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On Parts of Speech (Word Categories, 'partes orationis')*

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Abstract

In this paper the author addresses the question of what it means to define word categories (parts of speech or *partes orationis*) and how the theory of word categories can be given a foundation within a general theory of grammar. Not only are word categories conceptual categories which must be defined semantically, it is imperative not to confuse word categories with word classes, which are of an entirely different nature. Parts of speech correspond to specific "ways of meaning", and therefore a clear distinction must be drawn between categorial meanings of words on the one hand and their lexical meanings on the other. Whereas the latter are language-specific and hence idiomatic, the former are universal, though this does not imply that they necessarily occur as linguistic forms in all languages. Finally, the author points out that all the various classifications of words which have so far been proposed in the literature are valid in their own ways, provided they are not taken as definitions of word categories.

1. Introduction

1.1. The aim of this paper is to clarify the problem of the so-called "parts of speech", here mostly referred to as "(word) categories", by introducing and discussing a set of conceptual distinctions. It is well known that the theory of word categories presents a number of difficulties and can be regarded as one of the most perennially controversial parts of the general theory of grammar.[1] In order to establish how the problem of word categories (i.e. noun, adjective, verb, and adverb) can be stated in a rational and coherent way, it is necessary to refer briefly to the very foundations of the general theory of grammar first.

1.2. Most problems concerning the theory of parts of speech result from two rather common mix-ups, viz. of *concepts* with *objects* on the one hand and of *meaningful words* with mere *forms* on the other. Once this confusion has been overcome, it is essential to understand that only concepts can be defined, not objects corresponding to one category or another. For example, *a* noun (or *this* noun) is an "object" (i.e. a word), but "noun" is a concept. Objects are impossible to define: one can only relate an object to a concept by "subsuming" the object under this concept. And that is exactly what happens when a particular word is called, e.g., a noun. What is being defined in such cases is the concept "noun" (viz. "substantive"), or, better still, "nouniness" (viz. "substantivity"). Furthermore, as I will try to explain in subsequent sections, categories can only be defined semantically, hence their definition must be based on specific features which belong to *meaningful words*. From an existential point of view, "nouniness" or "substantivity" can only be a property of meaning-bearing words, i.e. of entities which are conceived or thought of as meaning-bearing words. A

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1 Valuable discussions of the criteria for the classification and delimitation of the categories can be found, among others, in Paul (1920, 352-372), Brøndal (1928, 9-62), Piccardo (1952), Otto (1954, 25f. and 31-37). The semantic criterion is discussed in Kronasser (1952, 86f.).

mere "form" cannot be a noun, an adjective or any other category. It is of course possible to consider such a form as having the *function* of a noun, an adjective etc., thereby referring to the particular kind of meaning that is materialized by the form and transforming the mere form from a pure *signifiant* (the sound shape in the Saussurean sense) into a combination of a *signifiant* and a *signifié* (the linguistic meaning proper, again in the Saussurean sense). But a mere form is a mere physical phenomenon or, for that matter, a schema of facts, and as such it no longer belongs to language as a whole but only to the material part of language, i.e. *to language as a natural phenomenon*. This is not to say, however, that the study of the formal schemata of a language is superfluous. Rather, the point is that one must distinguish between the *theoretical level*, including the definition of the categories, and the *descriptive level* on which the schemata which instantiate the categories are described. It is perfectly legitimate – and sometimes necessary – for a descriptive grammar which is concerned with a language system to take forms as its starting point, thus restricting its inquiry to mere matters of form. But due to the very fact that it pays no attention to linguistic meaning, such an analysis can do no more than establish schemata to which one can assign conventional labels, e.g. *A, B, C, D* etc. (see, for instance, Bloch and Trager 1942, 60). Up to this point, the "formalist" stance is still a legitimate one – even though it usually encounters some serious problems of its own (see sections 3.3 – 4 below for some discussion). But as soon as the *function* of a schema is to be determined, one cannot but fall back on semantic categories (noun, adjective etc.) which are either pre-defined or intuited. Contrary to what theoreticians of formalism claim (Bloch and Trager 1942, 68-69), defining these semantic categories involves more than merely establishing the formal schemata – just as the definition itself cannot be reduced to such an act. Word categories are, after all, not mere "forms" or physically observable phenomena. Empirical evidence for this can be drawn, for instance, from the simple observation that one and the same category adjective is present in different languages like Latin, Spanish and German, whereas the formal schemata which realize this category differ in a number of ways among these languages.

2. Levels of Abstraction

2.1.1. Further difficulties arise from the fact that the different levels of abstraction on which language can be studied are not always neatly and coherently distinguished from one another.[2] The main error which one tends to encounter (and which derives from the two mix-ups discussed in § 1.2) is that word categories are thought of as lexical "classes". Indeed, there have been many endeavours to define word categories as classes to which words from the lexicon of a particular language belong "by nature". Strictly speaking, this error is a threefold one, (1) because word categories are not word "classes", (2) because the classes that can be construed on the basis of categories are not "lexical" classes, and (3) because categories cannot be defined on the level of "language". The category noun, for instance, is not to be identified with the class of nouns, nor is this class a class of the lexicon of a language; nor, finally, can one state with respect to any particular language *what it is* to be a noun. All one can establish is whether a particular language has nouns or not, and if it does have nouns, *what* the specific formal schema *looks like* that corresponds to the category.

What I call a "definition" is an operation carried out on concepts and should not be confused with what is usually called a "classification". The latter operation is always of an existential kind – even if its objects are the result of an abstraction. Classes can be set up on the basis of categories, but they cannot possibly be defined as classes themselves. It is perfectly reasonable to set up, say, the class of triangular objects, but this does not mean that by doing so one has also defined "triangularity". Triangularity is not itself a class of objects but, rather, the basis on which the class comes into existence; after all, triangularity corresponds to a *way of being* of the objects that constitute the class. By way of analogy, one could say that word

categories or parts of speech correspond to the *ways of being of words*.

One should keep in mind, however, that this kind of analogical reasoning is of limited validity given that words are not "things" but "events" and that their "categorial" character is not something one can observe in the physical world but a *semantic function* one *thinks*. Furthermore, what I call the categorial character of a given item is not a constant feature of one and the same form. This is precisely why word "classes" are necessarily classes of abstract words and hence depend for their size and conception on the way the abstraction is carried out. Categories, on the other hand, are *partes orationis*, i.e. they occur as *ways of being* of concrete words in *speech*, that is as semantic functions in *language use*.

2.1.2. And there is yet another important reason why word categories are not word classes. As a matter of fact, the categorial values I am referring to occur not only in individual words. Syntagmatic combinations of words can also be, e.g., proper names (for example *Alcalá de Henares* and *Ciudad Real* in Spain, *Antonio Martínez García* etc.). Even complete utterances can be "nominalized" and thus function as nouns. In this paper, however, I will focus on the problem of what categorial values can be found in words and how they are to be defined.

