

HUMAN
COGNITIVE
PROCESSING 20

The Categorization of
Spatial Entities in
Language and Cognition

Edited by
Michel Aurnague
Maya Hickmann
Laure Vieu

John Benjamins Publishing Company

HUMAN COGNITIVE PROCESSING is a forum for interdisciplinary research on the nature and organization of the cognitive systems and processes involved in speaking and understanding natural language (including sign language), and their relationship to other domains of human cognition, including general conceptual or knowledge systems and processes (the language and thought issue), and other perceptual or behavioral systems such as vision and non-verbal behavior (e.g. gesture). 'Cognition' should be taken broadly, not only including the domain of rationality, but also dimensions such as emotion and the unconscious. The series is open to any type of approach to the above questions (methodologically and theoretically) and to research from any discipline, including (but not restricted to) different branches of psychology, artificial intelligence and computer science, cognitive anthropology, linguistics, philosophy and neuroscience. It takes a special interest in research crossing the boundaries of these disciplines.

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Editorial address

Jan Nuyts, University of Antwerp, Dept. of Linguistics,
Universiteitsplein 1, B 2610 Wilrijk, Belgium.
E-mail: jan.nuyts@ua.ac.be

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Edited by

Michel Aurnague

CNRS - Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail

Maya Hickmann

CNRS - Université de Paris VIII

Laure Vieu

CNRS - Université Paul Sabatier, Toulouse III

John Benjamins Publishing Company

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Contributors

Nicholas Asher. University of Texas, Austin TX, USA; IRIT-UMR 5505, CNRS, Université Paul Sabatier, INPT & UT1, Toulouse, France – Email: asher@irit.fr

Michel Aurnague. ERSS-UMR 5610, CNRS & Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, France – Email: michel.aurnague@univ-tlse2.fr

Andrée Borillo. ERSS-UMR 5610, CNRS & Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, France – Email: aborillo@univ-tlse2.fr

Melissa Bowerman. Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands – Email: Melissa@mpi.nl

Maud Champagne. Laboratoire Jacques Lordat-EA 1941 & INSERM U455, Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, France; Centre de Recherche de l'Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur & Université du Québec, Montréal – Email: M-Champagne@crhsc.rttss.qc.ca

Injoo Choi-Jonin. ERSS-UMR 5610, CNRS & Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, France – Email: InjooChoiJonin@aol.com

Karine Durand. Centre Européen des Sciences du Goût-UMR 5170, CNRS & Université de Bourgogne, Dijon, France – Email: durand@cesg.cnrs.fr

Colette Grinevald. Laboratoire Dynamique du Langage-UMR 5596, CNRS & Université Lyon 2, France – Email: colette.grinevald@univ-lyon2.fr

Susan J. Hespos. Northwestern University, Evanston IL, USA – Email: hespos@northwestern.edu

Maya Hickmann. Laboratoire Structures Formelles du Langage-UMR 7023, CNRS & Université de Paris 8, France – Email: hickmann@psycho.univ-paris5.fr

Roger Lécuyer. Laboratoire Cognition et Comportement-FRE 2987, CNRS & Université de Paris 5, France – Email: lecuyer@psycho.univ-paris5.fr

Philippe Muller. IRIT-UMR 5505, CNRS, Université Paul Sabatier, INPT & UT1, Toulouse, France – Email: muller@irit.fr

Jean-Luc Nespoulous. Laboratoire Jacques Lordat-EA 1941 & INSERM U455, Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, France – Email: nespoulo@univ-tlse2.fr

James Rivière. Laboratoire Cognition et Comportement-FRE 2987, CNRS & Université de Paris 5, France – Email: james.riviere@psycho.univ-paris5.fr

Laure Sarda. LaTTICe-UMR 8094, CNRS, Ecole Normale Supérieure & Université de Paris 7, France – Email: sarda@canoe.ens.fr

Elizabeth S. Spelke. Harvard University, Cambridge MA, USA – Email: spelke@wjh.harvard.edu

The linguistic categorization of spatial entities

Classifiers and other nominal classification systems

Colette Grinevald

Laboratoire Dynamique du Langage (UMR 5596) CNRS & Université Lyon 2

This chapter focuses on the classifier systems found around the world, with particular attention to Amerindian languages. It first proposes a typology of these systems that takes into account their different characteristics (morpho-syntactic, semantic, pragmatic. . .) and their dynamic dimensions (grammaticalization, age, productivity. . .). It then describes in more detail a sample of classifier systems (from America, Asia, Oceania. . .), shows some of their invariants and specificities, and relates them to other linguistic systems. The final part of the chapter presents a summary of the types of information that are conveyed by classifier systems and other nominal classification systems about spatial entities (e.g., spatial properties, perceptual modalities. . .) and examines, as well, the different encoding strategies that seem to be used across languages.

o. Introduction

The paper is a contribution from the field of descriptive and typological linguistics meant to give an overview of some linguistic systems unknown to European languages that explicitly categorize spatial entities according to a number of criteria, such as material essence, spatial characteristics or function of the entities. This means for instance that, while in European languages one does not have to specify that tables have four legs and are usually made of wood, or that oranges are fruits and are of a spherical shape, or that a tree is long and rigid, vertical or standing, in certain languages of the world this type of information is systematically given. This paper will focus on the so-called classifier systems found around the world that do so, with a special view to the contribution of Amerindian languages in this domain, and to the linguistic status of such systems, half way between lexicon and syntax in their more prototypical instantiations.

Classifier systems first attracted the attention of general linguists and psychologists from a typological perspective in the seventies (see for instance the now classical Allan 1977; Denny 1976) and received more recognition as an interesting

