

## PhR 2019 Philological Readings

### INTERPRETATION AND MORPHOLOGY: A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

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#### *Abstract*

The objective of this paper is to present morphology in an interpretive perspective. The author demonstrates the usefulness of a cognitive approach by showing mechanisms of cognitive and language structures interaction that underlie the interpretive potential of some morphological categories and forms in English. In attempting to provide an account of this issue the author addresses theory of interpretation worked out by prof. Boldyrev and his followers in Russian cognitive linguistics. After outlining the fundamental theoretical assumptions, the article examines the empirical evidence on the processes that manage interpretation in morphology. The argument presented in the paper is that interpretive potential of morphological categories may be viewed in the framework of three aspects of linguistic processing knowledge: representative proper, semiotic and interpretive. Secondary interpretation of knowledge in morphology is also given special priority. It gives the opportunity to present a new view and explain how morphological forms acquire different meanings in the process of verbal communication.

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## 1. Introduction

Cognitive theory of interpretation is a result of research conducted by the representatives of Tambov scientific school (Russia) “Cognitive Linguistics. Cognitive and Language Structures Interaction” (Boldyrev, 2012, 2017; Magirovskaya, 2012, 2017; Boldyrev & Panasenko, 2013; Besedina, 2014, 2017; Boldyrev & Vinogradova, 2015; Maslova, 2016; Babina, 2017; Bezukladova, 2017; Furs, 2017). In this section I present an overview of this theory.

I start by considering fundamental assumptions upon which the theory rests. The first basic assumption is that interpretation is considered in the framework of an integrated theory of representation and operating knowledge in language (Boldyrev, 2016, 2017).

I now turn to the second assumption. Interpretation is viewed as a linguistic cognitive activity of an individual, which provides interpretation of the world in language. While interpreting the speaker configures the knowledge (both about the world and about the language) in his/her conceptual system. On the other hand, language may be treated as an interpretive aspect of human consciousness. Magirovskaya (2013) suggests regarding it as a system materializing all the main types of a cognitive contact of a subject of cognition with the world.

In a broad sense, interpretation is one of the major aspects of human consciousness. It coincides with language cognition. Language cognition, as it is explained by Boldyrev and Vinogradova (2015), is “rather a human cognitive activity. It is reflected in the attempt of an individual to develop a linguistic world view and in his/her ability to apply the results of such cognition in the process of communication” (pp. 934-935).

I next turn to the third assumption, which claims that interpretation is based on the secondary conceptualization and categorization of objects, events and so on (Klepikova, 2014). Interpretation being based on schema of collective knowledge is individual in nature. Two main aspects of interpretation are distinguished. Interpretation is regarded as a unique universal cognitive need and ability and as specific cognitive level which is hierarchically highest in the system of cognitive levels of knowledge configuration (see Magirovskaya, 2012).

With these generalities in mind I will turn to some issues, concerning the presentation of English morphological categories in the framework of cognitive theory of interpretation.

## 2. Problem Statement

Interpretive function of the language, introduced by prof. Boldyrev, is claimed to be a basic one along with the cognitive and communicative functions (see e.g. Boldyrev 2016, 2017). The key argument for this statement is that interpretation is represented in the system of linguistic categories and is characteristic of linguistic conceptualization and categorization. As Boldyrev (2016) argues, “it is the interpretive function of language that requires a broad choice of schemas to structure the world and the world knowledge and to trigger selection, classification and evaluation as three basic processes of linguistic interpretation” (p. 20). Linguistic interpretation displays an anthropocentric nature of language. From this perspective structuring world and world knowledge in the process of conceptualization and categorization is always interpretive. Conventional schemas employed in these processes include among

propositional, metaphoric, metonymic ones also the structure of different categories, morphological in particular. In other words, morphological conceptualization, morphological categories and forms are treated as language processing system.

### **3. Research Questions**

The paper will therefore address following questions:

Why may interpretive potential of morphological categories and forms be treated in the perspective of linguistic processing of knowledge?

How is secondary interpretation of knowledge managed in morphology?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the present paper is to propose a cognitive and discursive explanation of English morphological categories and forms from the perspective of their interpretive potential. That is when they create different senses in the process of verbal communication.

