning of his magnum opus on cognitive grammar:

‘If one language says *I am cold*, a second *I have cold*, and a third *It is cold to me*, these expressions differ semantically even though they refer to the

same experience, for they employ different images to structure the same basic conceptual content' (Langacker 1987:47)

Now, such a statement seems to be quite in line with the hypothesis presented at the beginning of this paper, and not an unreasonable conclusion to draw. And in fact, many linguists (and anthropologists) who do not subscribe to cognitive grammar have made similar claims. Although on the face of it, it seems to be a fairly strongly relativistic position, it is hedged in certain significant ways, to which I will return at the end of this paper. But languages differ grammatically in more fundamental ways than in Langacker's example. In fact, languages differ significantly in the basic constructions constituting clauses and phrases. This has led some linguists, such as Hans-Jürgen Sasse, to propose radically different syntactic analyses for the basic constructions of languages such as English, Tongan, Cayuga and Tagalog. Sasse makes clear that he considers the implications of his syntactic analyses of these languages to be semantic as well, and ends one of his papers on this topic with a strong statement of the relativist position:

'...if there are differences in expression, there are also differences in meaning. This fundamental unity of expression and meaning defines meaning as language-specific and rules out universal semantics as a legitimate field of study' (Sasse 1991:93)

Depending on one's view of semantics, this may or may not be a dramatic or interesting claim. If one views linguistic semantics as independent of conceptual structure, then Sasse's position would reduce to the assertion that linguistic semantic representations are language-specific, and in fact quite closely mirror morphosyntactic representations in that language. Such a view would say nothing about the relation of language to thought. But this is clearly not Langacker's or, I suspect, Sasse's view: they assume that "semantic structure is conceptual structure" (cf. Jackendoff), in which case Sasse's assertion is a radical relativistic view of the relation between language and thought.

In this paper, I will argue that one can accept the hypothesis that different constructions for describing the "same" experience in a single language encode different conceptualizations of that experience and the hypothesis that semantic structure is conceptual structure, accept the existence of typological variation in language, and still consider universal semantics as a legitimate field of study. That is, the premises stated in the last sentence are not sufficient to draw the conclusion of (radical) relativism. Specifically, I will argue that there are hidden premises in the reasoning from the iconic principle to radical relativism; if we discard those premises by making certain reasonable assumptions about other aspects of language, then the radical relativist position does not follow automatically. In particular, if we assume the existence of polysemy, redundancy in expression, conventionalization, and the integration of variation and change into a speaker's knowledge of language, then it is possible to believe in the possibility of universal semantics.

## 2. HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS.

2.1. CONTRAST AND POLYSEMY. Let us begin with the example from Langacker regarding the three ways to express the sensation of coldness, illustrating more concretely with three languages that actually differ in that way:

English: *I am cold.*

Spanish: *Tengo frío.* ['I have cold']

German: *Mir ist kalt.* ['It is cold to me']

Langacker's conclusion contains a hidden premise. There is an important difference between the within-language principle described at the beginning of this paper and the cross-linguistic inference drawn here from it. The within-language principle (particularly as espoused by Bolinger and Wierzbicka) depends critically on the notion of contrast: if two grammatical structures occur in the same language to describe the "same" experience, they will differ in their conceptualization of that experience in accordance with the difference in the two structures. But if two grammatical structures do not occur in the same language, and so no contrast exists in the mind of any particular speaker, does the same difference in conceptualization hold? Instead, whatever way the language has chosen—'I am hungry', 'I have hunger', etc.—is the only conventional way to express the experience, which I'll group together as 'states' for short. So the speakers do not have available to them alternative ways to conceptualize the experience, and so it may not be the case that the conventional expression encodes any particular conceptualization.<sup>2</sup>

There is a response to this argument. The different ways to express cold, hunger etc. across languages do exist in the same language. For simplicity, let us stick to the first two possibilities, 'I am cold' and 'I have cold'. Even if a language uses only 'I am cold', there will exist 'I have X' or the appropriate possessive construction in that language, which contrasts with 'I am cold'. Conversely, a language using exclusively 'I have cold' will have 'I am X' or the appropriate predicate adjectival construction which contrasts with 'I have cold'. The conceptualization is encoded by the constructions SBJ PRED ADJ vs. SBJ POSS OBJ—or whatever the predicate adjective and possessive constructions are; these too vary considerably across languages. The conceptualization of cold, hunger etc. depends on whether it is categorized as the ascription of a property (the predicate adjectival construction) or as the possession of an object (the possessive construction).

