

SYNONYMS AND HOMONYMS AS SEEN IN COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

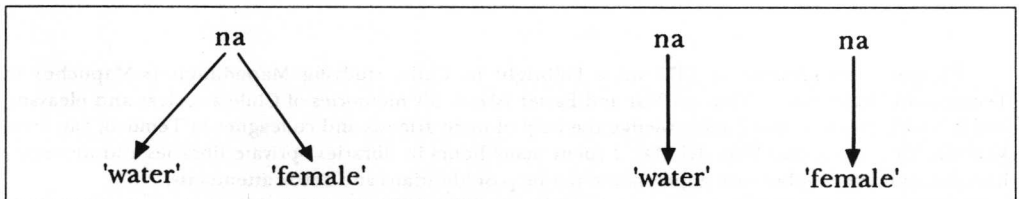
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The notion of "synonym" can be explored by examining the building blocks that are used to create words in American Indian languages. Universal cognitive processes are similar between speakers of Indo-European languages and non-Western languages, as seen in such concepts as 'up' and 'down'. Culturally learned cognitive relationships, as exemplified in language, give us some insight into meaning, and how the mind works.

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguists have struggled for a long time with the notion of "synonym" and its revelations in semantics. Discussions of synonyms have been carried out for centuries. One of the characters of *The Name of the Rose* made a synonymic observation about Latin when he noted that the ancient sage, Virgil of Toulouse, declared that "there are twelve ways of designating fire..." (Umberto Eco's novel of 1980). South American languages have at least six ways of expressing 'water/liquid', an example which is expanded on below. Other synonyms are seen in basic items, such as 'fire, male, female, foot, hole', as in other languages of the world.

I am using the term "homonym" to refer to items that have the same name (phonetically homophones), but with no judgment as to their origin being the same or different. Bréal uses the term "polysemy" to cover those lexical items that take on *new* meanings, and he notes that these definitions exist alongside of one another (Bréal [1900] 1964: 139). In the study of preliterate languages, we do not have the luxury of history to enlighten the etymological question. In several South American languages, the morpheme /na/ means 'water', and in many languages in the same countries, it also means 'woman/female'. The linguist deals with the possibility of either one or two etymologies:



Some insight into understanding the nature of synonyms and homonyms is gained by looking at cognate sets in comparative studies that deal with genetically related languages. Two languages of Chile¹, Mapudungu and Rapa Nui, have similarities with other American Indian languages, and I have compiled extensive comparative files in order to try to explain the resemblances in a coherent way. The mass of data appeared to be an incorrigible tangle of inexplicable sets of resemblances in languages of Bolivia, Peru and Chile. In the early 1980s I realized that the data would be more manageable with a synonym database, rather than the cognate sets that I had been assembling from comparative studies. This was the origin of the *Intercontinental Dictionary Series*, the format of which is based on the synonym dictionary of Carl Darling Buck. Scholars from all over South America have cooperated in contributing data which now are recorded in a preliminary form on computer disks, with a Macintosh Hypercard program. Some 75 South American languages from across the continent are recorded in a 1311 WordList, following the modified outline of Buck. Four of these languages are from Chile: Cunza (Robert Lehnert Santander); Mapuche = Mapudungu (María Catrileo); Qawasqar (Christos Clairis); Yagan (Ana María Guerra Eissmann). It is possible to draw from the computer any two or more words in any two or more languages and merge the selected material into lists. The presentation here results from the merged lists of "water words" from the American Indian languages that are recorded in the database.

2. DEFINITION / ILLUSTRATIONS

All languages contain more than one way to refer to similar things or concepts, of course. Recognition of the distinctive features of lexical items is basic to understanding that which underlies the meaning. A familiar illustration in writings on semantics is the term for 'bachelor', which is defined as having the distinctive features of {+human, +male, +adult, -married}. The complications of defining and accepting examples of synonyms are intricately involved in categorization, in translation, in sociolinguistics, and in the acquisition of other languages and dialects. 'Chair' and 'stool' are combined in the category of house furniture in ordinary language. But an interior decorator or a museum curator may place these items in separate categories: a 'chair' is a piece of household furniture; a 'stool' is an artifact of the barn. The 'stool' may actually be called a 'milk stool', identifying it with the barnyard and only comprehending it in its function of a resting place for the farmer as he or she milks the cow.

¹ I spent the summer of 1975 on a Fulbright in Chile, studying Mapudungu (= Mapuche) in Temuco, and Rapa Nui in Viña del Mar and Easter Island. My memories of Chile are clear and pleasant, and it is with pleasure that I acknowledge the help of many friends and colleagues in Temuco, Santiago, Valdivia, Valparaiso, and Viña del Mar. I spent many hours in libraries—private libraries and university libraries, and I remember with appreciation the help of librarians and xerox attendants!