2.2. A corollary of what has been said in § 2.1.1 is that "classes", which can be established on the basis of categorial features, are not classes of "mere words" or "mere forms". Such mere forms do not have meanings and can therefore be classified only according to physical features such as *oxytones, paroxytones, proparoxytones* etc., as *monosyllabic, bisyllabic, trisyllabic* words etc. Moreover, physical identity in no way implies functional identity. On the level of mere forms one can identify, for example, a single form with several distinct functions, for instance *amo* (meaning 'I love' or 'master' in Spanish) or *liebe* (as in *meine liebe Freundin* 'my dear friend' or *ich liebe sie* 'I love her' in German).

2.3.1.1. Moreover, word "classes" are not simply classes of meaningful words. Rather, they are constituted in a variety of different ways.

Time and again one can read in grammars and linguistic articles that in a language like English nouns "do not differ" from verbs. Such claims are

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typically corroborated by the observation that a word is a noun or a verb depending on whether it is preceded by *a (an)/the* or by *to*, e.g., *a/the fire* vs. *to fire* (cf. Rosetti 1950, 139). However, what this observation shows is precisely that in a language like English (and also, e.g., in Chinese), nouns and verbs are perfectly distinguishable with regard to their occurrence as concrete words in speech. There clearly is one particular way of being for nouns and another for verbs in these languages, and the difference between them is immediately clear as soon as the words are arranged in a sentence, i.e. as soon as one seeks to identify their function in actual speech utterances (cf. Vendryes 1950, 141-143 and Meillet 1948, 176-177). And that is precisely what grammarians do whenever they conceive of words as meaningful units, given that this is in itself already a way of using them, of rendering them meaningful (cf. Bertoni and Bartoli 1928, 25).

To identify *(the) fire* and *(to) fire* is not the same, however, as identifying the mere words

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[2] It should be noted that such difficulties did not arise to the same extent when the foundations of the theory of word categories were first laid in antiquity. To ancient scholars, words did not possess meaning outside their use in speech, nor did these scholars work with the modern concept of a "language", understood as a system that is deduced from language use und then "isolated" in some artificial manner (or, worse still, considered as existing 'outside and independently of the speakers'). See Lohmann (1952, 11f.).

"*amo*" and "*amo*". One can readily admit that *fire* and *fire* are identical as "abstract meaningful words", but this is obviously not the case for "*amo*" and "*amo*". The claim that *fire* and *fire* are identical "abstract meaningful words" is not based on the kind of meaning through which a word is said to belong to one category rather than another. Hence what is required is a new distinction between two kinds of meanings, viz. *lexical meaning* and *categorial meaning*.[3] In English, (*the*) *fire* and (*to*) *fire* are one and the same abstract word from the point of view of lexical meaning, but not from the point of view of categorial meaning. This difference becomes even clearer from a comparative point of view. The relationship between pairs like (*a*) *fire* and (*to*) *fire* or (*a*) *wire* and (*to*) *wire*, for instance, is not the same as the relationship between, say, *a bear* and *to bear* (Vergote 1951, 27-28): the members of the former pair differ only in categorial meaning, whereas those of the latter pair differ in lexical as well as categorial meaning. Likewise, Spanish *amo* 'I love' and *amo* 'master' differ in both categorial and lexical meaning, whereas German *grün* (adjective) as in *der Baum ist grün* 'the tree is green' and *Grün* (noun) as in *Grün ist eine Farbe* 'Green is a colour' differ only categorially.[4] Thus, the lexical meaning of a given word covers what is organized by the language, whereas the categorial meaning covers *the way it is organized*. To put it more succinctly: whereas lexical meaning refers to *what* is rendered as word meaning in a given language, categorial meaning refers to *how* the language renders it. Hence if, e.g., German *grün* and *blau*

(or Spanish *bosque* and *selva* ≈ 'woods') correspond to a single word in another language, we are dealing with the level of lexical meaning, but if one and the same lexical meaning 'green' can be conceived of and expressed as either "quality" or "substance" in another language, we are concerned with the level of categorial meaning.

2.3.1.2. There can be no doubt that word categories are semantic categories, but they stand for categorial meaning, not for lexical meaning, i.e. they constitute moulds in which lexical meanings are organized in speech. And lexical meanings differ substantially from categorial meanings in two respects.

First of all, lexical meanings cannot strictly speaking be assigned to "categories" (i.e. universal ways of being in language) but only to "families" of words or what have come to be known as semantic "fields". Such semantic fields differ *per definitionem* from language to language, given that each language delimits and structures reality in its own manner and according to the way the words in that language "organize" reality.[5] And insofar as lexical meanings belong to a single language, which is itself an historical object, both these meanings and the semantic fields of which they are part constitute "objects" (or more precisely: parts of objects) as described above. For this reason, lexical meanings can be proven to exist, they can be delimited, described and analysed, and they can be compared to lexical meanings in other languages. But they cannot be "defined", for one can only define the *concept* of "semantic field", not a particular field in a particular language.

Furthermore, except for metalinguistic expressions, the "things" speakers refer to when they use lexical meanings are external to language. As a consequence, the concepts to which they correspond cannot possibly be defined within the purview of linguistics. With respect to what speakers refer to on the basis of lexical meanings, linguists can only record "uses" and try to describe them in a systematic way. To define the concept of 'virtue', for instance, is a task for moral philosophers, not for linguists. All that linguists can do is describe

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[3] Note that the theory of grammar needs to distinguish not only *lexical meaning* and *categorial meaning* but other kinds of meaning as well. *Grammatical meaning* is the meaning that corresponds to grammatical categories (e.g., *Agent, Patient, determined, undetermined* etc.), *instrumental meaning* is the meaning of instrumental morphemes like *determiners, prepositions* etc. These kinds of meaning apply to word classes only, however, and are therefore of no immediate concern to the problem of word categories.

[4] Contrary to what Pfänder (1963, 164-165) seems to think, there is no opposition in the latter example between the "concept of noun" on the one hand and the "noun" itself on the other. The example only shows that the categorial meaning of "nouniness" is expressed in a formal schema which deviates from what is to be considered its "normal" realization; cf. note 16 (with reference to the example *Grün ist die Farbe der Hoffnung* 'Green is the colour of hope' in Paul 1920, 354) and § 5.2.

[5] This insight goes back to W. von Humboldt. The theory of semantic fields was later elaborated by the Neo-Humboldtians, especially in Germany by J. Trier and L. Weisgerber.

