The Designation of Humans: Transparency and Opacity

Online Proceedings of UK-CLA Meetings
http://uk-cla.org.uk/proceedings
Vol 1: 419 – 432

ELISE MIGNOT

University of Paris-Sorbonne (Paris 4) / CELTA

Elise.Mignot@paris-sorbonne.fr

We designate humans with nouns or pronouns. In this paper, I focus on nouns, both simple and complex, and address the related issues of transparency and opacity.

My first aim is to show that nouns which designate humans tend to be more opaque than those which name other entities, and that transparent constructions may take on specific shades of meaning when applied to humans. For instance, the verb+noun pattern (pickpocket, passport) is derogatory only when it denotes humans. My hypothesis is that transparent designations do not readily designate people because reducing someone to one characteristic amounts to ignoring a human being's essential complexity.

I then compare nouns (in general) with other parts of speech, and, within the domain of word-formation, I observe a higher degree of opacity for the first set. My hypothesis is that nouns, more than other parts of speech, must be opaque, because, perhaps better than other parts of speech, they categorize. How, indeed, can a category be named? One cannot name an item after the prototype of the category it belongs to (as the prototype does not represent all members), or with a characteristic shared by all members of the category (as in most cases there isn't one). The only way is to resort to an arbitrary, and therefore opaque, sign.

One may therefore draw a parallel between the grammatical category of nouns and the designation of humans, in that they are both characterized by opacity. In fact, humans encapsulate at least one ingredient of categorization, i.e. opacity (people have an identity: they are more than the sum of their acts). One may therefore tentatively see humans as the conceptual basis for categorization.

Keywords: transparency, opacity, arbitrariness, humans, nouns

1. Introduction

We designate humans with nouns or pronouns. In this paper, I focus on nouns, both simple and complex, and will address the related issues of transparency and opacity, which, in the Saussurian terminology, correspond to 'relative' and 'absolute' arbitrariness (Saussure 1916: 180-184). (Opaque nouns, such as 'man' or 'cousin', are absolutely arbitrary in that there seems to be no reason for using those words rather than other ones. With transparent nouns, on the contrary, there seems to be a good reason to give a certain name to a certain entity).

My first aim is to show that nouns which designate humans tend to be more opaque than those which name other entities, and that transparent constructions may take on specific shades of meaning when applied to humans. My hypothesis is that transparent designations do not readily designate people because reducing someone to one characteristic amounts to ignoring a human being's essential complexity.

I then compare nouns (in general) with other parts of speech, and, within the domain of word-formation, I also observe a higher degree of opacity for the first set. My hypothesis is that nouns, more than any other part of speech, must be opaque, because, perhaps better than any other part of speech, they categorize. How, indeed, can a category be named? One cannot name an item after the prototype of the category it belongs to (as the prototype does not represent all members), or with a characteristic shared by all members of the category (as in most cases there isn't one). The only way is to resort to an arbitrary, and therefore opaque, sign.

One may therefore draw a parallel between the grammatical category of nouns and the designation of humans, in that they are both characterized by opacity. In fact, humans encapsulate at least one ingredient of categorization, i.e. opacity (people have an identity: they are more than the sum of their acts). One may therefore tentatively see humans as the conceptual basis for categorization, and for nouns – in as much nouns categorize.

2. More Opacity for Humans

2.1 Humans Less Readily Expressed by the Most Transparent Nouns

Out of the 2030 nouns of my corpus[i], 45% are simple, i.e. formally and semantically unanalyzable, and therefore opaque. If I take into account only the nouns which denote people, the proportion rises to 72%. This shows that nouns designating humans tend to be more opaque. These figures include proper names (proper names being opaque, one might say by definition – I will come back to this). Even if I discard proper names, I still have a proportion of 59% of simple nouns for humans (which is still more than 45).

However, simply to oppose simple and complex words seems too much of a generalization, and it is in fact more accurate to state that humans can actually be denoted by complex words, but that those tend to fall lower on the scale of transparency than the nouns applied to other entities.

Complex words can indeed be more or less transparent / more or less opaque. The more transparent they are, the less they depart from a propositional structure. I propose a classification of complex nouns into four types, from more to less transparent:

1) *Conversion*: where there is no modification of the base (except in some cases a phonological one, as in to re'cord – a 'record).

