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Polysemous Qualities, Continuity, and Graduation

Author's reply to 'Drawing Networks from Recurrent Polysemies' by Michael Cysouw (2010)

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Cysouw's (2010) remarks concern three issues: the presentation of the concepts studied, the arbitrariness of the statistical approach, and the visualization of the networks. I will briefly comment upon each of those in turn.

As for the presentation of the cross-linguistic concepts, Cysouw is right: exemplifying by a sentence or above all by a small paragraph would have been very useful. The pilot study, conducted for African languages, was aimed at naming the concepts and assumed that these prototypical qualities were easily understandable; it made sense as a first step. But the approach Cysouw suggests is indeed preferable. In some instances, it would be even better to use a short paragraph rather than a single sentence, as some concepts, e.g. 'dried fruit' or 'dry weather', may be not cross-culturally attested.

Concerning the issue of statistical assessment of the frequencies attested, I will try to clarify my point of view. Cysouw points out that "arbitrary divisions of a scale [are] not very suitable for interpretative practice". I fully agree with him: some qualities are very federative and some others are less federative, just as some polysemous patterns recur frequently while others are less recurrent. But it is clear that the algorithm used by Cysouw avoids the problem of quantifying a threshold because his representations give an account of the attestation frequencies (by means of the length of the line), whereas my *qualitative* notional maps forced me to add a *quantitative* viewpoint. For instance, I defined the federative notions as qualities involved in a minimum of five polysemous patterns and across a minimum of six languages. The reason behind specifying a threshold was that the particular functioning of these polysemous qualities becomes statistically more significant. Nevertheless, although a statistical approach enables me to distinguish regularities, it does not commit me to final inferences. As I tried to explain in the conclusion, a strictly quantitative conception of typology is not very productive because it goes beyond binary definitions and all-or-nothing oppositions.

We need to maintain a constructivist approach of language, which implies "a rejection of substantive universals, a definition of dynamic invariant features [...], and a dynamic construction of salient patterns" (Fuchs 1999:17-18). And, once again, I will refer to Lazard (1992:432) who states that "semantic substance is continuous and unstable. Differences within it are gradual." So, federative notions as well as recurring phenomena must be considered as continuous and gradual facts.

As for the networks drawn by Cysouw, there is no doubt that his model significantly improves the analysis of the polysemous patterns (whether recurring or not) because, as I just mentioned, his representations capture the principles of continuity/graduation better than mere reliance on attestation frequencies. As a consequence, we can clearly observe that Cysouw's "clusters" are organized around conceptual cores of federative notions, e.g. *strong/hard/solid* or *fat/big/thick*, etc. And I think that, with such a method of representation, the expression "semantic field" as employed by Lazard (1992) really becomes meaningful.

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