

# Iberian Spanish “macho”: vantages and polysemy in culturally defined meaning <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This study explores some specific aspects of compatibility between cognitive models. Robert E. MacLaury’s theory of vantages as arrangements of coordinates and Lakoff’s concept of radial categories are mutually reinforcing to an analysis of semantic polysemy. Vantage Theory (VT) includes the notions of *zooming in* and *zooming out*, allowing focused and broad points of view to be constructed in reference to a figure and ground. Zooming in and out are some of the mechanisms of Lakoff’s increments of polysemous extension. Also helpful is Langacker’s usage-based model of a hierarchical semantic network. Expanding the VT model in this way enables interpretation of a complex lexical meaning as multiple perspectives on one concept, the Iberian *macho*.

In addition to polysemy, we will look at the relation between vantages and prototypes and consider the contribution of one’s personal background and viewpoint to semantic networks.

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## 1. Introduction and data collection

MacLaury’s (1997, 2002) Vantage Theory (VT) contributes to modeling polysemy in interesting ways. The theory maintains that a category is constructed as a vantage or an assembly of vantages, i.e. arrangements of grounds and figures (fixed and mobile coordinates). We will attempt to show how this idea can also be used to address the differences in the choice of prototypes within a semantic category maintained by different speakers. The credibility of the analysis rises when VT is found to be compatible with Lakoff’s (1987) conception of a radial category and Langacker’s (1987, 2000) usage-based network model. In polysemy as a radial category,

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<sup>☆</sup> This is a revised and updated version of a paper presented by the first author at the LSA symposium “Cognitive Grammar and Related Topics: Vantage, Prototype, and Metaphor,” Tucson, Arizona USA, in July 1989. The paper was overseen by Rob MacLaury. With the original idea dating back about 20 years, it represents an early application of Vantage Theory to language data. Later revisions of the theory by the second author link it to recent developments in the field.

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figure-ground chaining motivates the links between the central and other cases. In Langacker's network, the chaining is the driving force of meaning extension.

The data derive from non-directive interviews with Castilian Spaniards regarding the emotionally charged and semantically complex Spanish term *macho*. Castilian Spanish harbors notions of *macho* that differ substantially from those of other Spanish dialects. (For example, Mexican and Peruvian views on the concept depart in major ways from the Castilian view. American English also expresses the concept but it is an inter-cultural borrowing and therefore drastically modified.) Three informants were interviewed by the first author of the present paper, all of them native speakers of Castilian Spanish. All interviews were conducted in a small and quiet university conference room; there were no distractions and one of the interviewees was acquainted with the interviewer. The speakers are identified by the letters M, G and V. They were asked to give definitions and descriptions of the word *macho* (the Appendix A below provides the details). As specified in Section 5 below, the informants were born and grew up in different regions of Spain and all had spent at least a few years in the USA prior to the interviews. One of them, Informant G, comes from a linguistically distinct region of Catalonia and is a bilingual speaker of Catalan and Castilian Spanish. Only Spanish was spoken during the interviews.

It can be seen from the above that the study has some limitations. First, the sample is limited to three informants. Second, all of them had certainly been influenced by the American culture, having resided in the US for a substantial amount of time prior to the interviews. Third, they all count as "educated;" indeed, two are professors in Spanish literature and one is a graduate student, also in Spanish literature, at the University of Arizona, so their views are probably not representative of an average, "naive" language user. For example, informant G's explanations in example (13) below, involving references to Greek mythology, Christ or the Middle Ages, are certainly inaccessible to the majority of speakers. In a sense, however, we feel that these limitations can also work to the benefit of the study. On the one hand, a different background of the subjects would probably yield different results. On the other hand, it is possible that the time the subjects had spent outside their native culture allows them to view it with a certain degree of detachment, to project a more holistic outlook on it, and therefore to make more objectified judgments. Also, the uniformly academic milieu of the interviewees provides for a consistency in their views.

## 2. Vantage Theory

VT holds that people categorize by drawing a subconscious and instinctive analogy to the way they orient themselves in space–time. This involves plotting one's position relative to the spatial coordinates of up–down, left–right and front–back and the mobile coordinate of relative motion. A system of spatial coordinates can itself be moving, which affects judgment. Einstein's classic example, often quoted by MacLaury (e.g. 1995, p. 240; 1997, p. 143), is that of a rock dropped from a moving train: its trajectory is different for a person on the train than for someone standing by the track.

By analogy, color categorization involves combining into coherent wholes the **fixed coordinates** of brightness, saturation or hue with the **mobile coordinates** of reciprocally balanced degrees of attention, on the part of the viewer, to **similarity** or **difference** between color stimuli. For example, the category RED is constructed by focusing on elemental red and regarding other sensations of red as similar to or different from it. The stronger the attention to similarity, the more stimuli are included in the category and so the range of the latter expands. Attention to difference, in turn, results in establishing the category's boundary: stimuli are deemed as lying outside the category and so the category is curtailed.

Combining fixed and mobile coordinates into a coherent whole, which happens in at least two steps, is called **vantage construction**. Fig. 1 models the (abstract, imaginary) category RED in this way.

First, elemental red (symbolized by R) is chosen as the primary fixed coordinate, the "starting point" or a **focus** of the category. Other stimuli are matched against the focus: as long as they are viewed as similar to it (S stands for similarity), the category expands its range. At level 1, R functions as the **ground**, S as a **figure**. Then, on level 2, the similarity is treated as known (the ground), against which difference (D) is juxtaposed: once stimuli start being viewed as different from the ones encountered so far, the category is curtailed at a margin. The inherently mobile similarity is "fixated" at level 2 so as to function as the ground for introducing and emphasizing difference. The two figure-ground arrangements constitute a coherent whole, a **vantage**, but a

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