2) *Compound nouns*, such as 'milkman', 'cleaning lady', 'seaman', 'delivery boys', 'Harvard man' (whether they are single- or double-stressed, lexicalized or not), are one degree lower on this scale of transparency. The two constituents of the corresponding clause are retained but there is a syntactic modification, with 'milk' (a complement) moving forward in the new structure (This kind of departure from the syntactic pattern contributes to the opacity of nouns).

3) Then, still one degree lower, there are *suffixed nouns* such as 'driver', 'servant', or 'artist'. They illustrate the same departure from syntax as the preceding case in that the order of the constituents is modified (the verbal element precedes the agentive suffix). They also contain a suffix (rather than a noun), which, as it is semantically vaguer, is in itself a means of opacification.

4) Close to that case are nouns like 'tenant' where one recognizes a suffix (the same '-ant' as in, say, 'servant'), but where the base is bound (rather than free as in 'servant', where 'serve' can stand alone as a verb). A bound base contributes to the opacity of a noun in that the constituents then appear less separable. The word is more likely to be seen as one unit, therefore resembling simple nouns, which are lowest on the scale of transparency.

Now that this scale of transparency is established, it is easier to show that the more transparent a word is (conversions and compound nouns), the less likely it is to denote a human.It is in fact well known (Adams 1973) that most nouns derived from verbs through the process of conversion, such as 'a catch', 'a cough', 'a lift', and 'an arrest', denote situations or things, and very infrequently humans. (This also stands for cases of conversion which include composition, such as 'beesting', 'godsend', 'snakebite', and 'sunburn'.) In my corpus 5% of conversions denote humans (for instance, host, substitute), whereas if I take into account all the nouns of my corpus, 23% denote humans.As for compound nouns (the second process of word-formation on my transparency scale), they also tend to designate non human entities. In my corpus, 13% of compound nouns denote humans. In another corpus (Mignot 2001), constituted of noun + noun compounds only (1715 items), the proportion of forms denoting humans is 12%.[ii] Again, this is less than the previously mentioned 23% (the proportion of nouns which denote humans).

It seems that opacity is needed to designate humans. How, then, is opacity achieved?

2.2 How is Opacity Achieved?

In this section, in order to describe how opacity is achieved, I look at all complex words, not just conversions and compound nouns.

2.2.1 Rare Bases

One way for a word to gain opacity is to be formed from a relatively rare base. Take, for example, the nouns 'president', 'resident', 'correspondent',

'inhabitant', or 'occupant'. The verb 'preside' is less common than, say, 'rule', to describe what a president does. In the same way, speakers are more likely to use the verb 'live' than either 'occupy', 'reside', or 'inhabit' to describe what an occupant, a resident, or an inhabitant does. This is admittedly less true of '-er' deverbal nouns (such as 'driver'), but then it is no accident that those frequently denote inanimates (take 'dishwasher', for example). It seems that inanimates are less likely to be designated with nouns that include rare bases. In my corpus, out of all the cases where I could find a rare base (although I admit there is an element of subjectivity there), 31% denoted humans (when, again, the standard proportion of nouns designating humans is 23%).

2.2.2 Obsolete Meaning of Constituents

Another mechanism of opacity involves retaining an obsolete sense of a component in a complex word. In my corpus 53% of nouns where I have identified an obsolete meaning designate humans (a proportion higher than the average 23%). 'Gentle', for example, means 'noble' (an obsolete meaning) in 'gentleman', but has a different meaning ('sweet', 'considerate') when used as an independent word. As a result, the meaning of 'gentleman' is not predictable from the current meaning of the adjective 'gentle'. In 'gentleness', however, 'gentle' has its current meaning. The old meaning is only retained when the complex word denotes a person. The same applies to 'strange', 'stranger', and 'strangeness'. The only case where 'strange' retains its old meaning of 'unknown' (rather than 'odd', 'bizarre') is when it enters a complex word which denotes a person. In words which follow the same adjective + noun pattern but which denote a non-human entity, such as 'highchair', 'bluebell', and 'blackbird', the adjectives have the same meaning as they would have in other contexts, even if sometimes the meaning of the whole is not entirely predictable from the meanings of the component bases. A 'high chair' may be a special type of chair, designed for small children, but it is actually high (i.e., 'high' is used with its current meaning). A 'blackbird' may be a special type of bird, but, again, 'black' is used with its current meaning.