There is another important hidden assumption here though. This assumption is that the semantics of SBJ PRED ADJ is identical to that of SBJ PRED STATE, and that the semantics of SBJ POSS OBJ is identical to that of SBJ POSS STATE.<sup>3</sup> But polysemy is rampant in languages, especially among grammatical morphemes and constructions. It is at least as reasonable to assume that there is a semantic extension—metaphor, perhaps—from the adjective or possession experience to the sensation-of-a-state experience. And a polysemy analysis does not require semantic identity of related meanings, which would imply semantic relativity, but only the recognition of resemblance. And this does not necessarily lead to relativity, since our experience of internal states can simultaneously resemble both

our experience of physical properties and our experience of possession without any change in its conceptualization from language to language.

Before going on, let us summarize the alternative analyses in terms of postulated syntactic and semantic structures. In the analysis which lends itself to a relativistic interpretation, there is a single construction covering both states and the “basic” function of that construction (ascription of a property, possession of an object). Also, there is a single semantic structure, identical for both states and the other function; and the cross-linguistic variation as to which semantic structure is assigned to states leads to the strongly relativistic interpretation. In the alternative analysis, there are two uses of the construction, that is to say, the construction is polysemous.<sup>4</sup> This may seem to violate the principle of “one expression, one meaning” that is the essence of iconicity, but another principle of cognitive linguistics repairs this particular problem. In cognitive grammar, and also in grammatical construction theory, there can be two separate constructions involved, one for states and one for the basic function of the construction, since constructions are autonomously stored elements in the mental representation of the grammar. The two constructions can also be subsumed under a superordinate category that covers both cases (and which can be, but need not be, given a unitary semantic conceptualization). These two variants are equivalent at the semantic level, because either one permits the possibility of two different uses of the same construction, which can differ semantically, and thus not require a relativistic analysis; the difference at the syntactic level will become relevant in section 2.4.

The less relativistic position is a reasonable view in this particular example, because ‘cold’, ‘hunger’, ‘fear’, etc. are not prototypical, either as members of the categories Noun and Adjective, or as types of predications (note the use of copula, possession, and impersonal constructions, all indicators of nonprototypical predicativity). The cross-linguistic variation in how they are encoded is one manifestation of their nonprototypicality as members of these lexical categories and as predications. One can argue that they share some conceptual properties with prototypical nouns and some with prototypical adjectives, without claiming that they are wholly conceptualized as one or the other. (Note the hedge, ‘wholly conceptualized’.)

However, this position does not seem to be so reasonable when applied to the prototypes themselves, that is, the basic constructions used for prototypical nouns and verbs, and their “projections”, phrases and clauses. Let us now turn to those examples and examine them more closely.

**2.2. REDUNDANCY IN EXPRESSION.** The first example I will describe, regarding nouns, illustrates another hidden assumption about how meaning is encoded in form that may reasonably be called into question. This is a claim that has been made about languages with numeral classifiers, that there are no count nouns, and “count” nouns are in fact “mass” nouns. In such languages, any noun in combination with a numeral must also have a classifier accompanying it (in fact, the classifier and the numeral form a constituent). In a number of classifier languages, demonstratives also require classifiers, and in a small number of languages, a classifier is found with a large range of modifiers.

In these languages, entities that would be expressed as mass nouns in non-classifier languages such as English also require classifiers. These classifiers are the equivalent of partitives or measures in English: *two pieces of bread, two cups of sugar*. There are also classifiers that are applied to “count” nouns that indicate groups or arrangements, the equivalents of *two flocks of sheep, three rows of trees*. But what differentiates such languages from English is the requirement of a classifying morpheme for phrases such as *three books, two women*; the following example is from Lahu (Matisoff 1976:98):

Lâhū nī gā

Lahu two CLF.PERSON  
‘two Lahu’

This has led a number of researchers to argue that the apparent translation equivalents of ‘book’ and ‘woman’ do not refer to specific individuated tokens, but only to the undifferentiated types of ‘bookhood’ or ‘womanness’.

