

Towards Extended Vantage Theory

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Abstract

The applicability of Vantage Theory (VT), a model of (colour) categorization, to linguistic data largely depends on the modifications and adaptations of the model for the purpose. An attempt to do so proposed here, called Extended Vantage Theory (EVT), slightly reformulates the VT conception of vantage by capitalizing on some of the entailments of specific vantage levels, namely the three types of viewing: non-discriminatory, analytic and synthetic. It nevertheless maintains the fundamental mechanism of vantage construction, i.e. selective emphases to similarity or difference on the part of the conceptualizer. The extended model is applied to an analysis of nominal modification, especially the use of articles, in two English translations of Polish literary prose.

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1. Introduction

Although there is no shortage of descriptive models available to a cognitive linguist today, there are at least three reasons why I think it is worthwhile to consider MacLaury's Vantage Theory (VT) as a potential candidate for the club. First, apart from a number of specific observations pertaining to the colour domain, VT addresses several questions of language and cognition at a more general level, such as the relativity/universalism debate, the active role of the conceptualizer/speaker or the problem of the subjectivity of meaning. Second, not being a strictly linguistic theory, VT stands a good chance of making valuable contributions to the cognitive linguistic enterprise by offering findings from cognition, specifically the cognition of colour. Third, the study of language can prove an ideal testing ground for the previously unattested phenomena which MacLaury has recognized and described in a systemic manner.¹

However, the non-linguistic provenance of VT is not only an asset but also a problem. Modifying the model for the purposes of linguistic analysis has been an uphill struggle; the major problems I have encountered so far include: the transition from categorization to conceptualization (or, prior to that, from the categorization

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¹ One of them is coextension, a unique relationship between colour terms but possibly also between lexemes from other domains (for details of coextension cf. MacLaury, 1997, pp. 111–129; for application to non-colour domains cf. Taylor, 2003; MacLaury, 2003; Tribushinina, 2010).

of colour to that in other domains), modelling the details of linguistic expression, establishing the status and role of vantages in the process of conceptualization, establishing the number of vantage types, correlating strengths of similarity and difference with analytic and synthetic thinking (important work on this issue is Allan, 2002), plus the perennial questions of terminology. My proposals have often been greeted with skepticism, critics pointing out the apparently programmatic nature of VT without palpable advantages over alternative accounts, as well as the lack of balance between the complexity of the theory and the uncertain benefits of specific solutions.

Yet, I believe that despite these objections, chasing the VT-linguistics interface rabbit with a view to future gains is a promising endeavour. Having struggled with an array of diverse data, I am now in a position to dispel my earlier doubts (Glaz, 2006) about whether it is better to remain faithful to the original formulation of VT with the limited applications it allows, or to modify the theory and risk departing from MacLaury's original thought. In the present paper I would like to show that one can eat the cake and have it: VT does yield to theory-internal adaptations without losing its fundamental insights into the nature of categorization, conceptualization and language. Besides, the adaptations are not grave and mainly consist in slightly different roles played by aspects of vantage.

With this purpose in mind, I will first present the basics of Vantage Theory, then I will review its earlier modifications and propose a schema of my own VT-derived model, which I will call Extended Vantage Theory (EVT). This will be followed by a sample analysis of the use of articles in English translations of Polish prose. Hopefully, future work will reveal the value of this approach and propose more modifications to the model in order to make it applicable to a variety of linguistic phenomena.

2. Vantage Theory

A comprehensive introduction to VT is not possible here (see, e.g. MacLaury, 1995, 1997, 2002²), so I will only present the basics of the theory, with special attention to those of its aspects exploited in proposing EVT.

Vantage Theory is a model of categorization, primarily in the colour domain but also – by extension – of all categorization. VT is founded on the view that humans draw a subconscious and instinctive analogy between the way they orient themselves in space–time and the way they construct categories. To orient oneself in space–time means to plot one's position relative to the spatial axes and with regard to the relativity of motion (including the motion of the whole frame of reference, as proposed by relativity physics). The spatial axes of up–down, left–right and front–back are transferred onto the categorizing process as the so-called *inherently fixed coordinates* (in the colour domain these are hue, brightness and saturation), while time is transferred as a function of an *inherently mobile coordinate* of reciprocally balanced emphases on *similarity* (Sim) or *difference* (Diff). To construct a colour category is to select an inherently fixed coordinate (commonly hue), focus on a value of that coordinate (e.g. red) and conceptualize other values as similar to or different from it. If the other values are deemed similar to the focus, more of them are included within the range of the category; if emphasis on similarity gives way to emphasis on difference, a boundary or margin of the category has been encountered. In other words, to construct a category is to plot the inherently fixed coordinate with the inherently mobile ones.³ Crucially, more than one such arrangement is possible within the same category: an arrangement of this sort is called a *vantage*. A colour category may be named with more than one term, each being associated with a different vantage. A vantage is then a point of view on the category constructed as a specific configuration of fixed and mobile coordinates.

The alignment of fixed-to-mobile can also be understood as that of ground-to-figure. What is a mobile coordinate (new information) at one level, is fixated or becomes known at the next level so that another coordinate (more new information) can be introduced. Thus, coordinates can be inherently fixed or inherently mobile but either type can function in the other capacity for immediate purposes. A vantage, then, is a coherent arrangement of figure-and-ground configurations; MacLaury finds that they usually number three and maximally five.

² For more references and fuller information, see Section 1 to this issue.

³ In fact, there is only one inherently mobile coordinate, difference being the lack of similarity. However, it has become standard in VT literature to overtly refer to two, which tradition I follow here.

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