There are other examples where the obsolete meaning is that of a verb (so far I have only listed adjectives), as is the case for 'keep' in 'housekeeper'. The equivalent of 'keep' in a clause might be, for example, 'take care of', as in 'Joseph will take care of the house' (Brontë: 336). Other possible equivalents could be 'clean', 'run', or 'manage' a house.[iii] Other cases where an obsolete meaning of the verb is retained in the derived noun are 'hairdresser' and 'shopkeeper'. What a hairdresser does is 'cut' hair rather than 'dress' it, and a shopkeeper 'runs' a shop rather than 'keeps' it. Similar -'er' deverbal nouns, when they denote machines rather than humans (such as 'dishwasher' and 'drycleaner'), do not seem to involve an old meaning. Again, my conclusion is that opacity concerns humans more than other entities.

2.2.3 Specialization of Meaning

The meaning of a complex word is specialized when the meaning of the whole is not entirely predictable from the meaning of the parts, and when the parts have more meanings than are selected in the final form. Thus a 'freshman', or 'fresher', is not a man who is fresh, but a student ('student' being more specific than 'man', which indicates a specialization of 'man' in this context), who is in

his first year at university. 'Fresh' is also specialized in that it does not only convey the concept of 'being new', but, more precisely, to be new in a university. The meaning of the whole is clearly narower that the sum of the parts. Similarly, a 'housekeeper' is a person employed to look after a house. One would not normally say that someone who keeps the house after a divorce is a 'housekeeper'. The nouns 'Baptist' and 'Methodist' are other cases in point. Someone who follows a particular method in order to solve a problem is not normally called a 'Methodist'. In 'Methodist', the noun 'method', even if it is recognizable, is used in a very restricted sense, which might not even be obvious to native speakers. Even if these phenomena can sometimes be observed in nouns denoting inanimates, they seem to be more common in those that designate people. In my corpus 56% of nouns where I identified a specialization of meaning denote human (again, this figure has to be compared to the average 23%).

2.3 Proper Names: The Height of Opacity

Proper names designate mostly people (in my corpus 86% of proper names designate people – rather than places or animals), and they represent the height of opacity. Kleiber (1981) has emphasized the fact that one major characteristic of proper names is that they are not descriptive. One might know the etymology of names such as 'Catherine' or 'Elizabeth' (there is a field of knowledge called 'onomastics'), but one does not have to know the etymology of a name to use it. It could even be argued that the etymology must be forgotten in order for the name to fulfill its role. This is true of first names but also of family names, such as 'Turner', where all idea of agentivity is lost. In fact, many proper names are complex in form, but are not perceived as such because the original reason for their complexity is lost, and, again, must be if they are to be used as proper names.

Of course, proper names of places are opaque too. 'Oxford' is not felt as meaning 'ford for oxen' any more, and in 'Middleton' or 'Clifton', one does not perceive the element -'ton' , which is the same one that yielded 'town' in contemporary English. Yet, place names allow some transparency. In 'Stratford-upon-Avon' for instance, the spatial relationship between the town and the river 'Avon' is clear, and in 'England' or 'Iceland', one recognizes the element 'land'. In many geographical names, the fact that the designated entity is a country is obvious, as in 'the low Countries', or 'the United States'. The name 'the United Kingdom' is in fact so transparent that if the UK changed its political system and became a republic, it could not be called 'the United Kingdom' any more. In the same way, proper names of houses and animals also allow some transparency, as in 'Wuthering Heights' (the word 'Height' indicating that the house is located on a hill) or 'Skulkers' (the dog is named after its characteritsic behaviour).

None of that relative transparency applies to humans. Proper names can generally be said to represent the height of opacity, but they are even more opaque when they denote people.

3. Transparent Constructions Applied to Humans: Personal or Derogatory Designations

It appears that, generally speaking, nouns are more opaque when they designate people, but of course one may use transparent forms as well. However the difference between humans and non-humans remains. Transparent forms, when applied to humans, may take on specific shades of meanings that they do not have when applied to non-humans. For instance, the use of a transparent form for a person may convey the idea that a designation is used by a particular speaker in particular circumstances, rather than being conventional. Transparent denominations also have a tendency to be derogatory.

