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Understanding of abstract nouns in linguistic disciplines

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Abstract

Despite centuries of studying abstract nouns, linguists have so far failed to come to unanimous understanding of this category but agree on the ambiguity of the term and the concept itself. The main issue every researcher faces is the lack of clearly defined term 'abstract'. Moreover, there have been suggested numerous and diverse approaches to distinguishing between abstract and concrete nouns ranging from selected formal grammar criteria to semantic and extra linguistic parameters. This paper aims at considering the existing methods of determining abstract words with an attempt to understand which are better applicable. Besides, the article covers the progress in this research covering the period from Ancient Greece to present day researchers in various fields of knowledge, including but not limited to linguistics, clinical psychology, and philosophy, as all these areas propose their own outlook on the issue of the nature of abstractions and their distinction from concrete words.

Introduction

Abstract nouns have attracted attention ever since Plato and Aristotle set the issues of distinguishing the abstract and the concrete and intended to study the nature of abstraction both as a process and result of cognition. Nevertheless, even now most arguments have not been resolved. Researchers emphasize that the issue of abstract nouns demands further investigation and suggest their own approaches to tackling this group of words.

Abstract nouns are of particular interest as they reflect the "invisible" world of qualities, actions and interrelations of various subjects abstracted from the subjects themselves. There has been a debate whether all people are familiar with abstraction as Franz Boas, the founder of modern anthropology, for instance, claimed that "primitive cultures… do not discuss virtue, kindness, evil, beauty… do not talk about abstract ideas" [quoted by 1]. Nevertheless, the

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researcher also admitted that the languages of these primitive cultures are quite able to express abstract notions. No undeniable proof linking stages of culture development to abstraction ability has been found yet. Thus, Luis S. Feuer in his *"Varieties of Scientific Experience: Emotive Aims in Scientific Hypothesis"* emphasizes that abstraction is an inherent ability of human cognition and does not imply people's need in philosophical concepts – abstract nouns exist even in languages whose speakers do not show any inclination towards metaphysics [1, 105-106]. Therefore, it is safe to say that every person can operate with abstract concepts regardless of the level of his/her culture.

Some researchers distinguish two levels (if viewed synchronically) or stages (if considered from historical, or diachronic, perspective):

- Sensual (immediate, empirical) thinking. Being the initial stage of abstraction, it is based on feelings, senses and images, therefore requiring no language basis.
- Logical (abstract) thinking. A further stage of abstraction, which appears in the form of ideas, thoughts and reflections and has to rely on natural language for expressing notions through words and ideas through sentences (Krivonosov, Novitskaya) [1].

In different ways this idea has emerged throughout the centuries on numerous occasions, with its proponents working in different fields and aiming to study diverse aspects of language and cognition.

2. Abstraction in neurolinguistics and cognitive psychology

Before analyzing the trends of abstraction research in linguistics proper, I would like to turn to a range of empirical disciplines, such as Clinical Psychology, Cognitive Psychology, Neurophysiology and Neurolinguistics. While the first two works with linguistic material, the latter rely on tomograms showing the activity of the brain. Nevertheless, their foci are similar: language acquisition (as first language by children and second language by both children and adults) (Schwanenflugel, De Villiers, Kormos, Saxton, Caramelli) [2, 3]; and speech deviations, such as aphasia and deep dyslexia (whether congenital or caused by traumas) (Barsalou, Wiemer-Hastings, Kohn, Shewan, Bushell) [3,4, 5, 6]. Without going into particulars, it is worth mentioning the fact that patients with speech deviations find it significantly more difficult to recognize and reproduce abstract words. Moreover, recent developments in hemispheric asymmetry studies confirmed earlier hypotheses, which stated that concrete words are processed by the left hemisphere while the right hemisphere stores and processes images, and are responsible for recognition of word in context. Therefore, patients who suffered damage to the right hemisphere tend to have greater difficulties with recognizing and processing abstract words.

Language acquisition studies also contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of abstraction and abstract words. The researchers, who unanimously claim that both children and adults understand and remember concrete words better and, moreover, the ability to process abstract words develops with age, proposed two essential theories explaining this fact. First, there is "double code" theory by A.Pavio [4] stating that concrete words are easier to work with as they are stored in people's mind both as a word, a lexical unit, and an image, whereas in order to understand or use abstract words speakers can only rely on the verbal code. The second theory, known as "context theory" (Schwanenflugel) [2] claims that abstract words do not have a context in its broad sense, that is feelings, associations, emotions linked to a word; thus, such words as *longitude, apprehension* and others are only based on our understanding of these concepts.

3. Abstract vs. concrete in linguistics

Unclear definition of abstraction and abstract words has long stood in the way of developing definite criteria for distinguishing abstract from concrete. Even nowadays, despite many research and developments, linguists define and identify abstract nouns in many different ways. The parameters, which may help identify those, can be characterized as either extra linguistic or linguistic, with the latter ones falling into semantic or formal. Generally, all the parameters mentioned in earlier research on abstract nouns can be categorized into:

1. Extra linguistic
2. Linguistic:
   - Semantic
     - No material detonate,
     - Possibility to be identified through defining words,

- • Synonymic/antonymic relations with other words;
- Formal
  - • Incomplete number paradigm,
  - • Irregular use of articles with the words,
  - • Specific word building,
  - • Transformation ability.