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how words like *virtue*, German *Tugend*, Spanish *virtud* etc. are being used in specific linguistic communities.

Whereas lexical meanings are language-specific, categorial meanings do not belong to particular languages as such but to language in general (and this also explains why they occur in so many different languages). Categorial meanings are – at least potentially – universal, and that is why they can be defined. This does not mean, however, that categorial meanings constitute a different kind of "things" altogether. Analogous to what has just been said about the relationship between lexical meanings and "things" in the world, it is safe to say that categorial meanings are the "things" themselves, i.e. objective features of human speech which may be referred to by words like *verb, noun* etc. As such they are "linguistic things", facts of languages, the concepts which correspond to them are "linguistic" concepts, and they can be defined by linguists only. It is obvious, however, that a linguist cannot perform this task by simply assuming the stance of a lexicographer or historian and recording the different uses of, say, the word *noun*. The linguist must also be a theoretician and seek to determine what a 'noun' is (understood as a term of linguistic metalanguage which can only be rendered explicit from a linguistic point of view). This task has nothing to do with "metaphysics" or "logicism". After all, no metaphysics is involved when concepts are defined, nor is the noun a logical entity; rather, it is a linguistic one.[6]

2.3.2. We are now in a position to understand why "classes" which correspond to word categories do not come about on the basis of lexical meanings but only on the basis of categorial meanings. Such classes come about through abstract words of a particular kind. Let F refer to a word's physical form, L to its lexical meaning and C to its categorial meaning. Four types of abstract words are then conceivable:

(a) mere "forms" (F), e.g. Spanish "*amo*", English "*bear*", German "*liebe*";

(b) "lexical forms" (what one might call "semantemes") (FL), e.g. English *fire* and *wire* or Spanish *verde* 'green', regardless of the respective categorial meanings;

(c) "categorial forms" (what one might call "categoremes") (FC), e.g. Spanish *cuadro* and *papel* when considered as nouns, irrespective of different lexical meanings ("cuadro" 'painting' or 'team', "papel" 'paper' or 'role (in some kind of event)');

(d) words with lexical and categorial meaning (FLC), e.g. Spanish *amo* 'master' (noun) or 'I love' (verb).

Evidently, only the abstract words constituted as FC or FLC can be classified categorially, on the basis of the element C. This means that FL-words will appear in several classes, even though they present different C-meanings.[7] Hence, interferenc-

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[6] In this sense, the Bloomfieldian view of linguistic meaning offers one correct solution alongside two incorrect ones. It is correct that the study of what speakers refer to when they use meanings, and the definition of the corresponding concepts, falls within the purview of the non-linguistic sciences, i.e. of those sciences which deal with the "things" themselves. But it is incorrect to believe that this frees us from the task of analysing lexical meanings or that we may relegate the study of *meaning in language use* to non-linguistic sciences which deal with the referents of words. It is also incorrect to think that this applies to categorial meanings as well as lexical ones. The belief that the act of defining categories can be reduced to determining the material schemata which instantiate categories in a given language ignores the fact that categorial meanings (just like grammatical and instrumental ones) belong to the very matter of language and that the only science which can deal with the matter of language is linguistics. From the point of view of this belief, there is no difference between categorial meanings and the material procedures which instantiate them (endings, infixes, alternations etc.);

[7] both are treated as potentially universal modalities of language as such and as open to linguistic definition independently of any particular language. The difference between both is that categorial meanings are modalities at the level of content, whereas endings, infixes etc. are modalities at the level of expression. Incidentally, Bloomfield himself (1933, 202f.) constantly refers to so-called "class-meanings" and regularly points out that one has to take meaning into account in one way or another in order to give a formal description of language (cf. Bloch and Trager 1942, 68 and 74). The post-Bloomfieldians treated Bloomfield's reservations *vis-à-vis* meaning as a kind of negative dogma and as an invitation to avoid any reference to meaning at all. A lucid discussion of Bloomfield's own, much more differentiating position can be found in Fries (1954, 58-60).

From the point of view of the two kinds of meaning I am considering here (viz. lexical and categorial), it is interesting to note that there are words which are F only while also bearing an "instrumental meaning" as defined above (e.g. articles or prepositions) or other values still (e.g. interjections), and that there are also words which refer to a lexical meaning provided by the situational context or other words in context (e.g. pro-

es can only occur between heterogeneous classes, never between homogenous ones: one and the same object cannot belong to different classes that are constituted on the basis of a single criterion but only to different classes that are constituted on the basis of different criteria. For instance, if several triangular and rectangular objects which are blue are to be classified according to their form and their colour, then a single triangular object will simultaneously belong to the class of triangular objects and to the class of blue objects. But a rectangular object cannot be assigned to the class of triangular objects merely because it is blue. In the same vein, it would be incoherent to say that the word *green*, as a noun, belongs to the same class as the adjective *green* merely because both words share the same lexical meaning. The latter is a feature that has nothing to do with the criterion constituting the word class in question.

The problems and difficulties commonly raised in this matter are caused by interferences between the criteria used to assess the identity of words. For if one identifies some (abstract) word as FL, then it follows that this item can be a member of several classes of "categoremes"; *shop*, for instance, can then be a noun or a verb. But if one identifies some word as FC, then one and the same item can belong to different groups of "semantemes", e.g. the above-mentioned *cuadro* in Spanish, or *lengua* in the same language. Finally, if one identifies a word as FLC, then two items which only differ in C and L cannot be one and the same word: for this reason, *amo* 'I love' and *amo* 'master' in Spanish are two different words, and the same is true of *(the) fire* and *(to) fire* or *lengua* 'tongue' and *lengua* 'language' in Spanish.[8]

So what does it mean to say that in languages like English or Chinese one and the same word can be a noun, an adjective or a verb? It means that it is customary or desirable to identify the abstract words for these languages as FL, even in cases where it would be preferable or more convenient to identify them as FC in other languages. In part this is indeed justified, especially with regard to the difference between verbs and nouns, because in languages like English and Chinese a given word's lexical meaning can be isolated more easily than in many other languages; this in turn is due partly to the fact that lexical meanings have greater *autonomy* with respect to categorial meanings in languages like English and Chinese than elsewhere. In these two languages one even encounters FL-words which can be proper names as well as verbs (compare, for instance, *Coventry* and *to coventry*, *Shanghei* and *to shanghei*; Chinese *tschung*[1] *kuo*[2] 'China' or 'to treat someone as a Chinese', Vergote 1951, 35). Conversely, in Romance languages it is common practice to identify abstract "words" as FC because the connection between lexical meaning and categorial meaning is much closer in this family. It should be noted, however, that this criterion does not always hold for the opposition between adjective and noun, as shown, e.g., by words like Spanish *verde*, *blanco* etc., which are identified as FL-entities.[9]

2.3.3. The items I have been discussing so far belong to the vast and complex domain of the conventions that are commonly used in linguistic research. In fact, it would be of great benefit to linguistics as a science if the level of the object of research were always strictly distinguished from the level of the research process. By implication, one would always have to remain aware of the fact that one is working with products of abstractions in different directions. This would, I contend, prevent linguists from projecting problems into the object of inquiry which actually stem from inadequacies in dealing with the criteria of the analysis itself.