3.1 Non Conventional Designations

3.1.1 Compound Nouns Denoting People on the Basis of their Profession

As humans typically work, there are many nouns denoting people on the basis of their profession. It seems on the face of it that all degrees of transparency are found. There are suffixed nouns such as 'servant', 'president', 'shoe-mender', 'baker', 'driver', and 'shopkeeper'; compound nouns such as 'milkman'; and conversions such as 'cook', 'turnkey', or 'sawbones' (atypical designations in that they are jocular, which I will come back to later). However a closer investigation shows that the most transparent forms (i.e. compounds and conversions – but here I focus on compounds), even it they can designate people on the basis of their profession, convey a personal aspect to that designation. My first remark on compound nouns will be that few designate humans on the basis of their profession. (The most common constructions to refer to people on that basis are suffixed words: more precisely words ending with the -'er' suffix, such as 'baker'). This is to be expected, as compound nouns appear in a high position on my scale of transparency, and therefore do not very readily designate humans.

Out of over 1700 noun + noun compounds, here are those which denote a person on the basis of their profession: 'milkman', 'delivery man', 'postman', 'cleaning woman', 'garbage man', 'junkman', 'spaceman', 'gas man', 'oil man', 'water man', 'electricity man', 'repair man', 'paper boy', 'seaman', 'junkman', and 'labman'. They seem to have two characteristics.

The first one is that most of them ('garbage man', 'junkman', 'spaceman', 'gasman', 'oil man', 'water man', 'electricity man', 'repair man', and 'paper boy') do not really denote professions, but rather reflect the way a certain speaker denotes a person on the basis of what he or she does in a certain situation. This appears quite clearly in the following context, where the narrator is emptying his dead father's house.

> **Garbage men** clumped in with heavy boots and hauled off mountains of trash. The **water man** read the water meter, the **gas man** read the gas meter, the **oil men** read the oil gauge. [. . .] The real estate agent came to buy some furniture for the new owners and wound up taking a mirror for herself. A woman who ran a curio shop bought my mother's old hats. A **junkman** came with a team of

> assistants (four black men named Luther, Ulysses, Tommy Pride, and Joe Sapp) and carted away everything from a set of barbels to a broken toaster. By the time it was over, nothing was left. (Auster 1982: 12)

If one asked a 'gas man', 'What is your job?', the interlocutor probably would not use the compound noun in his answer but another term, such as 'technician', for example. For 'garbage man' or 'junkman', the 'official' designation is 'refuse collector' (GB) or 'sanitation worker' (US), which, despite appearances, are not primarily compound nouns but suffixed nouns, just like 'driver' or 'singer' (except that a complement is retained in the nominal structure). In the same way, the person that I may call the 'repair man' if my car breaks down would probably call himself (and would generally be called) a 'mechanic'. To take one last example, a person might be called a 'space man' by an admirative child, but would call himself an 'astronaut'. In all these cases, the compound noun (more transparent than other formations) expresses a name that is only valid for one speaker, on a particular occasion, and is therefore not conventional.

However, one cannot account for all the compound nouns cited before in the same way. 'Milkman', 'cleaning woman' and 'postman' are felt as denoting a 'real' job. So, probably, are 'delivery man' and 'paper boy'. What characterizes those compounds is that they denote people who come to someone's house, generally to deliver something (or to do something in the house, in the case of the 'cleaning woman'). My hypothesis is that this is precisely the reason why the transparent designation has been retained, even though it normally does not work for people designated on the basis of their profession. As seen before, compound nouns normally reflect a personal way of denoting someone. The pattern can be found in these cases because there is a personal relationship between the designated person and someone else (not necessarily the speaker).

Notice in this connection that some of these compounds, such as 'paper boy', fall into the two sub-categories. One may argue that the word does not really denote a job (a paper boy is a child, who does not have a permanent job yet), and that its intended referent is a person who delivers something. This reinforces my hypothesis that the common feature of all these compounds is that they reflect a means of conveying a personal designation. The same conclusion can be drawn from the compounds with 'mate' as a head noun.

3.1.2 Compounds with 'mate' as a Head Noun

These forms also illustrate the fact that noun + noun compounds, when applied to humans, express a personal designation (rather than a shared, conventional one). In my corpus of noun + noun compounds, 209 items denote humans. The head nouns that appear most frequently are 'man' (16%), 'friend' (5%), 'boy' (4%), and 'mate' (4%). All other head nouns occur only once. These figures show that only four nouns represent 29% of all head nouns. It seems relevant to note that, out of those four head nouns, two ('friend' and 'mate') denote personal relationships. Examples of compounds with 'mate' as a head noun include 'bunkmate', 'schoolmate', 'running mate', 'classmate', 'roommate', 'team-mate', and 'playmate'. Notice that if an alternative to 'running mate' was used, it would not be 'running man' (another

