

## **Vantage Theory: Developments and Extensions**

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### **Introduction**

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### **1. Why Vantage Theory?**

Perhaps the most comprehensive recent account of categorization (Cohen and Lefebvre, 2005) only refers to three publications on Robert E. MacLaury's Vantage Theory in but one of its forty-nine chapters. The actual term "Vantage Theory" is not even mentioned in the book. Why then need cognitive linguists bother about a yet another, off-mainstream, poorly-known theory, and one whose origins lie outside linguistic investigation in the strict sense of the word?

There are at least three reasons. First, a major asset of Vantage Theory (henceforth also VT) results from its apparent weakness, i.e. its non-linguistic beginnings. Michel Achard notes: “It would be worth investigating whether Vantage Theory can be used successfully to describe linguistic data”, and in this way address anthropological and linguistic issues in a coherent fashion, which “no specific theory has to date been able” to do (Achard, 1999, p. 242). The present volume will hopefully constitute a contribution towards this end. Second, VT has significant things to say about linguistic relativity (cf. esp. MacLaury, 2000 and Allan, this issue). Third, VT proposes a model of categorization which ascribes a pivotal role to some of the key issues in cognitive linguistics: subjectivity, the agency of the conceptualizer and the conceptualizer’s point of view. And all this is a result of extensive field research with the use of consistent methodology. Therefore, although there is no shortage of descriptive linguistic models, VT is certainly one that should be reckoned with.

## **2. What is Vantage Theory?**

### *2.a. The basics*

VT emerged in the 1980s as a model of colour categorization, in response to the limitations of the then available models, such as the age-old conception of the necessary and sufficient conditions, Rosch’s (e.g. 1975) prototype theory or Zadeh’s (1965) fuzzy sets. Between 1978 and 1981, MacLaury collected a huge body of data on the categorization of colour in the languages of Mesoamerica, which was later supplemented with material from other parts of the world. Attempts to describe and explain the data in terms of the existing models proved unsuccessful, so the scholar proposed a model that draws on the findings of

prototype theory but is based on different principles and extends beyond prototypes. VT proposes that:

- Humans categorize by behaving analogically to the way they orient themselves in space-time. The spatial coordinates of up–down, left–right and front–back are correlated with the coordinate of time as a function of relative motion. In categorization, these translate into, respectively, *fixed* and *mobile coordinates*. In colour categorization the fixed coordinates are hue, brightness or saturation, whereas the mobile coordinates (in all categorization) are reciprocally balanced degrees of attention, on the part of the conceptualizer, to *similarity* (S) or *difference* (D). The analogy is instinctive and subconscious; it is performed as quickly as one can think and talk.
- A selection and arrangement of coordinates is a vantage taken on a category. A category is thus an assembly of its coordinates and their arrangements, i.e. the sum of its vantages. A category may be viewed and named in more than one way, which in colour categorization is reflected by two terms being used in reference to the same category, sometimes by a single speaker during a single interview.
- A vantage is constructed as a series of (two to five, usually three) figure–ground alignments of coordinates. A conceptualizer, however, can only focus on one such alignment at a time, the others being held in memory as presuppositions. The series constitutes a whole, a coherent body of cognitions.

- Depending on the position and emphasis of either similarity or difference (the indispensable components in any categorization), vantages are of two major types: *dominant* and *recessive*. Greater attention to similarity (the dominant vantage) contracts the cognitive distance between the stimuli, whereas greater attention to difference (the recessive vantage) protracts it. This has consequences (called *entailments*) for the shapes of the vantages. For example, the dominant range is typically broader and more compacted than the recessive range, and its focus or the best example is more centrally located than in the recessive type.
- A third vantage, if it appears, requires the use of two frames, each comprising two vantages. The recessive vantage in Frame I functions as the dominant vantage in Frame II. The notions of “dominant” and “recessive” are therefore relative rather than absolute.
- The relationship of dominant to recessive can be of three basic types: *near-synonymy*, *coextension* and *inclusion*, difference playing a progressively greater role in that sequence. The recognition of coextension is a unique contribution of VT to studies on categorization: it obtains when the ranges of the vantages substantially overlap (usually in more than 50%) but the range of one covers the focus of the other. When difference reaches extreme values, a category may divide and the dominant vantages of distinct categories can be related by *complementation*.

Vantage theory also addresses more general issues, to which we now proceed.

### *2.b. Linguistic relativity/universalism*

MacLaury (2000, esp. p. 260) adduces a number of arguments against the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis but in favour of (a differently understood) relativism. The author views categorization as a plastic process which allows for a considerable degree of freedom within neurological constraints. People can entertain various cognitions and categories, even within the same village dialect, but name them with the same words. Otherwise phrased, language cannot influence thought and categorization because it is too weak: words are incapable of “holding concepts at one shared state” (MacLaury, e-mail to A.G. of Jan 16, 2002). Vantage Theory proposes to reconcile universalism and relativism: universal but plastic *categorizing abilities* enable the emergence of diverse *categories*.

