



TITLE

How do languages express objects?

UMBRELLA KEY IDEA

Words/signs can be divided into groups.

TEXT KEY IDEA

Languages express objects by giving them names.

CONSPECTUS

1. Umbrella key idea: Words/signs can be divided into groups.
2. Introduction
3. Text key idea: Languages express objects by giving them names
 - 3.1 Why do we name people and other things?
 - 3.2 People picture things differently according to their life experiences
 - 3.3 Nouns can refer to things which are not present in time and space
 - 3.4 Nouns can refer to concrete or abstract things
 - 3.5 Nouns are a category of language expressions
 - 3.6 Nouns can refer to countable or uncountable things
4. Examples: Examples of concrete/abstract nouns and acceptability of a sentence
5. Conclusions: Words/signs from group 1 are called nouns and they are a powerful tool in language

REFERENCES

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OBJECTIVES

You can **recognize** nouns amongst other parts of the language.
You can **classify** concrete and abstract nouns.
You can **identify** strategies to distinguish nouns from other (phrase) categories.

FULL TEXT

1. Umbrella key idea

All words/signs from one language we call a dictionary of this language. Words/signs in a language dictionary we can divided into groups. Words of group 1 refer to objects (both concrete like monkey and abstract like dragon and describing different types of feeling and ideas like love or liberty). Words of group 2 refers to activities (sth is happening with an object or object by itself is doing sth). Words of group 3 refers to features (both of objects and activities). In some languages (sign languages, English) some signs/words from the 1 and 2 groups look the same. There is an extra 4 group with words which do not belong to any of the above groups. Words in this 4 group play different roles: replace, connect or indicate types of relation between words from 3 above groups.

2. Introduction

When a child is born parents want to teach him/her a world. They indicate something and say a word. "Look. This is a bird. A bird". In the child's brain a connection arise: object + word. This is how in languages we express objects: in the process of indicating and naming.

3. Naming things

Languages express objects by giving them names or indicating on them. But there are different objects we need to talk about. Some of them are invisible like ideas in our mind and it is hard to indicate on them. Still, we want to talk about them. That is why we need naming them with signs/ words. Naming is a very important process in languages.

3.1. Why do we name people and other things?



We name people, animals and things because, when they have a name, we can talk about them more easily. Imagine the following situation: a hearing person named Robert meets the deaf community. After meeting him for several times, the deaf community gives him the sign-name WATER (because once during a dinner he drank one litre of water in five minutes for no reasons). The deaf people needed a sign for that person, Robert. Why? To talk about him, to ask about him, to introduce him to others, etc. Without the sign-name they could refer to Robert only by describing his look, spelling his birth name, telling information about him. These strategies take a lot of time in communication. Also, from a cultural point of view, Robert started “existing” in the deaf world only when the deaf community gave him a sign-name.

The same happens for names of people in the hearing world. Imagine the following situation: a child is born. Friends go visit the parents and the newborn baby in the hospital. The baby’s parents announce with a smile: “Meet Sara.” From that moment on, Sara exists not only physically but also she exists in the language used by her parents and their friends.

As we do for people, we name everything else: objects, animals, plants, places, feelings, dreams, projects, etc. We need to give a name to that thing we want to talk about.

3.2. People picture things differently according to their life experiences

When you sign or say the word/sign from group 1 for a person, e.g. *mum*, you can be picturing in your head different things: the image of your personal *mum*; the image of a woman who has kids; any other picture that means *mum* to you. Are you sure your idea of *mum*, is the same for other people? A rich boy from California or an African old lady could picture a different *mum* in their mind.

When you mention an object, for instance a *book*, instantly your brain will put in your mind a general picture of a *book* or a particular one, maybe thick and black, according to what you already know and what’s happening around you (for example the book your friend gave you as a present, or the book lying on the table next to you)

This shows you two facts:

- a word/sign from group 1 make you picture something in your head and that picture is your idea, the meaning you give to that person, animal, plant, object you are signing or talking about
- your idea connected to that sign/word could be different from that of another person

3.3. A word/sign from group 1 can refer to things which are not present in time and space

Also, what can happen is that, while you are talking about your *mum*, she could not be there where you are, or she could even not exist anymore. When you are telling your friend how much you loved that romance book, in the meantime, you could not have that book anymore, you could have lost it, lent it to a friend. This shows that: the name and



the real thing you connect to the name are not always physically together in the same place and time

3.4. A word/sign from group 1 can refer to concrete or abstract things

Sometimes the real thing you connect to the name is something you cannot picture in your mind precisely: it does not have a shape, it does not have a colour, it does not make any sound, it does not smell or taste, you cannot touch it with your hand. Think about the signs and words for: love, fear, hope, and anger. These are feelings: you cannot touch them, you cannot hear them, they don't smell or taste like anything and you could not tell their shape, but, still, you can talk about them. A distinction could be made between those nouns which are linked to something that can be perceived with your senses the senses (touchable like a book, visible like a dog, smellable like a rose, etc.). These nouns are generally called concrete, since they refer to perceivable objects, animals and people. Other nouns refer to things which cannot be perceived through the senses (for example, you cannot touch 'freedom'). These nouns are called *abstract*. See example 1.

3.5. A word/sign from group 1 are a category of language expressions

All signs and words which refer to things and not to animations or features, are called **nouns**. This makes nouns a category. When you sign or speak in your language you use nouns all the time although you may not be aware of doing this. Also, you never use nouns instead of signs or words from other categories (animations, features, connections). If you exchange word/sign from the group 1 with a word/sign from group 2 or 3, a sentence may stop being grammatically acceptable. See example 2.

3.6. A word/sign from group 1 can refer to countable or uncountable things

Some of the things can be counted, others cannot. Imagine water, salt, lava from a volcano: each of them is only one big piece of matter. You won't describe "how many" water, salt or lava there are, can you? These are called uncountable nouns. Many other things can be counted, you could tell if there is only one or more of them. These are countable nouns (eg. houses, trees, pens, dogs, etc.). In sign language you can place countable objects in different parts of the space in front of you (eg. three houses, for trees, two pens, two dogs), while it cannot be done with uncountable nouns without adding some extra information (eg. four BOTTLES of water; three DIFFERENT TYPES of salt; two volcanos and two KINDS of lava).

4. Examples of concrete/abstract nouns and acceptability of a sentence

Here are some examples of concrete and abstract nouns.

Example 1

Concrete: *person, mum, chair, needle, dog, elephant, bushes, rose*

Abstract: *love, fear, hope, anger; freedom, sacrifice, effort; topic, theory*



See these examples and reflect upon your ideas. Do you also think that the sentence marked as ‘non acceptable*’ looks wrong in your language?

Example 2

Acceptable: YESTERDAY IX-1 HOUSE BUY-DONE / Yesterday I bought a house

Non acceptable: *YESTERDAY IX-1 BUILD BUY-DONE / *Yesterday I built bought

Non acceptable: *YESTERDAY IX-1 NEW BUY-DONE / *Yesterday I bought new

5. Conclusions

In order to communicate we need to name things. Once things are named, we can talk about them. The words/signs from group 1 allow us to talk about everything: either an abstract or concrete thing, either a thing which is present where we are or not present. When you first learn a word/sign from group 1, you connect it with your personal experience and you create an image of the word/sign meaning in your head. The images we have are all similar but also somehow different because we have different life experiences. Despite the differences in our head, we can communicate quite a lot of information by using words/signs from group one. Words/signs from group 1 are called nouns and they are a powerful tool in language.