### **5. Research Methods**

Adopting a fresh perspective, I use some commonly used methods of cognitive research in linguistics: conceptual analysis, cognitive modelling and conceptual-representative analysis. Conceptual analysis aims at detecting of conceptual content by means of meanings of linguistic units representing the corresponding concept. Cognitive modelling is in service of concrete sense creation process. Conceptual representative analysis (Besedina, 2006) implies further development of conceptual analysis and aims at investigating a concept's content and role of each linguistic level in its representation. Thus the analysis is done in both directions: from conceptual to linguistic content and vice versa.

### **6. Findings**

#### **6.1. Morphological categories and forms in perspective of linguistic interpretation**

This section is concerned with introducing and describing the research questions in more details. My general point is that the sort of approach to morphological categories and forms I sketch offers the basis for a more coherent, learnable presentation of this hitherto seemingly arbitrary aspect of English grammar.

#### **6.2. Interpretive potential of morphological categories and forms and three aspects of linguistic processing of knowledge**

The main aspects of linguistic processing of knowledge were distinguished by prof. Boldyrev within the broader framework of an integrative theory of language as a system of knowledge representation (Boldyrev, 2012; Boldyrev & Dubrovskaya, 2015). These are: representative proper, semiotic and interpretive. As for the problem discussed here, the representative aspect allows to present morphological categories as special knowledge formats in the language. Knowledge format is a special

form and way of presenting knowledge on mental and linguistic level (Boldyrev, 2006). Morphological categories (tense, aspect, voice, mood, person, number, etc.) in this case are formats of presenting linguistic knowledge. The latter includes knowledge of language forms proper, their meanings and categories, which show how world knowledge is presented in the language. Being a special knowledge format, morphological categories gather morphological forms together on the basis of the concept in common. I name it morphological concept (see Besedina, 2006, 2014). The latter provides the unity of conceptual content and ways of its representation in a language.

Semiotic aspect is oriented to the understanding of cognitive and linguistic operations of sense creation process. This process may be treated as morphological representation. It presupposes a categorical way of structuring conceptual content through morphological categories and forms (see Besedina, 2006). It is one of the possible types of verbal representation, which is included into the system of shared knowledge, having conventional character. In this case morphological categories and forms are treated as linguistic mechanism of knowledge representation. To understand morphological representation I will start by examining the stages of this process in more detail. Conventionally, it experiences some stages.

The first stage is connected with the formation of morphological concepts. I suggest that they are formed on the basis of the primary concepts which already exist in the conceptual system and have an important and salient position in it. They are usually named fundamental concepts in cognitive linguistics. These are such concepts as SPACE, TIME, RELATION, QUANTITY (see e.g. Lakoff, 1987; Jackendoff, 1996; Talmy, 2001; Kubryakova & Demyankov, 2007). The formation of morphological concept is determined by the cognitive operation of abstraction. Its realization on the first stage results in encoding the most important characteristics for the language. The second stage is characterized by activation of the main characteristics in the content of morphological concepts by the morphological forms. It leads to forming the generalized morphological senses (see details Besedina, 2006). On the next stage the concretization of generalized senses takes place. This concretization is revealed on the sentence-utterance level in interaction with linguistic factors (semantic, syntactic and contextual) that influence or may even determine the sense creation process.

Having considered the interpretive potential of morphology in perspective of linguistic knowledge processing, it's time to analyse the processes which manage the secondary interpretation in morphology. The remainder of the paper will develop the details.

### **6.3. Secondary interpretation of knowledge in morphology**

The central insight in this section is to find out what cognitive mechanisms can be called the driving forces behind the secondary interpretation in morphology. Linguistic units, and morphological forms among them, may be differently comprehended in the process of verbal communication. It is the result of individual interpretation of objects and events in person's surroundings. The process of secondary interpretation in morphology is connected with the non-prototypical usage of some morphological forms. I mean such cases as: non-prototypical usage of superlatives (*a most important result or a most interesting debate*), lexicalized forms of plural nouns (*drops, greens, wheels, honours,*

etc.) and progressive forms of the verbs (*She is always losing her things*). In the paper superlatives and lexicalized forms are in focus.