compound) but 'runner' (a suffixed noun). The compound (rather than any other form) is used when the speaker (or another person whose point of view is adopted by the speaker) knows the intended referent personally; there seems to be a correspondance between the structure (noun+noun) and the semantics of the head noun. What is important here is that this is only true of compound nouns denoting people. Compound nouns which designate other entities (sujet as objects, animals, or plants) usually just fill a sub-categorizing role (an 'alarm clock' is type of clock, a 'blow lamp' is a type of lamp, a 'racehorse' is a type of horse, a 'mountain bear' is a type of bear, a 'water lily' is a type of lily), but again they fill a sub-categorizing role rather than express a personal designation. They do not express a personal relationship with the referent. Once again, my conclusion is that compounds, which happen to illustrate a high degree of transparency, cannot easily be used as a standard (i.e. conventional) denominations when it comes to designating humans.

3.2 Derogatory Designations

3.2.1 Verb to Noun Conversions: The 'turnkey' Type

I will now look at conversions, such as 'turnkey' or 'sawbones', where the converted verb is followed by a complement. Cotte (2004) has discussed these formations. He has observed that they are remarkably transparent. Indeed, on my own scale, they are the most transparent. Firstly, they involve no phonologically realized suffix. Secondly, in the derivative, the verb precedes its complement, therefore not departing from the syntactic word order. (In alternative formations such as 'story-teller', on the contrary, the complement precedes the verb.) Cotte has also noted that these formations are often used in a jocular and/or derogatory way, as is the case for 'spendthrift', 'cut-purse', 'do-nothing', 'cut-throat', 'pickpocket', 'spoilsport', or 'turncoat'. Sometimes, the derivative can be contrasted to a more standard designation: 'sawbones' instead of 'surgeon', or 'turnkey' as opposed to 'jailor'. The fact that these forms are derogatory is all the more striking as the situation involved ('to turn a key', in the case of 'turnkey'), is often not intrinsically debasing. If the element 'spoil' of 'spoilsport' does include a negative shade of meaning, it is not negative in itself to turn a key ('turnkey').

However, these forms are not always derogatory, as appears in 'wagtail', 'scarecrow', 'passport', and 'makeweight'. In fact, they are derogatory only when they denote humans. The same applies to French. Compare for instance 'rabat-joie', 'pique-assiette', 'gratte-papiers', 'traîne-savates', 'va-nu-pieds', and 'trouble-fête', which denote humans and are derogatory, to 'porte-bagages', 'presse-papier', 'tire-bouchon', 'porte-couteau', and 'pèse-personne', which denote inanimate entities and are neutral. It appears that similar constructions acquire different shades of meaning depending on what they denote.

3.2.2 Adjective + Noun Compounds

The same tendency can be observed for adjective + noun compounds. To denote humans, we have 'dimwit', 'busybody', and 'bighead', which are jocular and/or derogatory. This shade of meaning is absent when the same construction is used to denote other entities, as in 'bluebell' and 'hardback'.

The compound 'gentleman' could be seen as a counter-example, as it denotes a human and is not derogatory. However, as I have seen before, it is rather more opaque than, say, 'busybody', 'redhead' or 'dimwit' for two reasons, namely the use of the old meaning of 'gentle', and the vowel transformation in 'man'. Only transparent formations are derogatory.

3.2.3 Why should Transparent Designations be Derogatory

One may wonder why this pattern is derogatory only when it denotes humans. As remarked above, among the various types of complex words, they are the most transparent. My hypothesis is that transparent designations do not readily designate people because reducing someone to only one characteristic amounts to ignoring a human being's essential complexity. People are seen as complex beings, whose identity transcends the sum of their acts. More than any other entity, they must be denoted by opaque nouns.

4. Nouns and Opacity

I will now examine the relationship between nouns in general (not only those that denote humans) and opacity. I have established so far that nouns which denote humans tend to be more opaque than others. There is, however, some degree of opacity in every noun, and it can even be argued that nouns are more affected by the constraint of opacity than any other part of speech. This I will show by comparing the formation of nouns to that of other grammatical categories. Before that, I will briefly examine how words become opaque.

4.1 How Complex Words Become Opaque

It is customary to mention opacification only in rare cases such as 'cupboard' or 'honeymoon'. I aim to show that in fact opacification is a frequent process. It can be achieved in several ways, which are not mutually exclusive.