Now, it cannot be argued that count nouns belong to a marginal category of nouns that happens to vary in its encoding across languages because it shares conceptual features with more than one neighboring prototype. Count nouns are generally taken to be the prototypical or paradigm class of nouns.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the same hidden assumptions required for the relativistic account of the expression of internal states also apply to the relativistic interpretation of classified nouns. As with the constructions for describing internal states, it is assumed that the classifiers for “count” nouns are the same syntactically and semantically as those for “mass” nouns. Although it is the same syntactic construction in question, it does not use the same classifiers, and it is possible to consider the count classifiers as somewhat different in their grammatical status and therefore also in their conceptual consequences. Greenberg has noted, for instance, that count classifiers are associated with particular count nouns, while there is no single classifier associated with particular mass nouns, since various part and measure classifiers are used with each classifier; and Berlin (1968) has noted that the “inherent” count noun classifiers have a somewhat special status in the classifier system of Tzeltal.

There is another assumption about the relation of meaning to form found in this example, however. The reasoning for the relativistic interpretation is that since individuation is encoded in the classifier, it is not encoded in the noun itself. This presupposes nonredundancy in expression: if semantic content is expressed overtly in one place, it is not encoded elsewhere. But evidence suggests that if anything, language is highly redundant in its communication of information. This is true in grammatical expression as well. One example of this is the phenomenon of modal harmony described by Jennifer Coates in her study of the English modals (Coates 1983). For some complements, the expression of irrealis modality does not necessarily follow from the semantics of the matrix verb; for these verbs, the use of a modal auxiliary in the complement contributes additional meaning to the complement. Other complement-taking verbs such as ‘ask’, however, do entail an irrealis modality for the complement. Modal auxiliaries come to be used with those verbs as well, even though their semantic contribution is “redundant”. This is what Coates calls modal harmony: the modal in the complement is semantically

harmonious with the semantic requirements of the matrix verb. But we would probably not want to say of a language that employs modal markings in this way that the propositional attitude expressed by main verb is conceptualized as lacking a modal specification for the complement.

2.3. THE “SEMANTIC UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE”. But there is a still more radical analysis of variation in the semantics of nounhood and verbhood, which we can examine in order to uncover a still more important assumption underlying the relativistic analysis. We will illustrate it from a recent article taking this position, the one by Sasse quoted above. Sasse argues that there are radical differences between the syntactic structures of certain non-European languages, such as the Iroquoian languages and certain Austronesian languages, and a “typical” European language. This can be illustrated by the following examples and glosses:

Tongan (Sasse 1991:79):

na'e ui 'a Sione  
 PRET call ABS/GEN S.

‘It was calling of Sione.’ [Sasse’s “literal translation”]  
 ‘Sione called/was called.’

Cayuga (Sasse 1991:84):

a- hó- htq:' ho- tkwɛ't -a' nɛ:kyɛ h- ɔkwɛh'  
 PAST- 3SGN/3SGM- lose 3SGN- wallet -“NOM” this 3SGM- man

‘It was lost to him, it is his wallet, this one, he is a man’ [“literal translation”]  
 ‘The man lost his wallet.’

Sasse argues that in the Tongan example, what Eurocentric types would call a “predicate” is really a verbal noun, that is, a referring expression, with a genitive dependent. On the other hand, in the Cayuga example, what we would call an “argument” is really a predication, in apposition to the “true” predicate (‘it was lost to him’). Sasse thus argues that ‘reference’ and ‘predication’ (and the categories of ‘noun’ and ‘verb’ that are motivated by them) are expressed in radically different ways. Since he concludes the article with the passage quoted above, it is clear that this implies for him a radical difference in how events, objects etc. are conceptualized in these languages in contrast to each other and to European languages.

Sasse’s argument rests on the identity of the constructions involved for reference and predication in both Tongan and Cayuga. In Tongan, what one traditionally would call the absolutive marker is identical to the genitive (and the ergative, by the way, is identical to an oblique preposition, which can modify a noun as much as a “verb”), and at least in one case that he gives, the verb stem can also be used as a referring expression without any additional morphology. In Cayuga, what one would traditionally call the gender marker is identical with one

or the other of the “agent” and “patient” personal affixes of the verb, depending on the “noun” root, and so the “noun phrase” would presumably be identical in form to a predicate nominal construction. In fact, Sasse’s argument overlooks certain important differences between the “predication” and the “referring expression” in both languages—there is a tense-mood auxiliary in Tongan and a tense prefix in Cayuga, and Cayuga has a nominal suffix on one of the “NP”s. These critical differences in themselves suggest that the “predicate” and “subject” are in fact syntactically not the same despite some sharing of morphology (see Croft 1991, Chapter 2). Nevertheless, we will ignore these differences and examine the implications of the similarities.