Though superlative forms reveal the highest degree of properties intensity, they also may be used just to generally emphasize a high degree of a quality. Such cases are called ‘elative’ (*a most important limitation, a most enjoyable day, a most important result, a most interesting debate, a most delicate and sensitive lady, etc.*). In this paper I argue for a new perspective on the nature of the elative sense (see also Besedina, 2012). My principal basic assumption is that elative sense is the result of secondary interpretation, which, in its turn, is based on secondary derivation. The latter is treated as a linguistic model of configuring conceptual content (in this particular case – conceptual content in service of superlatives meaning-construction) to create a new sense – elative. My second assumption is that secondary interpretation in this case is closely connected with the idea of emotional evaluation as a certain reaction to objects and events that affect a speaker’s world in the ways that appear important. Emotional evaluation is subjective by nature and exploits a personal scale of values; it is connected with psychology of human perception of concrete things and phenomena. Now consider a further illustration:

A dog is still **the most popular** pet.

This is **a most popular** hotel.

In prototypical usage of the superlative (*the most popular*), it is asserted that no other animal is as popular as a dog. A speaker relies on conventional knowledge about pets. By contrast, in the second case the superlative form (*most popular*) is used evaluatively (non-prototypically), a speaker generally emphasizes a high degree of a quality, giving a secondary interpretation. The hotel is conceptualized as absolutely (very) popular. While there may be other popular hotels, these are not considered. The speaker relies on his individual knowledge (experience) about the popularity of this particular hotel and expresses a personal emotional-evaluative interpretation. I now turn to a more detailed account of the process of secondary interpretation at both conceptual and linguistic levels.

Conceptually, it is an emotional-evaluative configuration of collective knowledge that results in transfer to the sphere of individual knowledge and leads to an individual appraisal of actions, situations or objects. The phrase *a most + Adj.* is used to express a very high degree of a property, without implying any comparison. From a cognitive point of view it’s connected with the defocusing of the idea of comparison. On a linguistic level the use of the indefinite article appears to play an important role in this. In other words defocusing is considered to be a cognitive mechanism, and an indefinite article – a linguistic mechanism determining the emotional-evaluative (interpretive) construal of an object.

In most of such cases the idea of a speaker’s personal attitude based on his individual knowledge is underlined with the help of such expressions as *I consider, I’m sure, I find that, you really are (have)*. Consider the following examples, illustrating this idea.

**I find that** a most important limitation.

**I consider** it a most interesting debate.

**I’m sure** members were treated to a most entertaining talk.

**You really are** a most delicate and sensitive lady.

Another morphological form that is connected with secondary interpretation is plural form of nouns. These forms may be lexicalized. Generally, the process of lexicalization is treated as the

conversion of a language element or a combination of elements into a separate lexical unit (see Besedina, Shemaeva, Borisovskaya, & Zimovets, 2015). Lexicalized plural nouns are a special case of lexicalization defined as semantic isolation of plural forms. Within the framework of traditional linguistics lexicalization is interpreted as the result of interaction between lexical and grammatical meanings of a word when plural nouns no longer refer to a simple multitude of similar objects, that is they denote another class of objects. E.g. *green* (a green colour) – *greens* (green vegetables); *bag* (a container, made of flexible material with an opening at the top, that is used for carrying things) – *bags* (loose folds of skin under the eyes); *bead* (small ball of wood, glass, etc. with a hole through it, for threading with others on a string or wire) – *beads* (necklace of beads).

Within cognitive linguistics tradition lexicalization of plural nouns has often been viewed in terms of cognitive processes resulting in formation of new cognitive structures in human mind. As it is widely assumed in multilevel theory of meaning (cognitive semantics), differentiating the conceptual and linguistic levels of knowledge representation, any changes of meaning structure are caused by changes in the corresponding conceptual structure. Moreover, concepts and conceptual structures are capable of interacting. As a result of it, new conceptual structures that become a part of the conceptual system are formed. To make it clear, interaction of concepts may be viewed as a cognitive basis for many language products.