3. CONSIDERATIONS FOR MEANING AND COGNITIVE PROCESSES

The understanding of human behavior and of human language involves scrutinizing the connections that form the networks of social systems and linguistic structures. There are the universals, the properties of human beings that are hard wired in the physiology and especially in the brain. These universals predict that all people on all the continents act the same with categories that are forthrightly equivalent among human beings in any culture. Based on perception, in ways that neurologists are exploring, all peoples recognize:

head = up; foot = down

All human beings perceive 'round' in the same way and relate the shape to things in nature that are round, such as the sun and the eye.

There are also the phenomena of "onomatopoeia" that are expressed in such words that human beings automatically recognize as characteristic of both onomatopoeic sound (such as 'laugh' and 'suckle') and onomatopoeic movement (such as 'earthquake', 'lightning', 'butterfly'). It is not trivial that in comparative studies the words for 'air / blow / wind' are similar to a very large extent all around the world. I call these the "puff" words, because they are articulated with labial sounds. Such words are not useful for comparative work and should not be relied on to show connections between languages.

The hardware is illustrated in some Panoan languages, where 'eye' also means 'seed / grain'. This dual meaning also occurs in Ayoreo and Lengua. In other languages, such as Cayapa, 'eye' occurs with a classifier indicating 'round'; and in some languages, such as Epena-Saija, the word for 'eye' also means 'ball, round (thing)'. An artifact that is 'round' may be expressed by a morpheme homophonous with 'eye'. In my judgment, such forms, respectively, descend from a common origin, and the underlying meaning is based on universals of how human beings perceive something, as dictated by the neural networks in the brain. In the case of relating 'eye' and 'seed', the common denominators have to do with shape and size.

In contrast, the behavior of human beings is also controlled by the culturally learned software –the systems that underlie the social networks and the different languages. The word 'eye' provides examples in South American languages that may exemplify both the hardware and the software. In some cognate sets or synonym sets, the word for 'star' occurs alongside 'eye'. This apparently derives from a belief system that connects 'eye' and 'star'. My statements here are inconclusive in that I have not found a universal explanation of the combining of these two glosses into the same set. An example is cited in a proto form of the Panoan languages, where the cognate set for 'eye' includes the meaning 'star' (Shell 1965: 163). In other languages, such as Munduruku, the classifier for 'star' also means 'seed, eye'. When the linguistic analysis points to a connection such as 'eye' and 'star', the association may be based on beliefs, that is, the culturally learned. We *may* learn the *why* of the connection from mythology, but much of

history is lost, and we may never have a satisfactory explanation of the relationship.

The Guaycuruan languages of Argentina provide another possible example of software in the words for 'mountain' and 'lightning'. Mocoví, Pilagá, and Toba all contain the morpheme /soʔonaʔa/ in the word for 'mountain'. In Pilagá, it occurs in combination with /ka-/; this construction also means 'lightning', and it also refers to a female monster. This set of glosses is explained by the linguist (Buckwalter 1993): 'lightning' is caused by the female monster, and the people associate this morpheme with a startling sight. A distant mountain is an impressive geological formation when glimpsed by these woods-and-grasslands people. Further, when elephants were introduced in an itinerant circus, the word was also applied to them.

American Indian cultures manifest a belief system that emanates from natural phenomena, including the human body. Their languages and their artifacts were shaped by their view of anatomy and perceptions of the landscape. The connections seen in Comparative Linguistics have to do with:

- Descriptions of the "real world". Categorizing and labeling things in the environment is necessary so that families and clans can function. Things are 'round, long, clumped'; they are 'up, down, in front, behind'; they are 'small, many'; they are 'liquid, solid, air'.

- Descriptions of the "constructed world". Things are sorted out into a particular cosmology. Religion and culturally defined connections, as illustrated above in 'eye/ star' and 'mountain/ lightning', reflect the world view.

- Cognitive processes. There are connections made in the brain to refer to other things. These related events are seen in vocabulary that exemplify related notions:

water —> bathe; sun —> hot —> cook

It is very common for languages of the world to use the same word for 'month' and 'moon'; this association is exemplified in Cunza, Mapudungu, Qawasqar, and Yagan.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1. *Distant relationships*

Before positing distant relationships of languages, one must be guided by a constant awareness of the inherited hardware and a recognition of the software, the culturally determined "world views". Resemblances in sets that include pairs of ideas such as 'eye' and 'seed' may not be indicative of genetic relationships, but simply reflect the universals of how the brain works. However, if a cognate set includes 'eye' and 'star' one might suspect that a common mythology or belief system is historically reflected in the languages that contributed to the cognate set.

It is sometimes thought that a large mass of data provides more convincing "proof" of a genetic relationship, or at least a common historical background; and considerable effort is expended to compile massive lists of examples of resemblances. I think that quantity is not needed. Rather, a limited group of data is sufficient, when a coherent system that is culturally learned is displayed in simple and elegant formulas that explain the etymology of the vocabulary from two or more languages.