Unfortunately, the distinctions I have been talking about are very often ignored in actual linguistic practice, and this can lead to some serious inconsistencies. One such inconsistency is the debate about alleged "nominal forms of verbs". To assume that the class of nouns and the class of verbs are constituted by the same categorial criterion, is as meaningless as if one were to talk about the "triangular forms of rectangles". Another misconception which results from this kind of confusion and can be found in many theories and discussions of word categories, is the claim that "words like *hunger*, *flight*, *conversation* etc. are to be regarded as verbs, irrespective of their form, because they refer to processes"; that words like *speed*, *beauty*, *size* etc. "refer to qualities, without being adjectives"; that in *lumière du soleil* and *lumière solaire* (which both mean 'sunlight') the noun *soleil* and the adjective *solaire* express the same meaning; that a noun can mean a "quality" (or "property"; example: *beauty*) as well as a "process" (example: *arrival*); or that French *verdure* and *verdoyer* or *marche* and *marcher* "express the same concept".[10] Claims like these are intended to refute the semantic nature of word categories, but they fail due to two mix-ups: of meaning (German *Bedeutung*) with reference (German *Bezeichnung*) on the one hand, and of lexical meaning with categorial meaning (i.e. *what* is meant vs. *how* it is meant) on the other.[11] In fact such claims are unwarranted because word categories constitute distinctions with regard to a *how*, not with regard to a *what*; as E. Husserl (1948, 249) put it, they constitute distinctions "in der Weise der Erfassung". If this were not the case, one would quite seriously have to wonder whether words like *action* and *verb* (which no doubt mean 'action' and 'verb', respectively) should not be regarded as verbs and whether words like *quality* and *adjective* (which more than any other words mean 'quality' and 'adjective') are not really adjectives rather than nouns.

2.3.4. Let me emphasize finally that the word categories and word classes which are based on a given categorial criterion are not necessarily coordinated, even though this is how they most often appear in widespread lists of "parts of speech" (in which, incidentally, categorial, morphological, and syntactic criteria are usually mixed up with one another). A category can always display several categorial modalities, hence the corresponding class will contain quite a few subclasses (cf. Paul 1920, 352-353 and Bloomfield 1933, 249). For instance, the modalities of nominal pronouns, appellatives and proper names all correspond to the category noun.

2.4. In sum, if understood in the way I have been trying to defend, word categories are *categories of speech*, "universal" ways of meaning which are observed in actual speech and may be defined without reference to any particular language. Word categories must never be identified with so-called "word classes", for several reasons: because word classes are conventional, language-specific structures which have no concrete reality in actual speech; because some words belong to no category at all (cf. note 7), hence if one were to make a comprehensive categorial classification of words, such words would have to be allocated to other, noncategorematic word classes set up on another basis; and because word classes can be set up on entirely different grounds altogether which are equally conventional and theoretically no less valid. We must keep in mind that classifications, categorial ones no less than any others, are purely practical operations. Provided they are carried out coherently, such operations can be criticized only in terms of effectiveness and usefulness.

3. Categories and Schemata

3.1. An important consequence of the discussion in the preceding section is that word classes cannot possibly serve as a starting point in an attempt to define word categories. Since categories are speech functions, the only way to define them adequately is by successfully accounting for these functions. It follows that a given word can be assigned to a particular category only in relation to actual speech, i.e. in view of a particular, concrete use – be it attested in a text or, for that matter, arrived at through introspection.

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nouns and numerals) and can hence only be "categoremes". The existence of these kinds of words proves once more that "classes" do not coincide with "categories" and that lexical meaning and categorial meaning are two different things.

8   It is commonly thought that formal identity is an indispensable criterion for the identity of the (abstract) word. (Note that formal identity can be merely thematic, as for instance in second order abstract words like German "*singen*" which can be used to denote an entire paradigm, as in "the conjugation of the verb *singen*", "forms of the verb *singen*" etc.) In many grammatical systems, however, some paradigms are made up of entirely different forms with respect to a LC-identity; compare for instance Latin *bonus – melior – optimus*, English *good – better*, Serbo-Croatian *čovjek* 'man' – plural *ljudi*, etc.

9   Moreover, many words are always identified as FLC on the basis of etymological considerations or because of their grammatical meaning. For example, no one would ever claim that Spanish *papa* 'potato' and *papa* 'pope' are the same word, or Italian *lira* (the currency) and *lira* 'lyre' (the musical instrument), or French *sot* 'dumb' and *seau* 'bucket' (both pronounced [so]), or South-American Spanish *casa* 'house' and *caza* 'hunt', *ciervo* 'deer' and *siervo* 'servant'.

10   See, for instance, Hjelmslev (1928, 30) and (1948, 258), Buyssens (1950, 39-40), Frei (1929, 133), Larochette (1950, 109f.).

11   Most refutations of this kind are, of course, directed against the so-called "logical-objective criterion" which identifies word categories with what are assumed to be the "categories of reality". But as I have argued in Coseriu (1975 [1957], 228-230), such refutations are invalid as far as the use of the Aristotelian concept of "substance" in linguistics is concerned.

It goes without saying that a definition along these lines cannot be given on the level of the language system (*langue* in the Saussurean sense): after all, as pointed out above, a language system does not contain real words but *functional schemata*. Since all speech is conducted in a particular language and thus partly language-specific, all the linguist can do is specify the *particular categorial system* of a given language and the *formal expression* of each category within it. The particular ways of meaning of each language make up the categorial system of that language, with each *semantic mode* corresponding to some *formal mode*. If this were not the case, language could not function as a technique which all members of a speech community have at their disposal in order to realize their expressive competence.[12] The formal schemata, which also allow the formation of "classes", may be called *idiomatic categories*.