And it is the assumption of similarity, or rather identity, that is the source of the most important hidden assumption in the argument. Not only is it assumed that the relevant grammatical elements in Tongan and Cayuga are semantically unitary in meaning, rather than being merely polysemous between a phrasal function and a clausal function—the hidden assumption discussed in 2.1 above. It is also assumed that the grammatical elements and/or constructions are invariant in meaning across languages: it is assumed that we can identify the genitive marker of Tongan with that of English and other languages, thereby demonstrating the “nominality” of Tongan clauses; and likewise identify the pronominal affixes of Cayuga with those of other languages, thereby demonstrating the “predicational” character of Cayuga noun phrases. The argument for the relativity of the lexical categories with respect to their functions in an utterance is based on the assumption of the universality of the grammatical constructions that encode those functions. But one could just as easily argue that it is the genitive relation that is conceptualized differently in Tongan, rather than the predication of an event expressed by the verb; and it is the pronominal’s relation to its head that is conceptualized differently in Cayuga, rather than the act of referring to the person or thing denoted by the noun. There is a kind of semantic uncertainty principle involved here: determining the relativity of the conceptualization provided by one element in a sentence can only be done by assuming the universality of an associated element in that sentence.

This argument also applies to the case of ‘cold’. The alleged difference in conceptualization of states/sensations can only be asserted by assuming the universal semantics of the predicate adjective and possessive constructions. One could equally reasonably argue that the predicate adjective and possessive constructions of Spanish differ conceptually from those in English. Likewise, the relativistic interpretation of nouns in classifier languages can only be asserted by assuming the universal semantics of partitive, measure and group expressions (as well as the identity of those expressions with “true” count noun classifiers).

Because of this, it is a priori undecidable where the semantic relativity lies in grammatical variation across languages. But we can get some sort of idea by taking a diachronic perspective on the problem.

2.4. GRAMMATICALIZATION AND CONCEPTUALIZATION. From a diachronic perspective, it is fairly clear what is going on in Tongan, Cayuga and other languages that Sasse and others have cited. We can begin with the Tongan example. There is a common grammaticalization path in which finite main clause morphosyntax—the morphosyntax of predication—historically develops from

nonfinite, particularly nominalized, constructions. In this process, the genitive form of NP dependents often gets carried over into the main clause construction, as the marking of one or the other or both of the core (subject and object) NPs, and the nominalized form of the verb also can get carried over into the finite verb form. This is presumably what went on in Tongan, and also in Jacaltec and Tagalog, which Sasse cites, and many other languages. Concomitant to this process, and often the driving force behind it, is the grammaticalization of finite verbs that originally governed these nonfinite or nominalized forms into auxiliary verbs. These auxiliaries often continue to bear the markings of finiteness, and thereby "deprive" the main verb of its predicational character, as in Basque, another "atypical" predicational type according to Sasse. Eventually, the inflected auxiliaries often affix onto the reanalyzed main verbs, as happened in Japanese and the Dravidian languages, and the verb regains its predicational characteristics. And a new genitive construction arises, or the genitive-become-subject-marker erodes, and so the verbal arguments no longer look like noun phrase dependents.

The Cayuga case is somewhat different. Presumably the pronominal affixes originated as independent pronouns that affixed onto the stems they are now found on. The question is what was their syntactic function when this happened, and how they spread through the grammar. It appears that the pronominal prefixes on verbs are older than those on nouns. In fact, the nominal prefixes are not completely identical to the verbal ones, and their identity is determined by the stem to which they are attached, in contrast to the verbal prefixes, which are determined by the agent or patient involved in the event.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting in this regard that the gender affixes of Bantu languages are similar or identical to the verbal subject and object affixes. The Bantu system resembles the Iroquoian one, though the Iroquoian system goes one step further in that the pronominal affixes are also possessive affixes; in Bantu languages, the pronominal affixes are possessive only in combination with a possessive root to which they are affixed. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the Bantu languages are not usually represented as conceptualizing objects in a predicational fashion.

