

On the cognitive and linguistic significance of the superschema

“...[I]f an all-subsuming superschema can plausibly be posited for a category, it may well be only minimally entrenched and have very little cognitive salience. Although such a schema would define the commonality of the entire category, its cognitive and linguistic significance might be negligible.” (Langacker 1987:381)

According to Langacker (1987), who advocates a fusion of the prototype and schematic models of categorization, the structure of a complex category is based on at least two types of relationships that hold between the senses of a form. One is extension from a prototype, or a typical instance or best exemplar of a category, and the other is elaboration from a schema, or an abstract characterization that defines the commonality of all instances of the category. The potential existence and relevance of the ‘superschema’, located at the top of a schematic network, is discussed, but, as seen above, the question of whether a superschema that is posited by the researcher is relevant to language users’ processing is unresolved.

This corpus-based study investigates the superschema in an effort to address the question of what role it plays in the processing of lexical meaning. It begins with an examination of some methodological issues surrounding the positing of superschema. Striving for empiricism, a methodology for identifying superschema is introduced, involving the identification of maximally entrenched (i.e. syntactically differentiable) word senses and the classification of corpus data based on these high-level senses.

Looking at concrete usage events in the corpus data, we can make inferences about the abstract categories motivating the data. In this case, what is revealed is a high-level superschema, an abstract schematic representation of word meaning at a level which neutralizes word sense distinctions.

The empirical foundation for the argument comes from nine case studies I have undertaken using data from the British National Corpus. In these studies, qualitative analysis confirms the large number of context types in which individual uses of a polysemous item are not clearly assignable to a single sense. Additional support comes from a quantitative study of corpus data, in which a remarkable 40% of the tokens of a polysemous item in the data are not clearly motivated by a single sense of the item. While an individual case might be explained in terms of an inability of the analysis to differentiate senses, the overall pattern of results suggests that such cases are not ‘resolved’ to a single sense in the mind of the speaker. The results argue strongly for the relevance of the superschema in processing.

Bibliography

Langacker, Ronald W. 1987. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, vol. 1, Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.