3.2. The kinds of schemata I am referring to must be established individually for each language. As North-American structuralists have pointed out, such schemata must be constructed with regard to the paradigmatic axis on the one hand (i.e. with respect to inflection in its widest sense) and with regard to the syntagmatic axis on the other hand (i.e. with respect to the possibilities available in that language for the distribution and arrangement of words in sentences).[13] It is important to stress that this cannot be done on the basis of some *apriori* principle. Rather, the schemata one obtains are valid only for the language in question and vary greatly from language to language. And since inflection is not an empirical universal, the syntagmatic criterion will often be preferable to

the paradigmatic one (and may indeed turn out to be the only feasible criterion on occasion).[14]

3.3. The act of specifying "idiomatic categories" is completely inconsequential from the point of view of word categories: its implications are descriptive rather than definitional and concern the various ways in which semantic categories are materialized in various languages (cf. § 1.2). From a formal point of view, it is impossible to assert *what the noun is* or *what the verb is* (with "noun" and "verb" here understood as concepts); and strictly speaking no-one has ever made such an assertion. What one can assert is *how the nouns* and *how the verbs are* in a given language (with "noun" and "verb" understood here as referring to objects). And yet it would be a mistake to think of such assertions as "definitions". Rather, they are characterizations or descriptions of the material modalities in which the semantic categories are usually realized. A word is obviously not a noun or a verb just because it matches some formal schema; on the contrary, a word is realized according to a specific formal schema because it is a noun or a verb.[15] There are even cases where a categoreme fails altogether to match the schema which normally corresponds to its category.

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[12] This is not the place to dwell on the topic of language as "technical knowledge". Suffice it to say that language does not, strictly speaking, limit the freedom of expression and creativity of speakers but only determines how this freedom and creativity is realized; cf. Pagliaro (1952 [1951], 56f.) as well as Coseriu (1975 [1952], 88). In the latter publication I explain why language should not be regarded as something that imposes itself on the speakers but, on the contrary, as something that speakers have at their disposal. For an in-depth discussion of the complex problem of freedom in language, see Terracini (1963 [1950]).

[13] Cf. Bloomfield (1933, 198f., 268f.) and Bloch and Trager (1942, 60-61, 68-70). It should be noted, however, that many of the distinctions I discuss in the present paper are absent from the work of these authors.

[14] An adequate appraisal of the meaning of syntagmatic relations in delimiting and assessing the idiomatic categories of a language as well as in the development of a "feeling" for word categories can be found in Piccardo (1952, 13-16).

[15] A good example from a language where many formal schemata are characterised morphologically is Latin. In this language, a given word is not a noun or an adjective because it can be declined, on the contrary: it is declined because it is a noun or an adjective. For instance, *adversus* is declined if it functions as an adjective and not declined if it functions as an adverb or preposition. Conversely, a form like *instar* 'balance', which is never declined, can assume the value of a noun. The same holds for syntactic characterizations, despite the criticism put forward by Brøndal (1943, 9-10).

An interesting point in this connection is raised by the claim that only nominal expressions (including pronominal ones) can be the subject of a sentence (Slotty 1929, 140). This is circumstantial evidence, not a definition. A word is not a noun just because it is – or can be – a subject. On the contrary, it can be a subject because it is a noun (more precisely, it can be a subject if and only if it is a noun). The reason why *all* words can function as subject is that all words can take on a nominal value.

Nor is it correct to think that classes established on the basis of morphological and syntactic criteria correspond to those set up on the basis of categorial

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In order to avoid the "logicist" error of ascribing categories to a language which it simply does not have, it is absolutely imperative to take into account the formal schemata of that language when describing its system (cf. Sapir 1921, 125; Bloch and Trager 1942, 61). At the same time, it is important to distinguish clearly between *descriptions* and *theories* and to remain aware of the fact that it is impossible for a descriptive linguist to consider the schemata *per se*. First of all, an idiomatic category may be characterized by a negative feature instead of a positive one. Second, there are often interferences and overlaps between formal schemata. With "interference" I mean that one and the same form allows several schemata which in turn correspond to different C-meanings; overlap is encountered whenever two or more categories share certain formal feature(s) (cf. Bloomfield 1933, 196 and 269). Third, there are cases where schemata simply do not work. Recall that the schemata are established on the basis of semantic categories, not the other way around (see § 1.2.). The "categories" of descriptive grammar are by necessity formal, not because the semantic categories cannot be defined (indeed they can), but because grammars simply do not give definitions; they describe what can be observed in the language.

3.4. The idea has been advanced that a definition of the category noun such as "a noun is a word used as the name of a living being or a lifeless thing" is entirely useless because such a definition "tells us nothing about the structure of English, and does not enable us to recognize a noun when we meet one" (Bloch and Trager 1942, 69). It is true that the definition just cited is untenable, but not on the grounds stated by Bloch and Trager. Defining a word category is no doubt of theoretical interest with regard to linguistic competence in general, but it bears no instrumental interest whatsoever for the external description of a particular language. Conversely, definitions of word categories have nothing to say about the material structure of the language in question. Hence a definition in terms of word category is useless in identifying "a noun" as a physical unit, not be-

cause the definition is by itself inadequate but because definitions of categories refer to something entirely different, viz. ways of meaning, i.e. forms of the mind which are part of our internal consciousness alone and cannot be reduced to something else that can be observed in the external world. The task of the descriptions discussed in the preceding paragraphs is precisely to enable us to observe the material instantiations of categorial ways of meaning. Empirical research has taught us that material structures bear no indications whatsoever as to categorial meanings.[16] This proves once again that word categories must not be identified with the schemata which instantiate them and are impossible to define on the basis of such instantiations.

4. The Universality of Word Categories

4.1. When I say that word categories are *categories of speech* and cannot be defined for any particular language, this implies that word categories, unlike idiomatic categories, are universal.[17] What it does not imply, however, is that word

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criteria. The former classify flexional and functional modes, not categorial ones. In a morphological classification, Latin *frugi* 'competent' would inevitably show up among the "particles" because it is morphologically invariable.

[16] A case in point is when there is interference and overlap at the same time, as e.g. in Spanish *el sabio alemán* which presents no formal indications as to how *sabio* and *alemán* are to be interpreted, i.e. whether as an adjective or as a noun. Hence *el sabio alemán* is ambiguous between 'the erudite German' and 'the German sage'. Even more interesting is one of the examples given by Paul (1920, 354). Paul claims that in *Grün ist die Farbe der Hoffnung* 'Green is the colour of hope', an adjective functions as the subject of the sentence. But if the word *grün* indeed functions as subject here (implying that the sentence means 'The green colour is the colour of hope'), it has the categorial meaning of a noun. Nothing prevents us, on the other hand, from analysing the same sentence as a structure in which *grün* is a predicate. Which one of the two analyses applies, is also a matter of intonation and accent: a heavy accent on *grün* (as if the speaker were insisting on green as the colour of hope) seems to imply that the word functions as an adjective. Conversely, intonation and accent would remain unchanged if the sentence were uttered in order to deny or correct an earlier assertion such as *Gelb ist die Farbe der Hoffnung* 'Yellow is the colour of hope'; in this case *gelb* would, again, assume the function of subject and the categorial meaning of noun.