In general, the diachronic scenario is fairly straightforward: the morphosyntax of finite clauses often evolves from that of noun phrases; it is possible that the reverse also happens, or at least some parallel development can occur. The languages that have posed the interesting questions from the point of view of the semantic relativity hypothesis are those in which this evolutionary path is somewhere in the middle of its progress: clause and phrase share significant morphosyntactic features by virtue of one extending to the other, but no further evolution grammatically separating the two (through replacement, renewal or split) has occurred yet.

What is the significance of this diachronic perspective for the conceptual semantics that cognitive linguists associate with the basic lexical categories and the constructions that characterize them? The gradual character of grammaticalization suggests that the grammatical constructions involved are polysemous, acquiring new functions over time. Another argument in favor of polysemy is that these constructions may end up going separate ways. An ergative marker that arose from a genitive or an instrumental will develop grammatical peculiarities differentiating it from its source case, and phonological ones as well;

at that point, it reveals that it is no longer considered by speakers to be the "same" as its genitive or instrumental source, phonologically as well as semantically. These are examples of a split in grammaticalization, many examples of which are documented by Heine & Reh 1984. These phenomena can easily be modeled in the cognitive grammar/construction grammar model, which allows for the possibility that two constructions that begin as syntactically identical but diverge semantically at some point in time may no longer be perceived as identical by speakers; they become two independent constructions and will go their own way syntactically as well as semantically.

This is found in lexicon, morphology and syntax. But in general it is the semantic conceptualization of the denotation of the lexical item that appears to cause the change in its status, rather than a new grammatical construction causing a change in the conceptualization of the lexical root's meaning. A lexical example, orthographical actually, is the split between *flour* and *flower*. They originally began as one word, a metaphor borrowed from French, and are now orthographically distinct, and I doubt that contemporary speakers of English mentally represent them as the same word. It is also likely that there was not a change in conceptualization of the cereal product during this time, but rather that awareness of the conceptual differences between the botanical entity and the cereal product led to lexical divergence. A syntactic example of the same thing is the fusion of the infinitival *to* and the perfective *have* in the quasimodals *hafta*, *gonna*, *oughta*, *shoulda*, *musta*, *gotta*, *woulda*. There is a syntactic reanalysis from a compositional Verb + *to* + complement or Verb + *have* + complement structure. At some point, these instances of the Verb + complement construction became cognitively autonomous from the more general infinitival and perfective complement constructions, and realigned themselves with the *to*-less auxiliary construction. This is manifested in the phonological erosion of *to* and *have* in the quasimodals. But I suspect that it was not because speakers reconceptualized the nature of the concepts encoded by those forms, but because the evolution of the meaning of those forms towards the tense-mood domain made the syntactic change to the "conceptually appropriate" auxiliary construction more likely. In other words, the conceptual structure is not dictated by the syntactic structure, but is in fact partly independent of it, and can cause changes in the syntactic structure to make the latter conform with the former.

Variation and change in grammatical structure suggests that it may not be the case that there are radically different conceptual structures for similar meanings, but that the form-meaning relation is often in a state of flux because of the complex analogies and differences between conceptual structures, which can be reflected in syntactic structures. Variation and change in linguistic structures in a single language suggest that the conceptualizations underlying different structures are not only not incommensurable, but also simultaneously available to speakers of a language at any given time. It also means that "new" conceptualizations, that is, ones not encoded by existing grammatical constructions, must be latent or immanent in speakers' minds, since speakers innovate novel grammatical constructions that encode those conceptualizations. In fact, the "different conceptualizations" are unified in that they all belong to a single path of grammaticalization path ('transitory category' [Croft 1991] or 'grammaticalization chain' [Heine 1993]). More important, it suggests that the

relation between form and meaning (that is, between language and thought) is not as rigid as the quotations at the beginning of this paper appear to claim.

3. SEMANTIC RELATIVITY AND SEMANTIC UNIVERSALS. What, then, do the observations in this paper suggest as a model for the relationship between language and thought? It suggests that human conceptualizations of various semantic structures encoded by language are not as radically different as the variation in grammatical constructions and their uses across languages appears to imply. Linguistic variation is the manifestation of common, in fact universal, evolutionary processes. These processes demonstrate that some conceptual structures that appear to be “radically different”, such as those underlying reference and predication, must share some semantic features, and that those features motivate the extension of phrasal morphosyntax to clauses (and possibly vice versa). This is also true in the more prosaic case of internal states, which share characteristics with ascribed properties and possessed objects.