4.2. *Acquisition of the national language by ethnic peoples*

Linguistic analysis may elucidate some of the ways in which people have difficulties in learning another language. It is simple enough to learn by rote the names of things; it is not so simple to use the names with the correct associations. Misunderstandings and conflicts may result from two contrasting systems of world view, which may be reflected in synonyms and homonyms. The question above concerning the origin of /na/ treats the matter of thinking of 'water' as being a feminine thing, or thinking of the two meanings as completely independent, with no underlying association.

Differences in underlying structures can be further illustrated from the Incan culture with gender and tense/time. The ancient Incas incorporated a male/female dualism in their world view. According to Classen (1993: 22) these were complementary and independent categories, and their spheres of functioning did not conflict. It was the custom that women inherited property from their mothers, and men inherited from their fathers. The Conquistadores brought another kind of law that proportioned property only through males. It was impossible for Andean women to grasp the notion that their property should be controlled by their husbands.

The concepts 'behind, front' and 'past, future' result from both hardware and software. In many languages of the world, these notions of *SPACE* and *TIME* are associated with 'front' and 'back' body parts, and this may prove to be a universal. The four languages of Chile, which are listed above, all have the association of the body part: 'back', with the indicator of space: 'behind'. Throughout this century linguists have known that the details of the partition of time and space, however, are culturally learned. Among the Incan, it is the software that distinguishes Incan past and future from the concepts in Western cultures. In the Incan realm, the world was understood by viewing the landscape as a 'body' (Bastien 1987: 68). Incan wisemen used the metaphor of the human body to understand their community and belief system. In his study of the Kallawayas "Healers of the Andes", Bastien includes a map of the terrain with the title "Anatomy of the mountain's body". The upper level of the mountain has an /uma/ 'head', /nawi/ 'eyes', and /wayra/ 'mouth'; the central level has a /sixa/ 'stomach', and /sonko/ 'heart'; and the lower level has /čakis/ 'legs', and /sil'us/ 'toenails', which are indentations on the river. In Inca cosmology, the opposition of 'front/back' is associated with corporeal nomenclature: 'eye' and 'back', in accord with dimensions of *SPACE*. According to Classen, the association also incorporates *TIME*: past and present. Classen explains the Inca concept of time as an inversion

of front and back (1993: 13, 18) [for our purposes here, the terms are equivalent to Bastien's forms]:

In Andean thought the past is situated in front (*ñaupá*) and the future behind (*quepa*). English parallels are the words *before*, which means both "in front" and "earlier", and *after*, which means "spatially behind" and "temporally ahead."... The reason for this is that the past is known and therefore visible (in front of one), and the future is unknown and therefore invisible (behind one).

5. EVIDENCE IN AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGES

A study of "water words" illustrates the awesome power of creativity in the area of word formation. I believe that the large vocabulary that derives from the basic element of 'water' is characteristic of all languages in the world –not just the American Indian languages. The very existence of human beings depends on water. The ancient lyric poet Pindar called it the "noblest of the elements"². Thus, it is not surprising to find a very large network of "water words" for this necessity of life. I have compiled the following "Related ideas" from comparative studies available in linguistic literature. The major underlying distinctive feature of 'liquid/ water' is combined with other notions (morphemes) to form a significant portion of the vocabulary.

Related ideas:

properties: liquid, wet, damp, humid

natural elements: river (flow), creek, well (spring), sea, ocean, swamp, lake, lagoon, pond, rain, mist, dew, sap (tree)

corporeal: spit, tear (eye), urine, semen, diarrhea, blood, bathe, wash

artifacts: canal, watering hole

artifacts, food: juice, beverage, drink, soup, broth

The following examples of synonyms for 'water' in South American Indian languages are easily identified in the WordLists of Volume I of the Intercontinental Dictionary Series, and they are common throughout South America. This can be considered a preliminary observation, as apparently there are others that occur, which can be added later.

water₁ /pa/

water₂ /na/

water₃ /ko/

water₄ /me/

water₅ /še/

water₆ /la/

² I owe the correct reference to Christos Clairis, who has translated Pindar from the original Greek.

The morphemes in the above list are "synonyms" which combine with other lexical items to take on another identity, related to be sure. In combination: 'water' + 'flow' = 'river'; 'water' + 'quiet, still' = 'lake, pond'; 'water' + 'falling' = 'rain'; 'water' + 'eye' = 'tear (noun)'; 'water' + 'mouth' = 'saliva'.

