

Ewelina Wnuk - Abstract

Specificity at the Basic Level in Event Taxonomies: The Case of Maniq Verbs of Ingestion

It is well-documented that basic-level concepts vary across cultures. For instance, while for some Western urban dwellers, 'tree' is a basic-level label, for communities with greater botanical experience, more specific categories, e.g. 'pine' or 'elm', are basic. Research in this area so far has centered on objects, but other ontological categories have the potential to shed new light on this aspect of categorization. The present study explores the basic level in events, focusing on the field of ingestion. I examine basic-level ingestion verbs in Maniq— an Austroasiatic language spoken by mobile hunter-gatherers in Thailand – illustrating a highly specific categorization of ingestion events. A detailed analysis of these verbs reveals they tap into culturally salient notions. Yet, cultural salience alone cannot explain specificity of basic-level verbs, since ingestion is a domain of universal human experience. Further investigation reveals, however, that another key factor is the language itself. Maniq's preference for encoding specific meaning in basic-level verbs is not a peculiarity of one domain, but a recurrent characteristic of its verb lexicon, pointing to the significant role of the language system in the structure of event concepts.