4.1.1 Phonological Modification

Phonological changes can make the constituents of complex words less recognizable. With 'cupboard', for example, historical change has resulted in the loss of /p/ from 'cup' and the vowel reduction in 'board', and the word has become a simple base. In present-day English, it has become difficult to isolate the two elements 'cup' and 'board'. In 'resident' and 'president', seen as derived, respectively, from 'reside' and 'preside', we have both a vowel change and a stress shift (from the second syllable of the verb to the first syllable of the noun). From 'study' to 'student' we do not have a vowel reduction but a modification of the vowel quality. Vowel reduction is particularly frequent in compounds ending in -'man', such as 'milkman' or 'postman'.

4.1.2 Specialization of Meaning

Another means of opacification is the specialization of meaning. If we analyse the noun 'cupboard', for instance, we may understand that there is a spatial relationship between cups and a board (or some boards), but the meaning of the whole is more than the sum of its parts, in that one may put many things

other than cups in a cupboard, and that one cannot say any more that a cupboard is a type of board (in the same way as a racehorse is a type of horse). In other words, there is no hyponymy relation between the compound and its head word.

More examples of specialization are 'youth' (one can say of a forty-year-old man that he is young, but not that he is a youth), 'servant' (if a mother serves her meal to her child, she is not a servant), 'student' (if I study a face, I am not a student), 'Quaker' (if I quake from fear, I am not a Quaker), 'turnkey' (if I turn a key to lock my flat, I am not a turnkey), and 'housekeeper' (the one who keeps the house after a divorce is not normally called a housekeeper). Specialization of meaning can also be observed in specific contexts, as in the following example.

> And it was when these cops were chasing the crooks that **we played some good tricks with the telly**,[iv] because when one of them opened his big gob to spout about getting their man I'd turn the sound down and see his mouth move like a goldfish or mackerel or a minnow mimicking what they were supposed to be acting – it was so funny the whole family nearly went into fits on the brand-new carpet that hadn't found its way to the bedroom. It was the best of all though when we did it to some Tory telling us about how good his government was going to be if we kept on voting for them – their slack chops rolling, opening and bumbling, hands lifting to twitch moustaches and touching their buttonholes to make sure the flower hadn't wilted, so that you could see they didn't mean a word they said, especially with not a murmur coming out because we'd cut off the sound. When the governors of the Borstal first talked to me I was reminded of those times so much that I nearly killed myself trying not to laugh. Yes, **we played so many good stunts on the box of tricks**[v] that mam used to call us the **Telly Boys**, we got so clever at it. (Sillitoe 1959: 22–23)

The compound noun 'Telly Boys' is only valid to denote the narrator and his friends and not to any boy who watches television, or, say, repairs televisions.

4.1.3 Implicit Relationship between Head and Dependent

A complex word seems to contain more meaning than signs, which contributes to its opacity. A 'milkman', for instance, is a man who delivers bottles of milk, but the verb 'deliver' is not literally expressed. In the same way, a 'singer' often denotes one who sings regularly because it is his job, but the 'profession' sense is only implicit. In the example of the preceding paragraph ('Telly Boys'), the compound conveys much more meaning than it actually says, as is clear from the fact that it takes a whole paragraph to develop all the elements condensed in 'Telly Boys'.

4.1.5 The Shortness of Nouns

It may seem obvious that complex nouns are shorter that their syntactic counterparts, but is still worth noting as that is in itself a means of opacification. The shorter a sign is, the more opaque it is. Even if a complex noun can be analysed into constituents, it is synthetic, contrary to propositional structures, which by contrast can be said to be analytic.

There is probably much more to say about the means of opacification but, in

the present paper, I only aim to show that opacification concerns all complex nouns, one way or another. What I want to suggest now is that these processes of opacification apply to nouns more than to any other part of speech.

4.2 Complex Nouns vs. Other Parts of Speech

Opacity (or arbitrariness) is obviously present everywhere in language, and concerns all parts of speech. One characteristic of nouns, however, is that within the domain of word-formation, they seem to undergo more extensive processes of opacification than other grammatical categories.

There are, for instance, more cases of specialization of meaning with nouns than with other parts of speech. Marchand (1964: 14) holds the view that, in the case of doubtful examples of conversions, the derivative is always the word where there is a specialization of meaning: 'Of two homophonous words ... the one with the smallest field of reference is the derivative'.