[17] Cf. Hjelmslev (1928, 270), who draws a useful distinction between so-called "concrete categories" typical of particular languages and "abstract categories" in general. In the final analysis, however, Hjelmslev's "concrete categories" would turn out to be "abstract" and his "abstract categories" (provided one does not inter-

categories occur in all languages: after all, their universality is conceptual in nature, not historical. Different languages not only present different formal systems but also different conceptual systems, due to the different number of categories per language on the one hand and to the extension of the categories in relation to lexical meanings on the other.

4.2. It is no doubt interesting to find out which categories, apart from being conceptually universal, are also historically universal. Insofar as categories can be historical at all, it appears that the category noun – and in particular the category of proper noun – is historically universal. It is not possible, however, to develop a "general grammar" on the basis of the categories common to all languages,[18] because this would amount to a purely historical account, not a theoretical or grammatical one.

4.3.1. Another possible and (within its scope) perfectly viable way of dealing with word categories is to give a grammatical account, not so much of the idiomatic categories verb and noun in a particular language, but of the verb and noun in general, understood as *interidiomatic categories*. Clearly, such an account is only conceivable on a level of abstraction beyond any particular language system (*langue*); rather than list the morphemes that express a certain category in a specific language, one would have to state the "morphematic" categories that characterise one and the same category in general. This is the stance taken by Hjelmslev's "general grammar" (Hjelmslev 1928; cf. Llorente Maldonado de Guevara 1953). It should be noted, however, that even such general morphematic categories are not definitions but mere characterizations – if fairly abstract ones –, and that it is far from easy to find categories that are general enough and yet specified for a single interidiomatic category. For instance, a semanteme is not a verb *because* it combines, e.g., with morphemes indicating tense and person; on the contrary, a semanteme is combined with such morphemes *so that* it can be a verb and because it is represented with the categorial meaning of a verb.

This is not to say, of course, that a categorial meaning is simply the product of a lexical meaning combined with an instrumental (morphematic) meaning. Hjelmslev rightly points out that expression and content cannot be separated from one another, but shortly afterwards he argues that meaning (content) is not a suitable starting point if one intends to characterise morphematic categories (Hjelmslev 1928, 66 and 88). This, however, depends on what one aims to achieve: if one chooses to *describe how* a category is materially instantiated, then one must pay attention to the expression, but if one wants to *define what* a category really is, then one must start from the level of meaning. In this sense – and not the formalistic one –, word categories are truly "functional categories".

4.3.2. Finally, there is a third possibility: to *call*, e.g., "verb" a semanteme which is combined with a certain morpheme, without considering whether such a combination is general in the historical sense of the term. This would, however, be a pure meaning convention through which a formalistic description is transformed into a "formal definition". As Kant already pointed out, it is impossible to give formal definitions of real things. To refer to interidiomatic categories that are not established inductively is not to refer to language proper but to *metalanguage*. One is then no longer concerned with "language" but with "grammar" as a scientific discipline and with what is called, *per conventionem*, "verb" or "noun".[19]

5. Categories, Classes, and Norms

5.1. Despite all the problems they engender, the mix-ups I have been discussing in earlier sections – in particular those of classes with categories (§ 2.1.) and of lexical meaning with categorial meaning (§ 2.3.1.) – cannot be dismissed as mere errors. After all, they are nonetheless based in what one might call the "original linguistic knowledge" we all possess as speakers of a language. There is undoubtedly an intuition according to which the words of a given language belong to certain "classes" or "types". For instance, speakers of German

presumably do think of the word *Hans* as a noun (i.e. a proper noun) and do perceive a difference between the word *grün* ('green') and words like *Tisch* 'table', *Haus* 'house', *Garten* 'garden' etc. which tends to lead them to classify *grün* with *rot* 'red', *arm* 'poor', *sicher* 'certain' etc.

5.2.1. The main reason for this intuitive classification is undoubtedly the fact that linguistic categories very often seem to coincide with the categories of "reality". It is indeed not unreasonable to speak of "names of natural kinds" or, conversely, of "processes considered as a substance", but it would be more adequate to speak of "names of natural kinds that are perceived as objects" and "real processes considered as conceptual substances", and to remember that all reality is understood through language and that reality is not simply "natural reality".

5.2.2. Another reason is the fact that categorial meanings and lexical meanings are quite often closely connected. In most Indo-European languages, for instance, certain semantemes tend to be typically nominal and others typically verbal. That is why it is not simply nonsensical to speak of "nominal forms of the verb" (cf. § 2.3.3.): such a manner of speaking expresses the intuition that certain linguistic forms of FL-words which are observed with the categorial meaning "noun" (cf. § 2.3.2.) correspond to semantemes that are known to be "typically (though not exclusively) verbal". On the other hand, the "forms" of a given language cannot correspond randomly to all word categories at the same time; rather, most "forms" correspond to individual word categories only, and indeed often to just a single category. For instance, it is correct to say that "all words of a language can be (appellative) nouns",[20] but the opposite is not true, because not all forms that are normally nouns can also be verbs or adjectives.[21] Likewise, all proper nouns can be used as appellative nouns, while the opposite is true only of a few cases which are historically determined. Finally, each lexical word (FL) which is known to function with more than one categorial meaning

usually has *one* category as its "primary" category, even synchronically. This shows that in our languages there are no pure and independent lexical meanings which are then combined with adjectival, nominal, verbal or adverbial meanings; rather, one categorial meaning or another is "originally" given together with the lexical meaning of the word in question. For example, the categorial meaning 'adjective' is definitely primary in a word like *great*, and nominal uses of *great* are clearly derived from the adjective *great* (through nominalization) rather than the other way around.

5.2.3. The third – and most important – aspect of the relation between word categories and word classes is the fact that speakers never conceive of their language as a mere "functional system" or empty technique. A language is also a "knowledge" about the "material" that fits this technique according to the traditional ways of speaking of the members of a linguistic community (cf. Gardiner 1951, 68-93). It is no doubt fair to say that each individual creates his own expressions and constructs his own language, but an individual never constructs *the* language as such,[22] and a language not only presents itself as a *system* of possibilities but also as a *norm* of traditional realizations of the language system within a speech community.[23] Crucially, norms do not realize a system completely but only partially and in a specific way; moreover, norms usually retain elements of former systems.[24]

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[18] See the plea for such a "general grammar" by Delacroix (1924, 232) and the objections put forward by Hjelmslev (1928, 272f.).

pret them formalistically) would turn out to be the concrete categories of speech.

[19] Therefore Devoto (1951, 22) is essentially right when he claims that a "general" grammar is conceivable only as a "general grammar schema".

