

The Problem of Universals

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There is a question about the universality of semantic features - whether all, or some of them at least, occur in all languages. Views differ on the issue of universal semantic features between the following two extremes:

- 1- At one extreme, there is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which suggests that each language may "create" its own world and so its own semantics.
 - 2- At the other extreme, it could be argued that components such as (male) and (female) are found in all languages and that there are many others too, e.g. the basic colors.
- We will examine three different claims about the universality of semantic features that range between these two extremes in the next section.

Universalist View Claims

The simplest form of the universalist view is that there is a universal inventory of semantic features (components). There are three claims that try to explain the relation between this inventory and the actual features found in individual languages.

- a- The strongest claim says that all languages make use of the whole inventory and so have the same features.
 - This claim seems highly implausible in view of what seem to be very obvious differences in languages; it can only be made to work by arguing that all the semantic features can be exhibited somehow in each language.
- b- A weaker claim is that each language uses only some of the features in the total inventory. This might seem more plausible - all languages have "male", "female", "black", "white", etc.
 - However, many other features are found only in some languages, and this claim does not account for these features.
- c- A still weaker claim is that only some features are universal, while the rest are characteristic of individual languages. Though it may not even be that the universal features are exactly the same in each language. This seems to be the case with the color terms and categories.
 - If we accept the weakest universalist claim that languages share some semantic features, then we are faced with a question. What kind of explanation can we give for this phenomenon?
 - There are at least five answers which we will discuss in the following section.

Explaining Language Universals :

- 1- "The world is like that." (**physical reality**)
 - 2- The structure of the minds of all people is basically the same. (**psychological reality**)
 - 3- The cultural needs of different societies are similar. (**cultural reality**)
 - 4- There is or has been **contact between different societies** with different languages.
 - 5- The languages of the world all have a **common origin**.
- There may be some truth in all of these answers, and it is not at all easy to separate them. Let us examine these answers in more detail.
 - Regarding the first two answers, we can sometimes distinguish between what would seem to be **physical reality** and **psychological reality**. The differences indicated by "cow", "horse", "elephant".. etc. for example can be described on a **physical** basis.
 - On the other hand, even though it is true that different people make (roughly) the same color distinctions, these distinctions do not really "exist" in **physical** terms but are part of the **psychology of perception**.
 - We must not, of course, ignore the influence of **cultures** upon the linguistic systems . Kinship terminology, for example, will be much more a reflection of **cultural** influences than of the actual **physical** relationships.
 - For example, in Pawnee the term that we might translate as "father" is used of all the males from the father's side, while "uncle" is used of all the males from the mother's side.
 - Conversely, all the females from the mother's side are called "mother" and all the females from the father's side are called "aunt".
 - However, it will not always be easy, or even possible, to distinguish between **cultural reality** and **physical or psychological reality**.
 - In the case of color terminology, too, there may be three factors at work.
 - First, there are some **objective (physical) features** - the green of living plants, the red of blood, the blue of the sky. Here we are describing colors by associating them with our physical reality.

- Secondly, it may be that there is some **psychological reality** that distinguishes colors when they are perceived by the brain.
- Thirdly, **cultural considerations** may make certain color distinctions important. For instance, in the language of the Navaho tribe, the basic colors "white", "black", "red", "blue-green" and "yellow" are related to the use of objects and colors used in ceremonials.
- Some apparent universals may be no more than an accident of the history of languages in either of the two ways indicated by our last two answers (**contact between societies** and **common language origin**).
- For example, the modern Welsh system of color is now much more like that of English, as a result of increasing bilingualism.
- Also, in most semantic areas (including color systems) the languages of Europe have much in common because of the close **contact** between European societies.
- However, regarding the last answer of **common language origin** of languages, we often cannot be absolutely sure about the historical relationship of the languages we are examining.
- For the language families for which we have evidence, we can go back only a few thousand years. It is possible that all the existing languages of the world have a **common origin**. If so, at least some of the universal semantic features of language may simply be accidental.
- Our languages could also have developed in quite different ways and from quite different origins.

Notes:
