



# How are nouns categorized as denoting “what” and “where”?



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## ABSTRACT

Categorization is an inherent feature of human cognitive processes and systems that identifies coherent patterns in our knowledge and behavior. In language it takes the form of formally definable categories. Spatial categories are particularly known to pervade linguistic structure, and even to organize non-spatial domains. Within spatial linguistic theory there are two crucial notions, that of the *Figure*, the entity to be located (or the *what*), and that of the *Ground*, the entity with respect to which the location is defined (or the *where*). These two notions underlie all spatial functions and their cross-domain remappings. Yet, there are restrictions on which entity can function as the Figure and which as the Ground in a locative expression; notice the questionable sentence: *\*The house is behind the bicycle*. Bearing in mind how rudimentary the Figure/Ground constellations are in language, it is not surprising that these two fundamental spatial categories find expression in language structure. I argue that the capability to function as the Figure or the Ground is impressed on the lexicon of Lokono, an Arawakan language of the Guianas. This grammatical distinction parallels other types of noun categorization, such as the *mass/count* dichotomy. It manifests itself in a narrow, though cognitively universal context, namely directionality. Shifts from one category to the other are possible and result in predictable semantic changes. The distinction is attested cross-linguistically and reflects the ontological properties of the referents.

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## 1. Introduction

Categorization is an inherent feature of human cognitive systems and processes. Though its form and function may assume different guises (Cohen and Lefebvre, 2005), it is presumed that categorization allows us to better organize our knowledge of the world and access it in an efficient way. In Koestler's words, it is a mechanism that helps us “[...] eliminate a large proportion of the input as irrelevant ‘noise’, and assemble the relevant information into coherent patterns [...]” (Koestler, 1978, p. 201; cited in Senft, 2010, p. 676). In language, these “coherent patterns” assume the form of linguistic categories. To constitute a valid object of linguistic comparison, such categories must be definable language-internally by means of an exclusive linguistic feature, e.g. a morpheme, a syntactic structure, a phonological feature etc.

Spatial categories in particular are said to reverberate through language structure. In its most extreme form, this *localist* view has led some linguists to believe that “space is at the heart of all conceptualization” (Pütz and Dirven, 1996, p. xi).<sup>1</sup> Although this extreme view most likely does not reflect the truth, it remains a fact that many non-spatial domains are structured in terms of the same patterns as spatial ones (Casasanto and Boroditsky, 2008; Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Lakoff,

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous reviewer rightly points out that localism is much older than Pütz and Dirven (1996), going back at least to the Byzantine grammarian Maximus Planudes, and recurring throughout the history of linguistics, most notably in the work of Louis Hjelmslev (1972), and more recently in that of John Anderson (1973, 1971).

1987). Detailed descriptions of unrelated languages have further demonstrated how differently languages can structure space (e.g. Ameka and Levinson, 2007; Levinson and Haviland, 1994; Levinson and Wilkins, 2006). Nonetheless, underlying this cross-linguistic variety and these cross-domain mappings is the single fundamental spatial question of location: *where is what?* Levinson and Wilkins (2006) call it the *Basic Locative Question*. The most natural, language-specific answer to it constitutes the *Basic Locative Construction*. This question–answer frame operates on two indispensable entities: the entity to be located, i.e. the *what*, and the entity with respect to which location is established, i.e. the *where*. Within this frame, it is customary to call the noun encoding the *what* the *Figure*-denoting noun, and the noun denoting the *where* the *Ground*-denoting noun (Levinson and Wilkins, 2006; Levinson, 2003, 1999; Talmy, 1983, 1975).<sup>2</sup>

Of course, an entity can function sometimes as the Figure and sometimes as the Ground. Nonetheless, it has been observed that certain restrictions apply. A large immovable entity, e.g. a house, will function as the Ground rather than the Figure in combination with a small moveable entity, e.g. a bike (Gruber, 1976; Talmy, 1983); hence the dubious status of sentences such as *\*The house is behind the bicycle*. This implies some entities that are better Figures and others are better Grounds, at least in a relative sense. In fact, Talmy's (2000, p. 312) terminology explicitly refers to "moveable" and "stationary" as characteristics of prototypical Figures and Grounds, respectively. On the mesoscale of human experience of the world, such predispositions of entities to function as Figures or Grounds (if they indeed exist) should be consistent.<sup>3</sup> Bearing in mind that categorization filters out "coherent patterns", it is not impossible that the capability of functioning as a Figure or Ground should be impressed on language structure. In other words, nouns could be categorized as the *what* and the *where*. As such, the *what/where* distinction would parallel other forms of noun categorization found in languages across the globe, such as those based on animacy, countability or alienability (Chappell and McGregory, 1996; Massam, 2012).