Extra linguistic criteria are somewhat close to one of the semantic criteria that is representation of the word's dentate in the real world. According to this approach, all the words, which denote material objects, visible and tangible, are concrete, while the words referring to notions and things, which cannot be touched or sensed in any other way, are deemed abstract. However, these leaves out imaginary creatures (e.g. *mermaid, unicorn, centaur*), who are unanimously identified as concrete yet are not real or tangible.

Sometimes abstraction is defined as the process or the result of detaching characteristics of an object or a group of objects. In this, clearly oldest approach dating back to School of Athens' time, concrete words are understood to denote an object, and abstract ones – to denote qualities and states of the objects (*kindness, height, wisdom*).

A further semantic parameter applied to words classification is based on the definitions of the words. In this case abstract lexemes are those whose defining words in a dictionary entry are *action, quality, state* and similar (Arnold, Schmid, Zolotareva) [8,9]. Difficulties arise, however, when an attempt is made to compile a complete list of such words. Lately, they have been an object of research themselves; *shell nouns* (a term coined by H.-J. Schmid) or *anaphoric nouns* (G.Francis) or *carrier nouns* (Ivanic) [9] are a numerous word group which can only be understood through the context and may sometimes substitute more difficult notions thus facilitating communication for the speakers. Another way of determining abstract words through semantic links with other lexemes is establishing their synonyms and antonyms, which are known to be more characteristic of abstract nouns, unlike concrete nouns with hyponymy relations (Zolotareva) [9].

However, semantic criteria are sometimes seen as not entirely objective or sufficient, thus encouraging researchers to look for formal parameters. One of the most widely discussed criterions is the nouns' number paradigm and the absence of plural forms for abstract nouns. Regardless of the way this parameter is understood, whether as incomplete number paradigm (Zhigadlo, Vinogradov) [10] or absence of number category (Vorontsova, Hewson) [9] or even as uncountability, it fails to provide adequate means for distinguishing abstract and concrete nouns, because as early as 1898 H.Sweet [11] emphasized that abstract nouns can have plural forms in some cases. Nowadays, there is clear understanding that this criterion is insufficient (Christofersen, Arnold, Cherneiko) [9, 11].

Another peculiar feature of abstract nouns is their use with articles (Saveliev, Svensson). Nevertheless, the finding of different linguists are quite contradictory. While earlier researches claimed that abstract nouns never take an indefinite article, explaining it by the fact that the lack of shapes or physical boundaries of an abstract referent is emphasized by the absence of an article (Christophsen, Reiman) [3, 10], later studies revealed that abstract nouns can be used with any article (Green, Komova) [11]. Therefore, this parameter cannot be considered sufficient or valid.

Some researchers suggest that abstract nouns can be identified due to their specific wordbuilding, i.e. they have certain semantically motivated suffixes (in English, for instance, those will be *-tion, -ity, -ety, -ism, -ing, -ness*). However, this approach has to be applied with caution for two main reasons. Firstofall, it is not universally applicable as there is a number of words with different meanings, some abstract and some concrete; for example, *population, abbreviation*, which are abstract when denoting a process, and concrete when they denote result. In this case, additional semantic information is necessary to aid a formal criterion. Secondly, a lot of abstract nouns do not have these suffixes as they derived from foreign words or are substantiated verbs (for example, *sense, treason*). In order to avoid confusion, it is suggested to find synonyms (e.g. *sense=perception, treason=treachery*), thus again turning to semantic criteria.

Moreover, the fact that most abstract nouns derive from verbs and adjectives encourages linguists to apply nominalization transformation to confirm their abstractness (Ekberg, Vendler, Apresyan) [13]. For instance, *She doesn't give any thought to her appearance* is transformed into *She doesn't think about her appearance.* Despite some clear advantages of this method, namely, the ability to determine semantic basis of abstract nouns and distinguishing them from material, concrete nouns, one major drawback of this approach is that is can be applied to some concrete nouns as well. In the way similar to one described above, nominal agents (e.g. *teacher, lecturer*) can

also be transformed (*He teaches. He reads lectures*). Another problem is that depending on the way of transformation chosen, researchers distinguish words differently, for example, I. Arnold considers time to be an abstract noun (as it has a synonym with "abstract" suffix: *time=duration*) but Yu.Tretyakov classifies *time* as a concrete noun since is cannot be transformed. Therefore, this criterion alone is also insufficient in determining abstract nouns.

Having investigated the parameters suggested for abstract nouns selection, we arrived at the conclusion that none of them can be applied independently without considering others. Moreover, some of these criteria can be true for concrete nouns as well, which complicates the studies and makes findings questionable and in many cases ambiguous. Some nouns cannot be clearly classified as either abstract or concrete, which has caused some researchers to propose to adopt another strata of words – *half-abstracts* (Givon) or *quasiabstracts* (Pavlina).

Conclusion

The study of abstract nouns has a long history, dating back to Greek schools of philosophy, which tried to explain the invisible world of notions. Although many attempted to provide a clear and sufficient definition for the terms abstract and abstraction, a lot of questions still remain as different researchers propose various definitions and criteria for drawing the line between abstract and concrete nouns: extra linguistic or linguistic (which, in its turn can be subdivided into semantic or grammar). However, all of the above-mentioned parameters appear to be insufficient for clear differentiation between the two groups of nouns; hence, a number of criteria have to be applied for selecting abstract nouns. Moreover, differences in approaches lead to different understanding (and therefore classifications) of nouns, which affects the results of abstract nouns studies.

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