[20] It should be emphasized, however, that most words can only be nouns under either of two conditions: as autonyms of themselves (i.e. in metalanguage) or when a genuine categoreme takes on a lexical meaning, as e.g. in German *das Ich* ('the I', i.e. 'the Ego').

[21] That this holds for English, too, has been shown convincingly by Vergote (1951, 27-28).

[22] Cf. Hartmann (1949, 213f.), Pos (1948, 281f.), Pagliaro (1950, 19) and (1952 [1951], 62, 65 and 85), Coseriu (1975 [1952], 88-89).

[23] Note that it would be a misunderstanding to regard this norm as "imposed" from outside. As a member of a speech community which is *his* or *her* community, each speaker is an historical individual and at the same time a trustee of a tradition which is *his* or *her* tradition. In other words, speech is "determined" by norms in the same way as individuals are "determined" historically. Cf. Gentile (1954, 65), who points out that it would be perfectly possible to call a "desk" a "fountain pen" but adds that this is merely an abstract possibility which is not realized *in concreto*, because as speaker one has a history, or better still, one *is* this history, and that is the reason why one says "desk" and not something else.

[24] From the point of view of the English language system, for instance, for each adjective there is a corresponding verb which is formally identical with the adjective. To take just one semantic field (viz. that of basic colour terms), we see that this possibility of the system is indeed realized through words like *black* (*to black*), *yel-*

It is important to note that certain formal procedures and certain meanings are recognized as "typical", "common" or simply "normal" among speakers at a given stage in the history of their language. Such common formal procedures and meanings may be called *norm categories*. Their existence warrants the constitution of "norm classes" which are "classes of the lexicon". There are many reasons, however, why one should not expect such classes to be clear-cut: because norms are flexible (allowing for several "normal" realizations to coexist within one and the same norm), because no language is ever in a perfectly stable equilibrium, and because a language which is historically and culturally consolidated (i.e. what in German is called an *Idiom*) comprises several norms and systems simultaneously (Coseriu 1975 [1954], 140-143 and 202-203). Furthermore, in all languages there exists what W. M. Urban has called a "fertile ambiguity" (1961 [1939], 173): "The fact that a sign may intend one thing without ceasing to intend another is precisely the condition of its being an *expressive* sign at all." Thus a "verb" allows "nominal forms" on the norm level, just as a "proper noun" can function, in specific usages, as an appellative noun. This explains not only why norm categories, unlike concrete speech categories, cannot be defined, but also why, unlike idiomatic categories, they cannot be systematically described. Norm categories can only be identified, through observation, as the most "frequent" procedures and values. From this it follows that norm categories do not coincide with the real categories of speech: they are established on an entirely different level, viz. the level of statistical abstraction.[25] Nonetheless it is important

not to neglect these norm categories in linguistic research: after all, they form an important aspect of the unstable equilibrium of language referred to earlier, they are present in the consciousness of speakers and linguists alike, and moreover they are fundamental to many of the points I have been making in the present paper.

5.2.4. Together with other factors – such as associations, awareness of the inherent possibilities of the language system, encyclopaedic and contextual knowledge, linguistic and grammatical training on the part of the speaker, etc. – norm categories also provide a basis for so-called *psychological categories*. Such categories are not part of language proper, however, but belong to one's personal intuition about language. This means that they do not refer to what one says *in* words but, rather, to what one says *with* words (from the point of view of the speaker) and *through* words (from the point of view of the hearer). Therefore, strictly speaking, psychological categories are only subjectively valid, not intersubjectively (with the term "subjective" taken here in its familiar sense); in other words, they are concerned with what is suggested through language, not with the message itself. As a consequence, it is useless to try to systematize this kind of categories: they can be neither defined nor described nor measured statistically, and any "explanations" about them can only be accepted or rejected. Still, linguists must not simply discard psychological categories: such categories can be highly relevant intersubjectively, in concrete cases, through the situation, the context or the entire universe of discourse (see Coseriu 1975 [1955], 278-285). Obvious though it may sound, we must bear in mind that language is not a system of meaning for linguists but for speakers and hearers, and that not only language itself but everything speakers and hearers think, believe and feel about language is a potential object of linguistic research (Coseriu 1975 [1954], 184-185). Hence, all "explanations" one encounters deserve consideration. If such explanations refer to concrete words (as they commonly do), their diversity is often an indication of how suggestive the data (e.g. a text) are. But even if they are of a more general nature, they can be useful as "psychological descriptions" and yield nontrivial insights in their own right.

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low (*to yellow*) and *blue* (*to blue*). But *white* has two corresponding verbs (*to white* and *to whiten*), not one, and the verb corresponding to *red* is not *to red* at all but *to redden*, alongside the formally distinct *to blush* (cf. Coseriu 1975 [1952], 64f.).

[25] The only linguistic discipline that can claim to meet such a requirement is a *normative grammar* in the true sense of the term. A coherent normative grammar is neither theory nor description nor statistics but a corpus of linguistic recommendations based on the reputation and usage of famous authors – "constat ex auctoritate usuque clarorum scriptorum", as Campanella (cited after Pagliaro 1930, 36) put it. According to Croce (1924, 97-105), a normative grammar thus conceived amounts to the confirmation of one or several literary trends and to a programme of a style (spoken or written, indigenous or foreign).

5.3. Finally, it should be stressed that the mix-ups I have been exploring in this paper are partly engrained in our very own grammatical tradition. For the most part the "categories" in traditional empirical grammars are *conventional categories* which are not only mixed up with word classes but usually also elaborated on the basis of heterogeneous criteria. For instance, it is common practice to juxtapose the categories (or, for that matter, the classes) verb and noun with the category adverb, although the former are established on the basis of semantic features whereas the latter is based on "functional" (i.e. syntactic) grounds. Likewise, the copula, which on semantic grounds forms a category in its own right, is usually included in the category verb, for obvious reasons, viz. its morphology (inflection). And, finally, the category (or class) of adjectives is established on the basis of semantic and "functional" criteria simultaneously, hence it includes "demonstrative" as well as "possessive" adjectives (which are, strictly speaking, no adjectives at all but "adjectival pronouns") and even numerals.

It goes without saying that "categories" of this kind are arbitrary and hybrid, but again this does not mean that they are useless. Taken at the appropriate level of abstraction, they are in fact perfectly valid. To criticize them from a theoretical or scientific point of view is absurd and, *mutatis mutandis*, would be like criticizing a musician for being unfamiliar with the theory of aesthetics or a gardener just because he has no mastery of the botanical system. Hybrid conventional categories draw their validity from the fact that the tradition of empirical grammar does not aim at theoretical or scientific clarifications but is first and foremost designed to serve specific practical purposes. For this reason, empirical grammar should be judged in view of its usefulness. On the other hand, contrary to what some scholars seem to think (e.g. Hall jr. 1946, 40-50), empirical grammar is no less valuable merely because its categories are arbitrary or "irrational" (cf. the well-taken response to Hall's criticism by Pei 1946, 51-59). There is no doubt that it would be a grave mistake to model the theory of language or a particular linguistic description on empirical grammar, but if this were to happen, empirical grammar itself would not be at fault. Rather, the blame would lie with those scholars who adopt it as a model in response to entirely different questions and thereby, in one way

or another, confuse theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge.