The cognitive process that manages lexicalization of plural nouns is that of conceptual derivation, a mental process aimed at creating of new sense as a result of a certain way of interpreting the knowledge which was already verbalized. As a linguistic process it is based also on mechanism of identifying interpretation (see Besedina & Shemayeva, 2015; Shemayeva, 2015). The latter ensures the formation of sense on the basis of secondary nomination which involves mastering of new knowledge in a conceptual projection fixed by a lexicalized plural noun. As a result, a plural noun encodes a new fragment of knowledge in a certain conceptual configuration.

In this research I show that conceptual derivation that underpins lexicalization of plural nouns is possible due to some cognitive models using certain cognitive mechanisms. I assume that the cognitive mechanisms of lexicalization in this case are those of conceptual metonymy, conceptual metaphor, profiling, configuring and defocusing. However, the role of these mechanisms in creating new senses is different. While conceptual metonymy and conceptual metaphor determine the type of a lexicalization model, profiling, configuring and defocusing just complement them ensuring functioning of cognitive models. This fact gives me the right to distinguish two major types of lexicalization models: identifying metonymical model and identifying metaphorical model. The creation of new senses on the basis of these models is also determined by semantic factor. The latter presupposes taking into account the semantics of a singular noun and determines the stages of the process itself. In some cases, the context of the whole sentence, in which the lexicalized form is used, is of importance as well.

In the process of linguistic analysis the following metonymical models for lexicalized English plural nouns were found out: “material - product made of this material” (*tweed* – *tweeds*; *flannel* – *flannels*; *iron* – *irons*; *leather* – *leathers*, *nylon* – *nylons*; *silk* – *silks*); “quality – person” (*authority* – *authorities*); “quality – subject” (*colour* – *colours*; *flat* – *flats*; *green* – *greens*; *latitude* – *latitudes*; *scale* – *scales*; *shallow* – *shallows*, *splendour* – *splendours*, *white* – *whites*, *wild* – *wilds*); “action – event” (*game*

– *games; prayer – prayers; race – races; study – studies; talk – talks; travel – travels*); “action – result” (*foundation – foundations; sale – sales; writing – writings*); “effect – cause” (*woe – woes*); “substance – space” (*snow – snows; water – waters; sand – sands*); “feeling – mode of expressing feeling” (*honour – honours; respect – respects; rejoicing – rejoicings*); “weather phenomenon – period of time” (*rain – rains*); “part – whole” (*drop – drops; feature – features; figure – figures; thread – threads; verse – verses; wave – waves; wheel – wheels*); “content – container” (*trunk – trunks*). Metaphorical models are not so numerous as metonymical ones. But still such models as “subject – the part of body (organ) of a person (animal)” (*bag – bags; knocker – knockers; pin – pins*), “the part of body (organ) of a person (animal) – subject” (*jaw – jaws; wing – wings*), “subject (geographical object) – circumstances” (*strait – straits; curtain – curtains*) are distinguished in the process of empiric analysis.

Detailed analysis of cognitive and linguistic models for lexicalized plural nouns may be found in (Besedina et al., 2015; Shemayeva, 2015). It demonstrates that the process of sense creation expressed by lexicalized plural nouns is based on the interaction of linguistic and conceptual units in collaboration with linguistic factors.

## 7. Conclusion

This research gives us an insight into the way morphology interprets knowledge. My findings partly corroborate the results of the previous studies. In the approach presented here I have laid special emphasis on the fact that possibility for plural nouns to acquire their own lexical meanings is provided by the interpretive activity of human thought. The results of this study attempt to provide a better understanding of lexicalization cognitive processes. The above findings have important implications. The implications of the study are therefore both practical and fundamental. On the practical level I expect to project this investigation to areas such as grammar and language teaching. On the more fundamental side I hope the study clarifies some issues explaining, why interpretive potential of morphological categories and forms may be treated in the perspective of linguistic processing of knowledge. In theoretical terms, the proposed analysis uses the analytical tools of interpretation theory on cognitive grounds which can adequately explain how secondary interpretation of knowledge is managed in morphology and provide a new view on how new meanings of morphological forms are acquired.

The findings presented have significant implications for ongoing and future research on different levels of linguistic interpretation.

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