

Grammatical Categories: Essential or Emergent?

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Categories can be essential, i.e. defined by a feature that defines category membership, or they can be accidental, such that category membership is gradient, probabilistic and often shows family resemblance structures such that not all members share the same features (Taylor 2003).

Generative linguistics typically follows the essentialist tradition in that grammatical categories are determined by a certain set of features. When these are proposed to be innate, the linking problem arises: The child's mind has to activate these features by some characteristics in the incoming language, i.e.: language has to be translated into those features the mind operates with (Pinker 1989).

In emergentist, usage-based approaches associations between linguistics units develop gradually on the basis of children's linguistic experience such that even when a grammatical category is produced, the child may not yet know or represent all aspects typical of adult categories.

I will illustrate the process of category formation with three examples:

- 1) Innate conceptual categories: Even if the child pre-linguistically has access to conceptual primitives like MOVE, several rounds of representational re-description are necessary to make this knowledge available for language (Mandler 2008).
- 2) Plural formation: plurals are observable in the real world and thus form an easy target for the formation of a grammatical category since its feature "plurality" can easily be identified (Clark & Nikitina 2009). However, its realization in morphology in many Indo-Germanic languages shows high degrees of allomorphy or subregularities which require an analysis of the phonotactics and other distributional properties like nominal gender (Ravid et al. 2008, Behrens 2001).
- 3) Case marking: Case markers typically encode language internal relations. However, there does not seem to be a feature that characterizes case or the different cases. In addition, case (in German) is encoded on nouns, determiners and pronouns (with different syncretisms in each of these part-of-speech-categories), can be lexically or structurally governed. This raises the question of whether this case and cases are a coherent category for the learner, or whether they are rather tied to certain constructions.

Finally, the emergent nature of linguistic category entails that their range is dependent on the linguistic experience of a speaker such that we find individual differences in the representation of adults (Dabrowska 2015; Kidd, Donnelly & Christiansen 2017).