I argue that the *what*- and *where*-categories indeed operate in the nominal domain. I illustrate this distinction with data from Lokono, an Arawakan language spoken in the Guianas. The analysis presented here rests on the linguistic analysis of the linguistic materials collected by the author such as the recordings of different speech genres, elicitation sessions, and metalinguistic knowledge volunteered by the speakers. Below, I first summarize the theoretical literature that has broached the topic of the *what* and the *where* as linguistic categories. Since the *what/where* distinction manifests itself in the locative expression, I then present a theory of spatial meaning adopted as a framework in this article. I demonstrate how the two categories function in Lokono, discussing both formal and semantic aspects of the distinction. Finally I scrutinize the data in the light of other nominal categories, and suggest how to approach it in future research.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. What and where in linguistic theory

The idea that nouns can be categorized as the *what* and the *where* appeared already in the posthumously published writings of Whorf, though under a different guise.<sup>4</sup> Mackenzie (2005, p. 144) points out that Whorf (1945, p. 4) considered English nouns denoting cities and countries a *cryptotype*, i.e. a class that may "easily escape notice and may be hard to define, and yet may have profound influence on linguistic behavior". Whorf observed that such nouns are language-internally definable as a class. They can be substituted by *here/there* but not by *it* in locative contexts. Mackenzie (2005) developed Whorf's observation and noticed that this class was not limited to nouns denoting cities and countries. It encompassed all of what he called *place-denoting nouns*, whether non-relational (e.g. *Amsterdam*) or relational (e.g. *right, lee, inside*). Such nouns are opposed to nouns denoting physical entities, which in the locative contexts would rather be substituted by *it* (or *him/her* if referring to persons). Compare examples (1a, b, c) with (1d).<sup>5</sup>

- (1) a. I've come from Amsterdam, and Mike has come from there/\*from it too.  
 b. I'm standing to the right of Mary, and John is standing there/\*to it too.  
 c. I'm sitting in the lee of the wind, and Mary is sitting there/\*in it too.  
 d. I'm wrapped up in the blanket, and John is wrapped up in it/?there too.

Mackenzie (2005, p. 144)

<sup>2</sup> The terms *Figure* and *Ground* were introduced by Talmy (1975) and are equivalent to later *Trajector* and *Landmark* (Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987) and the terms *Referent* and *Relatum* (Levelt, 1996; Miller and Johnson-Laird, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Notice that if we change the scale, the above Figure/Ground tendencies do not apply. A toy house can easily function as both the Figure and the Ground with respect to a toy bike.

<sup>4</sup> I decided to use *what* and *where* as labels for the two categories, since they appeared to be terminologically neutral and generally accepted (Cablitz, 2008; Landau and Jackendoff, 1993). Other scholars have used different variations on the words *object/entity/thing* and *place/non-entity* but they turned out to be impractical because of the ambiguity of such terms as *object/place/entity* in linguistics and in other disciplines relevant to the topic, e.g. cognitive geography (Cresswell, 2006; Hill, 1996; Huber, 2014; Lyons, 1977; Mackenzie, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> From a pilot study I conducted it seems that this distinction in English is not that straightforward to the speakers and very likely depends on the variety of English that one speaks. To my knowledge there is no detailed study of how the *what/where* distinction operates in English, and bearing in mind that in English configuration and directionality are not always clearly separable, the discussion of the two categories may be quite complex. In this article I draw some parallels with English, but these should therefore be seen as a way to make the topic more familiar to the reader, rather than as serious linguistic claims of any parallelism. English clearly shows reflections of the same phenomenon but more research is needed to be able to compare such typologically different languages as Lokono and English.

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