

CENTER FOR COGNITIVE SCIENCE
University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Wednesday, February 11, 2004

280 Park Hall
North Campus
2:00 pm –4:00 pm

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"Why do languages have nouns and verbs"

The question to be addressed is why most if not all human languages distinguish two word classes (or parts of speech) that we can call 'nouns' and 'verbs'. An initial hypothesis is that the distinction corresponds to a basic ontological or conceptual distinction between things and events. I argue that the view that nouns denote things is seriously confused. Rather nouns denote what I will call 'kinds'; it is noun phrases, not nouns, that denote things. However, I will also argue against an alternative hypothesis that the noun-verb distinction corresponds to a basic ontological or conceptual distinction between kinds and events. I will propose instead that the noun-verb distinction reflects the different frequencies with which different sorts of words are used in different syntactic functions. In particular, words that are used more frequently as arguments group together into nouns while words that are used more frequently as predicates group together into verbs. The point is made clearer in languages with a weak noun-verb distinction, in which both nouns and verbs can freely be used as either predicates or arguments. The general idea is that the linguistic categories of noun and verb are due to different frequencies of usage and not to any ontological or conceptual categories.

The kind of explanation I offer challenges a popular view in linguistics that language is a "window into the human mind". Linguists often make claims about the human mind on the basis of the nature of language, assuming that we can make inferences from the nature of human language to the nature of the mind. But usage-based explanations of the sort proposed here provide an alternative kind of explanation for the nature of language, without making assumptions about the human mind.

Refreshments will be available

Everyone is welcome to attend!

For information please call the Cognitive Science Office at (716) 645-3794 or check
<http://www.cogsci.buffalo.edu/Activities/Colloquium/CLLOs04/2004spring.htm>

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