Adams (1973: 55) disagrees with that view, giving the verbs 'shepherd', 'usher', and 'master' as counter-examples. Indeed, a shepherd looks after sheep only, but one may shepherd other creatures. In that sense, one cannot say that the field of reference of the verb 'shepherd' is smaller than that of the homonymous noun. The view taken here is that Marchand's statement is valid only when the derivative is a noun. From 'a shepherd' to the verb 'shepherd', there is indeed no specialization of meaning, but the noun 'drop-out' does have a smaller field of reference than the verb 'to drop out', as it can only denote someone who leaves school or university, when the verb can be used in a variety of contexts.

What holds for conversion also holds for affixation. When a verb is formed (rather than a noun), there does not seem to be much specialization of meaning involved. To victimize someone is to treat them as a victim, where the meaning of 'victim' remains the same. Similarly, 'to catapult' something means 'to throw an object as if it were a catapult'. Again, the meaning of the noun 'catapult' does not change. One may regard the verb 'housekeep' as a counter-example (since 'keep' has a specialized meaning), but, as noted before, this is in fact a case of back-formation, of which the average speaker is aware (which, as it is not so frequent, is to be taken into account). The verb is derived from the noun 'housekeeper', and the meaning of the verb is retained.

In the same way again, complex adjectives seem to undergo far fewer opacification processes than nouns. In 'silver-white' or 'good-natured', for instance, there is no obsolete meaning, no phonological modification, and no feeling that the meaning of the whole is more than the sum of the parts. In Adams (1973: 92 ff), I have not found any instances of compound adjectives where an old meaning of a component is retained. Amongst the examples given are 'far-seeing', 'hard-hitting', 'long-suffering', 'ever-lasting', 'hard-working', 'clean-shaven', 'deep-set', 'first-born', 'ready-made', 'well-dressed', 'widespread', 'man-made', 'window-swept', 'threadbare', 'self-important', 'time-consuming', 'heartbroken', 'seasick', etc.

What one may conclude from such data is that among complex words, nouns

are more opaque than other parts of speech. This probably reflects the fact that the constraint of opacity applies to nouns more than to any other grammatical category.

4.3 Proper Names and Opacity

Within the category of nouns, the subset of proper names represents the height of opacity. Proper names can also be formally complex, whether by composition ('Lockwood') or affixation ('Miller') but they are not semantically complex. They are morphologically analysable but semantically opaque. In the family names 'Miller' or 'Turner', for instance, one does not perceive the -'er' suffix as agentive. In the place name 'Oxford', the two original constituents ('ox' and 'ford') are not perceived any more. One may recognize the element 'ox', but not 'ford'. Similarly, many names of towns end in -'ton' (an equivalent of 'town'), but the compounding pattern is no longer transparent.

Nouns ending in -/I/[vi] are another good case in point to show that, within the domain of word-formation, proper names are even more opaque than other nouns. Indeed, nouns ending in -/I/ include both common nouns ('auntie', 'sweetie', 'smarty') and proper names ('Cathy', or 'Nelly' for instance). When they are common nouns, these words are transparent in that they are semantically complex (a 'sweetie' is someone who is sweet). When they are proper names, they are more opaque in that, even if one recognizes the same suffix in 'Cathy' or 'Nelly' as in 'sweetie', in 'Nelly' the complexity is only formal (but not semantic). 'Nelly' is not 'someone who is Nell', nor 'Cathy', 'someone who is Cath'. 'Nelly' and 'Cathy' are used as diminutives, of Ellen and Catherine, respectively. The greater opacity of proper names ending in -/I/ can also be observed in their formation process. In the case of common nouns, the process is simple: a suffix (-/I/) is added to the base. In the case of proper names, the process may be similar (-/I/ added to Jack to form 'Jackie', for instance), but it is often more complex. It may involve back-clipping (Robbie formed from 'Robert'), or, quite frequently, ambiclipping (surplus removed from both beginning and end, as in 'Lizzie' derived from 'Elizabeth'). In the case of Nelly (from 'Ellen'), it involves back-clipping (of -'en') plus the moving of the final 'n' to the initial position. These modifications alter the perception of the /I/ suffix and hence the transparency of the noun.

From these data, one may conclude that proper names are more opaque than common nouns in that, when they are formally complex, they undergo more processes of opacification and cease to be semantically complex. More generally, it appears that proper names are only an extreme case within the category of nouns, which are, generally speaking, more subject to the opacity constraint than the other parts of speech.