The morpheme /pa/ 'water₁' occurs most commonly on the South American continent, in languages and place names from the mouth of the Amazon to the western side of the continent; and from the northern part to the southern part of the continent, as illustrated in the following examples. Caldas Tibiriçá gives alphabetical lists of Brazilian toponyms. The section beginning with the letters "pa-" contains more than five columns of hydronyms, relating to such "water-words" as 'river, creek, sea, lake' (Caldas Tibiriçá 1985: 92-95). I assume that /pa/ reflects a great time-depth in a common origin –and even going back to the Old World, where a similar (or same) morpheme is found across Europe and in ancient Mesopotamia.

The following examples are presented in a geographical format (more or less), starting from the farthest point north in the continent (Guajiro) to the southernmost location at the Tierra del Fuego, illustrated by the Yagan language. Within a language family, the languages are presented in alphabetical order. The illustrations are all taken from the synonym dictionary referred to above. In a preliminary study, with large amounts of data from many languages, it is possible to make a wrong identification of morpheme. It is also possible that the identification has not yet been recognized. With further analysis, mistakes can be corrected.

Guajiro (ARAWAKAN)	pa ^ŷ aa-ima ('shore')
Guajiro	pa ^ŷ aa ('sea')
Guajiro	mapa ('honey')
Guajiro	apara ^ŷ la ('flow')
Muisca (CHIBCHAN)	βaki ('small brook')
Embera-Atrato (CHOCOAN)	'ne-βa ('soup' lit. 'generic prefix-liquid')
Embera-Atrato	-βa ('sap/ liquid [tree]')
Embera-Atrato	dau-βa ('tear' lit. 'eye-liquid')
Epena -Saija (CHOCOAN)	pa'nia ('water')
Epena-Saija	'ne-ba ('soup')
Epena-Saija	pa'k ^h uru k ^h a'yoo ('sap')
Epena-Saija	'tau-ba ('tear' lit. 'eye-liquid')
Puinave (unclassified)	pai ('fermented drink')
Macushi (CARIBAN)	piranna ('ocean')
Joti (unclassified)	bābo ('lake')
Joti	bāilā ('honey')
Shirishana (YANOMAMAM)	palahi ('shore')
Cofān (unclassified)	'ma ² pā-ñe ('wash')
Wodani (unclassified)	pāta ('swim')
Siona (TUCANOAN)	p ² aya ('honey')
Tuyuca (TUCANOAN)	'baa ('swim')
*Tucanoan	*baa ('swim')

Yagua (PEBA-YAGUAN)	paroni; paruy ('wet')
Ignaciano (ARAWAKAN)	'mapa-ma ('honey')
Ignaciano	-e'pata-ča ('wet')
Wapishana (ARAWAKAN)	p ^h aran ('sea, ocean')
Wapishana	-ma ² ba ('honey')
Waurá (ARAWAKAN)	mapa ('honey')
Quechua (QUECHUAN)	para ('rain')
Araona (TACANAN)	pado ('to bathe another')
*Tacanan	*pa ('cry')
Cavineña (TACANAN)	pa-ana-kaka ('tear' noun)
Eseexa (TACANAN)	ɓai ('lake')
Tacana (TACANAN)	bai ('lake')
Tacana	(pado- ('bathe'-transitive))
Cashibo (PANOAN)	ɓaka ('river')
Cashibo	pa'rumpapa ('very large river')
Cashibo	pa'ɕa ('wash clothes')
Catuquina (PANOAN)	pasa ('soup')
Chacobo (PANOAN)	pai ('river'); pao ('stream')
Chacobo (PANOAN)	ɓata ('honey')
Shipibo (PANOAN)	paro ('river')
Cayuvava (unclassified)	pate ('urine')
Cayuvava	ɓa'riede ('beer')
Itonama (unclassified)	pa ² alɨ ² te ('swim')
Aché (GUARANIAN)	baki ('rain')
Guaraní (GUARANIAN)	para ('sea')
Guaraní	para-ɣasu ('ocean')
Wayãpi (GUARANIAN)	palana ('sea, ocean')
*Tupí-Guaranian	*paranā ('river')
Nambiquara (unclassified)	pā ('river')
Toba (GUAYCURUAN)	i-paɣan ('flow')
Toba	-apapi ('wet')
Chorote (MATAGUAYAN)	-pan ~ -pyen ('swim')
Chorote	ap ('cry')
Niwaklé (MATAGUAYAN)	-ap ('cry')
Günūna-Küne (CHON)	at ² ap ('tear' noun)
Qawasqar (unclassified)	pap ² e ('swamp')
Yagan (unclassified)	palaxa ('rain')

6. CONCLUSION

Comparative linguistics and analysis of word formation can contribute to the understanding of how people view the world, and how they relate to the environment and to each other. The concepts of "same" or "different" are realized in attempts to recognize and define synonyms. To understand cognitive processes and underlying meanings, it is necessary to find the perspectives of

other peoples, whose languages exhibit other points of view that contribute to defining basic vocabulary.

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