6. Conclusion

6.1. From the discussion above it has become clear that one would seriously misrepresent the problem of word categories by claiming that "all views but one" are mistaken. The truth is that the different views on word categories that I have been reviewing are essentially complementary and that (within certain limits) each one is legitimate and fulfils a specific purpose. The various criteria used to delimit the object of inquiry are reasonable as long as one remains aware of the different points of view and levels of abstraction that inform them. More revealing still is the insight that positions which are contradictory at first sight, turn out to be one-sided variations and developments of one and the same "original knowledge" of language. Except in cases where authors deliberately force a conflict, the apparent differences of opinion I have pointed out are therefore mostly insubstantial and do not really reflect different opinions on one and the same object of inquiry. Rather, they tend to refer to different objects or at least to different aspects of one and the same object.

Genuine problems do arise, on the other hand, if different points of view and levels of abstraction are muddled up or if one particular point of view is treated as the only legitimate one and subsequently adopted even for purposes which are outside its reach, e.g. when meanings, including categorial ones, are "defined" formally or psychologically. That categories like "norm" and those I have termed "idiomatic" and "psychological" belong to the domain of word categories is beyond doubt, but it is equally clear that they must not be identified with them.

6.2. The most fundamental insight to be derived from our "original knowledge" of language – an insight which this essay has sought to transform into (in Leibniz' words) a *cognitio clara distincta adaequata* – is that word categories are *ways of meaning* of words in concrete speech. In some, but not all, languages there are specific formal schemata which correspond to these ways of meaning and which can be observed on the level of the "norms" of a given language insofar as the sche-

mata in question constitute the "most frequent values" of the corresponding linguistic forms; this alone is a clear indication that there is no way to define word categories other than semantically. However, even if one does not yet have such a semantic definition, it is possible to delimit and describe the relevant formal schemata and to establish the most frequent values for any given language individually. Furthermore, there is no reason to abstain from research into words which correspond to a given category and from drawing historical "conclusions" or giving psychological "explanations". Assertions of this kind are useful and necessary and may contribute to a clarification of the problem of word categories, provided they are not taken as coinciding with a definition of the latter. Finally, it must also be borne in mind that word "categories" and word "classes" are entirely different things, and so are categorial meaning and lexical meaning.

(Translated from the German by
K. Willems and T. Leuschner)

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Review

From Sign to Signing. Edited by Wolfgang G.
Müller and Olga Fischer. Iconicity in language
and literature 3. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John
Benjamins, 2003, xiv + 441 p.

The third volume in the series *Iconicity in language
and literature*, a sequel to *Form Miming Meaning*
(1999) and *The Motivated Sign* (2001), is a selec-
tion of papers presented at the "Third Symposium
on Iconicity in Language and Literature", held in
Jena in 2001. Through this interdisciplinary theme
the editors hoped to achieve "a keener perception
of the pervasive presence of iconicity in all forms
of language" (Preface). While the majority of the
talks given in Jena actually focused on literature,
the conference also added another major topic to
the agenda of iconicity research, namely "signing"
or "sign language" – hence the title of the volume,
From Sign to Signing.

The volume is divided into five parts, and as the
editors themselves admit, this division is somewhat
arbitrary. Furthermore, the different parts bear no
resemblance to other classifications or types of
iconicity that have been suggested in the literature
(e.g. Hiraga 1994, Fischer and Nänny 1999: Intro-
duction). For the sake of brevity I will select one
article from each part for review.

Part I ("Auditory and visual signs and signing")
is mainly concerned with iconicity in sign lan-
guage. In their contribution "The influence of sign
language iconicity on semantic conceptualiza-
tion", Klaudia Grote and Erika Linz repeat the
well-known claim that sign languages tend to show
more "imagic iconicity"[1] than spoken languages
because there are "many more possibilities to de-
pict visual similarities than there are to produce
acoustic ones in the process of sign creation" (23).
This is, of course, obvious. What is more puzzling
is why iconicity has been ignored for such a long
time in the study of sign language. Unfortunately,
Grote and Linz do not provide a clear answer to
this question. As suggested by Christian Cuxac,[2]
researchers of sign language have avoided iconicity
because of the prejudice that sign language is some
kind of primitive pantomime. For sign languages
to be fully accepted as full-fledged natural lan-
guages, they first had to be considered as symbolic,
just like spoken languages. Yet, as more studies
have emphasised the iconicity of spoken language,
iconicity is apparently no longer regarded as a
threat to the essentially symbolic status of sign lan-
guage.

Following Charles S. Peirce, Grote and Linz
argue that a sign behaves mainly as a symbol when
entering a (sign) language system. However, this
does not imply "that the iconic dimension of a lin-
guistic sign becomes completely blanked out or
deleted" (35). The authors believe that a linguistic
sign can be re-iconicized, as in poetry or advertis-
ing. What is more, and this is the main thesis of
their paper, Grote and Linz also claim that
iconicity in sign language has a direct impact on
the conceptualization of the world by sign lan-
guage users.[3] According to their experiments, Deaf
people and bilinguals seem to choose different
sign-picture combinations compared to hearing
people. The choice of sign/picture combination
appears to be influenced by the iconicity of the sign
concerned. "E.g. with respect to the sign for 'cow'
which highlights the 'horn' of a cow, the Deaf and
bilinguals chose significantly more often the sign/
picture combination 'cow' and 'horn' than the
combination 'cow' and 'udder' or 'cow' and 'spot-
ted hide'. [...] In contrast, the hearing participants
did not choose the picture with the 'horn' as often,
which indicates that horns are not that central for
the concept of a 'cow'" (35). According to Grote
and Linz this provides support for "a moderate
version of linguistic relativity", adding a new per-
spective to the iconicity hypothesis because
iconicity is traditionally conceived of as a possible
explanation for the structure of language in rela-

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[1] "Imagic iconicity" refers to a kind of iconicity where-
by a sign referring to its object acts as an "image" of
that object. An onomatopoeia is traditionally defined
as an image of the object it is referring to.

[2] Talk given at the conference Le mot comme signe et
comme image: lieux et enjeux de l'iconicité linguisti-
que, Dijon, 29-30 April 2003.

[3] "Sign language users" refers to Deaf people as well as
bilinguals.