### *2.c. Speaker agency and subjectivity*

Vantage Theory models categorization in terms of points of view (vantages) and so treats it as inherently subjective (i.e. subject- or conceptualizer-oriented). MacLaury says: “The maker of the category ... names the ways he constructs it rather than the set of its components as detached from himself” (MacLaury, 1997, p. 153). This entails that categories are dynamic, rather than fixed and static entities.

### *2.d. Evolution of categorization*

Basic colour terms evolve but do not devolve; colour systems become more complex but do not simplify. MacLaury attributes the development of civilization to the necessary and continual adaptations to the increasing diversity of life, a process that is apparently

irreversible. This requires more analytic thinking and greater attention to difference. The formula which expresses it,  $SD \rightarrow sD$ , is taken to be the “cognitive mainspring of progress” (MacLaury, 2003a, p. 11).

### 3. Vantage Theory and linguistics

But categorization, although an indispensable aspect of language use, is not the same as language use. For VT to bring good results as a theory of language, it has to be carefully adapted for the purpose and attempts to do so have indeed been made. For example, in order to analyze conversations in VT terms, Preston (1993, 1994) uses the notions of vantage chains, chain shifts, refocusing, concept suspension and concept pruning. In his model a vantage may involve more levels than the maximum of five recognized by MacLaury, or figures need not be grounded nor grounds need to originate as figures. (Preston’s adaptations are capitalized on by Fabiszak, this issue.)

A different proposal is Allan’s (2002) VT2, constructed for an analysis of the English number (e.g. *three giraffe* vs. *three giraffes*). Allan reformulates the relationship between vantage and frame and introduces the notions of subvantage and table. In VT2, his synthetic (aggregatory) subvantage follows rather than being simultaneous with the analytic (separatory) subvantage.

Głaz has struggled with his own modifications of VT on several occasions. In Głaz (2006a and b), he models written discourse and song lyrics as a succession of vantages. Additionally, in Głaz (2006a) he proposes that a later vantage inherits the image constructed in an earlier one. The two studies also speculate on different names for vantage types, such as “canonical” (default) vs. “non-canonical” or “focused micro-vantage”, “macro-vantage” and “focused macro-vantage”. In an analysis of time adverbials, Głaz (2007c), like Allan (2002),

uses the notion of subvantage, though in a different manner. (Cf. also Głaz, this issue, for another step towards a modified VT.)

Other studies clearly show that a particular domain of investigation is the determining factor in the choice of coordinates for conceptualization. For example, Aoyagi's (1995) analysis of styles of Japanese speech involves a fixed, stable and asymmetrical coordinate of "power". This view is opposed by Adachi (2002), who models the speech of Japanese women with respect to the fixed coordinates of "rank" and "persona". The author contends that Japanese female speakers select styles according to their own rank, rather than, as Aoyagi proposes, on the basis of their relationship to others.

The above are only a few of many more attempts to take VT into the realm of language. Some of the proposals remain unpublished, those that have seen the light of the day, either as articles or conference presentations, have dealt with the following problems:

- the semantics of colour terms, probably the most straightforward application of VT (MacLaury, 1995; MacLaury, Almási and Kövecses, 1997);
- asymmetries in conceptualizing (MacLaury, 1995);
- quintessential vs. representative prototypes (MacLaury, 1995);
- lexical semantics (Taylor, 2003; MacLaury, 1995, 2003b; Geeraerts, 1997, pp. 171, 186; Głaz, 2007a and c);
- spoken discourse (esp. in its social dimension) (MacLaury, 2003a (Appendix); Aoyagi, 1995; Adachi, 2002; Preston, 1993, 1994);
- number in English (Allan, 2002);
- the English articles in written discourse (Głaz, 2006a);
- the articles and capitalization (Głaz, 2001);
- English time adverbials (Głaz, 2007c);

- double constructions in English (*salad salad, not fruit salad*) (MacLaury, 1995);
- morphology in the Arabic lexicon (Zanned, 2007);
- song lyrics (MacLaury and MacLaury, 2002; Głaz, 2006b; Niewiara, 2004, also this issue);
- language learning (Pishwa, 2002);
- conventions of the Japanese writing system (Stanlaw, 2002);
- diachronic semantics (Winters, 2002; Geeraerts, 1997);
- metaphorization (MacLaury, 1995);
- the English aspectual<sup>1</sup> system (Głaz, 2002);
- points of view in reporting events (Głaz 2007b).