4.4 Why do Nouns Have to be Opaque?

My hypothesis is that nouns must be opaque because, better than any other part of speech, they categorize. Wierzbicka (1988: 463-497) has discussed the categorizing role of nouns (particularly compared with adjectives), and I will not dwell on the subject.

Lakoff (1987) has contrasted Aristotle's categories and more recent interpretations of that concept. To summarize very briefly Lakoff's discussion, for Aristotle, the members of a category shared a common characteristic. Wittgenstein (1953: 66-71) opposed this view and introduced the idea of family resemblances. He argued that members of a category do not necessarily share a common characteristic, but resemble one or several others (not all) in some way (not always in the same way). Rosch's psychological experiments then showed that Wittgenstein's definition of categories was more valid, from a psychological and cognitive point of view, than that of Aristotle. My point here is that this probably has some consequence on how we name.

How, then, can the member of a category be named? A category does include a prototype, as Rosch (1978) demonstrated (the prototype of birds being a sparrow, for example), but one cannot name any member with the prototype, as it does not represent all members. If one cannot name an item after the prototype of the category it belongs to, or with a characteristic shared by all members of the category, the only way is to resort to an arbitrary, and therefore opaque, sign. This may account for the opacity constraint on nouns.

5. Conclusion: Humans as a the Conceptual Basis for Categorization?

Having compared nouns that denote people with other types of nouns, I have observed that the first set is characterized by a higher degree of opacity. Having then compared nouns (in general) with other parts of speech, I have also observed a higher degree of opacity for the first set (within the domain of word-formation). One may therefore draw a parallel between the grammatical category of nouns and humans, in that they are both characterized by opacity.

In fact, humans encapsulate at least one ingredient of categorization, i.e. opacity (humans have an identity: they are more than the sum of their acts). There seems to be a relationship between opacity and categorization. A noun must be opaque because it categorizes, and because the members of a category are heterogeneous. One may therefore see humans as the conceptual basis for categorization (people think the way they are) – I will not be the first, nor probably the last, to conclude that thought is embodied. If this is right, humans may also be the conceptual basis for the nominal category. Here I slightly diverge from Langacker (1991: 14-15) for whom 'things' (which include, but are not restricted to, humans) are the 'prototype' (in the sense of 'conceptual basis') of nouns.

Notes

[i] These figures include proper names.

[ii] In these data, I do not make any difference between single- and double-stressed compounds. It might be interesting, however, to investigate that difference.

[iii] The verb 'housekeep' does exist, but it is a case of back-formation, and is normally perceived as such (which is far from always true of back-formations). The process described here (opacification obtained by retaining an old meaning) therefore does not apply to the verb 'housekeep', as it is to be considered as a whole, and retains the meaning of the primitive form 'housekeeper'.

[iv] Emphasis mine.

[v] Emphasis mine.

[vi] What is given here is the phonetic transcription of the suffix. The corresponding orthographic form is either -y, -ey or –ie, but this is simply a matter of spelling alternation.

References

Adams, V. (1973). *An Introduction to Modern English Word-Formation*. London: Longman.

Aristotle [4th C. BC] (1963). *Categories and De Interpretatione*, tr. J.L. Ackrill. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Cotte, P. (2004). Le titre et l'incipit d'un conte d'Edgar Allan Poe. *Etudes anglaises* 57 (2): 173-186.

Kleiber, G. (1981). *Problèmes de Référence: Descriptions Définies et Noms Propres.* Paris: Klincksieck.

Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Langacker, R.W. (1991). *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol II: Descriptive Application*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Marchand, H. (1964). A set of criteria for the establishing of derivational relationship between words unmarked by derivational morphemes. *Indogermanische Forschungen* 69: 10-19.

Mignot, E. (2001). *Recherches sur les Noms Composés de Type Nom + Nom en Anglais Contemporain*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation.

Rosch, E. (1978). Principles of categorization. In E. Rosch and B.B. Lloyd (eds.), *Cognition and Categorization*. Hillsdale, NJ.: Erlbaum. pp. 27-48.

Saussure, F. ([1916] 1967). *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Paris: Payot .

Wierzbicka, A. (1988). *The Semantics of Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Macmillan.

Sources of the examples

Auster, P. (1982). *The Invention of Solitude.* London. Boston: Faber and Faber.

Brontë, E. ([1847] 2003). *Wuthering Heights*. London: Penguin Books.

Sillitoe, A. (1959). *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. London: Harper Collins Publisher