This is not to say that the universalist position is the last word on the matter. It only argues against a radical relativistic position, in which alternative conceptualizations are mutually exclusive semantic structures. All that I have said so far is harmonic with a view of semantic differences among languages described by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) with respect to the metaphors we live by, and by Langacker in a footnote shortly after the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper:

[I]t is a matter of convention (not cognitive necessity) that *scissors, pants, glasses, binoculars*, etc. are plural in form (and largely in behavior)... The plurality of these expressions reflects conventional imagery: they highlight the bipartite character of the objects named, so the assumption that they are semantically singular is incorrect. Contrasting forms like *nostrils* vs. *nose*, *buns/buttocks* vs. *ass/bottom*, *stars* vs. *constellation*, etc. similarly construe the conceived entity by emphasizing either internal multiplicity or overall unity (Langacker 1987:47, fn. 28)

Construal (including metaphor) is a matter of shifting attention, of highlighting or emphasizing certain aspects of a complex experience at the expense of others by virtue of the linguistic form or metaphor chosen to describe it. The choice of a different grammatical construction, either by the same speaker in the same language on a different occasion, or by a different speaker in a different language, does not deny the speaker's awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon which is fully captured by neither construction. In fact, the speaker must have that awareness in order to choose or create a new linguistic form and thereby initiate a grammatical change. But the choice does influence the speaker's view of their experience, relative to the degree that a contrasting construction is available to encode the same or a similar experience.

This interpretation of semantic relativity fits well with the cases that have been the topic of this paper, the interaction of lexical roots (“content words”) with the grammatical inflections and constructions that combine with them in phrases and clauses. It also fits well with another class of cases that have been proposed as candidates for semantic relativity. It has sometimes been claimed (e.g. by Whorf)

that cross-linguistic variation in obligatoriness of certain inflectional categories (particularly tense and number) reflects a different world-view regarding time and measure. It seems reasonable to propose that this is also a matter of difference in focus of attention. Research on the acquisition of spatial distinctions by Soonja Choi and Melissa Bowerman (Choi and Bowerman 1991) supports this view. Spatial features encoded in linguistic forms are learned earlier than ones that are not, and this varies depending on which spatial distinctions are encoded in language. This is presumably due to the fact that children's attention is focused on those features obligatorily encoded in the language. But it does not follow that the children in either culture do not eventually gain awareness of the spatial distinctions not obligatorily encoded in their language.

Nevertheless, the cross-linguistic variation that has led linguists to postulate at least some degree of conceptual variation across individuals and cultures themselves fit into patterns that are universal. These patterns are manifested in individual speech communities by internal variation and change over time; in fact, the universal patterns appear to be ultimately dynamic in character. The existence of these patterns, underlying the fundamental grammatical categories discussed here as well as many other linguistic categories, call for an analysis of conceptual structures underlying language that reaffirms the universality of human mental abilities while acknowledging differences in the conceptualization of individual experiences.

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<sup>1</sup>Ironically, part of the impetus for these observations arose from the interpretive semantic critique of generative semantics, when for instance it was shown that *kill* was not semantically identical to the surface construction *cause to die*.

<sup>2</sup>In fact, Langacker himself makes this point in the second volume of his major work on cognitive grammar: in considering the semantic differences in encoding the causee of a causative construction using the accusative vs. an oblique (dative or instrumental case), he writes: 'That is, it does so [the oblique confers a greater degree of volition on the causee—WAC] when the language allows an option [between accusative and oblique case for causees—WAC]. If the same case is used in all circumstances, its meaning is neutral in regard to agentivity and directness of causation' (Langacker 1991:412, fn. 14).

<sup>3</sup>This is central to Sasse's argument; in a footnote to his paper, he argues that one should assume that identity of form entails identity of meaning—that is, there is a single general meaning—unless proven otherwise (Sasse 1991:94, fn. 8).

<sup>4</sup>In grammatical models without constructions as meaning-bearing units, the polysemy can be associated with a particular morpheme, in this case 'be' or 'have'.

<sup>5</sup>An alternative analysis would be that mass nouns are the prototype, but there is other evidence suggesting that this is not the case.

<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Marianne Mithun for filling in the historical and grammatical details. She also informs me that the Cayuga predicate nominal construction is in fact different from the NP construction illustrated in the example above, and that speakers, when asked to translate a Cayuga "nominal", respond with an English noun, not an English predicate nominal sentence.

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