The present issue is a contribution to this endeavour. All of the papers except those by Tribushinina and Grace and Głaz were presented at the theme session “Extensions of Vantage Theory: Points of view in language structure and use”, at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Cognitive Linguistic Conference in Kraków, Poland, 2007 (Isabel Forbes, Chris Sinha, and Lazhar Zanned decided not to submit their work to this issue). In a sense, the session was a follow-up on a similar event (“Vantage Theory: Cognitive linguistic applications”, organized by Robert MacLaury) at the 6<sup>th</sup> ICLC in Stockholm, 1999. The Stockholm papers were then published in a special issue of *Language Sciences* (2002, vol. 24, 5–6), guest edited by VT’s founder. Therefore, the present issue is a continuation of very specific work initiated by Robert MacLaury.

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<sup>1</sup> We assume for the sake of simplicity that English does have aspect, a view opposed e.g. by Sullivan and Bogdan (2003: 302).

#### 4. This issue

The present volume starts with Keith Allan's discussion of VT in the light of linguistic relativity. It is followed by three studies on colour semantics. Alena Anishchanka investigates the relation between a colour and the entity to which it is attributed in American English descriptions of paintings. Danuta Stanulewicz looks at the connotations of and the relations between Polish terms for "blue". Finally, James Stanlaw reviews the history of colour naming in Japanese.

The next three papers deal with purely linguistic data other than colour terms. Elizabeth Riddle attempts to resolve the apparent paradoxes in the behaviour of English demonstratives with proper nouns. This is followed by Elena Tribushinina's study of two Russian antonyms to "high", and by Adam Głaz's proposal for a modified version of VT to account for different patterns of article use in text.

The three papers which follow concentrate on the issue of identity. First, Małgorzata Fabiszak looks at how national identity is coded in conversation; then, Nobuko Adachi investigates the notions of ethnicity among three categories of Japanese people. Finally, Aleksandra Niewiara investigates the identities of subculture members, possible to reveal through a statistical analysis of song lyrics.

The notion of culture is also taken up in Caroline Grace and Adam Głaz's inquiry into the connotations of a lexical item. The paper also shows point of convergence between VT, Langacker's (1987) Cognitive Grammar and Lakoff's (1987) conception of radial categories. It is interesting to note that an early version of the paper was presented by its first author at a conference in 1989 and was overseen by Robert MacLaury. We are happy that though this publication it has been rescued from oblivion.

A juxtaposition of VT and Cognitive Grammar is also a theme of the final contribution to the volume, Margaret Winters' diachronic study of specific English constructions.

As can be seen, the range of the issues addressed is extensive, and the authors use VT creatively. We only regret that the present extensions of and divagations on the theory are taking place without its founder and *spiritus movens*, Robert E. MacLaury, who passed away in February 2004. This was only a few months before he was to take part as a plenary speaker in the conference "Progress in Colour Studies" in Glasgow, Scotland. The conference was then devoted to his memory, and so is the present volume. We are all grateful to Rob for blazing the VT trail and inspiring us to move along.

## 5. The future

Is there a future for VT as a theory of language? If there were not, it would make little sense to present this collection of articles to the reader, unless as a historical curiosity for subsequent generations of scholars. We think, however, that for the future to materialize, VT researchers must confront at least the following issues.

First, and obviously, a modified version of VT must be readily applicable in analyses of linguistic data. This self-evident condition has rather serious consequences in that the theory of categorization must be remodelled as a theory of (linguistic) conceptualization (as many scholars have already sought to do).

Second, it seems that the value of an extended VT would be best manifested in a larger context of cognitive linguistics or when viewed against the backdrop of well-established cognitive linguistic models, such as Cognitive Grammar or Blending Theory. Winters (2002 and this issue), Grace and Głaz (this issue) and Głaz (in press and 2007c) are exactly such

attempts. Other scholars strive to synthesize VT with other models: Sinha (2007) with Distributed Spatial Semantics (developed by Sinha and Kuteva, 1995), Zanned (2007) with his Probabilistic Model (Zanned, 2005). At the psychological level, Johnson (2002) is a promising and important attempt to arrive at a coherent synthesis of VT and Barsalou's (1992) frame theory.

Third, a wider circulation of the theory can be hoped for if it is presented in an accessible manner, perhaps in the form of a textbook. At the 10<sup>th</sup> ICLC in Kraków, we were approached by several delegates with requests for explanation of what Vantage Theory really is (also a frequent experience of Rob MacLaury). Admittedly, there do exist two brief accounts of VT: the entry for "Categorizing percepts: Vantage Theory" (by Keith Allan) in *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (2006) and a section on colours and VT in *Natural Language Semantics* by the same author (Allan, 2001). A book on linguistics-adapted VT, however, is yet to be written. Such a book will be widely celebrated.

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