Author's Reply - Cross-linguistic Generic Categories Are Linguists' Generalizations

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Cross-Linguistic Generic Categories Are Linguists' Generalizations

Author's reply to 'Semantic Maps as Helpers in the Quest for Generic Categories' (Veselinova 2010) and 'Positing Grammatical Categories: Linguists' vs. Speakers' Generalizations' (Cristofaro 2010)

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In what follows, I first address Sonia Cristofaro's comment, and subsequently the comment by Ljuba Veselinova.

Cristofaro and I agree on the basics: it is important to distinguish two senses of 'categories', one in which categories are theoretical constructs, descriptive generalizations, and one in which they are assumed to have ontological reality – some mental reality, for instance. But while Cristofaro acknowledges that I explicitly subscribe to this distinction, she argues that in actual practice I neglect it. Below I shall argue that it is Cristofaro rather than me who is guilty of neglect. In her comment, she not only disregards the distinction between descriptive categories and ontological categories, but also the distinction between cross-linguistic facts or descriptions and language-specific facts or descriptions, and the distinction between potentially universal substance and language-specific linguistic structure. The following quotation from Cristofaro's comment is symptomatic:

> Boye's claim that generic categories should *correspond to linguistically significant generalizations* implies that positing particular generic categories should not be a matter of convention, and that these categories should rather *play a role in the grammar of individual languages*. There is, however, only one possible sense in which a category can be assumed to *exist in the grammar of a language* independently of a linguist's descriptive convention, namely, the category must *have some form of mental reality* for the speakers of the language. (Cristofaro 2010:24; emphasis added)

As it appears, Cristofaro takes (cross-)linguistic significance to imply 'playing a role in grammar', and subsequently identifies 'playing a role in grammar' with first 'existence in grammar' and then 'having mental reality'. Not every linguist would equate existence in grammar with having mental reality, and it is not obvious that playing a role in grammar is identical to existing in grammar (something could play a role in grammar by constraining it, for instance, rather than being part of it). What is important here, however, is Cristofaro's claim of an implicational relation between being a cross-linguistically significant generalization and playing a role or existing in the grammar of specific languages. Such a relation does not exist. What is more, it could not possibly exist.

First, a cross-linguistically significant generalization is a description, and as such inevitably distinct from what it describes, and thus, in turn, from what could play a role or exist in the grammar of individual languages.

Second, and more specifically, a cross-linguistic generalization or description is inevitably distinct not only from the matter over which it generalizes, and thus from what could play a role

or exist in the grammar of individual languages, but even from language-specific *descriptions* of the matter over which it generalizes.

Third, under the assumption that linguistic structure is language-specific while substance is potentially universal, cross-linguistic generalizations are inevitably substance-based, and by virtue of this feature alone, they are distinct from grammatical phenomena as structural linguistic phenomena.[1] As discussed in Boye, (2010: Section 2), it is natural to assume that cross-linguistic generalizations reveal something about cognitive and communicative phenomena which constrain structural variation, but because they are substance-based, they cannot be assumed to predict language-specific linguistic structure.

Cristofaro's claim that an implicational relation holds between being a cross-linguistically significant generalization and playing a role or existing in the grammar of a specific language thus rests on a neglect of these three distinctions. The claim erroneously presupposes 1) that cross-linguistic significance of generalizations pertains to *explanation* rather than *description*,[2] 2) that there is identity between *cross-linguistic* descriptions or facts and *language-specific* descriptions or facts, and 3) that *substance*-based generalizations can predict language-specific *structure*. Cristofaro is not alone, of course. As for the first of the three distinctions, for instance, both generative grammar and cognitive linguistics are on occasion guilty of trying to simultaneously *describe* and *explain* linguistic facts in terms of cognitive facts.

In my understanding, cross-linguistic generic categories are purely descriptive. They are observations of correlations between two findings: 1) the finding that a set of linguistic expressions from different languages have meanings over which a generalization can be made in terms of a particular notion (for instance, the notion of source of information); 2) the finding that, across or within different languages, expressions belonging to the set group together linguistically (semantically or distributionally). As far as I can see, but contrary to what Cristofaro claims, they are neither more nor less "conventional" than language-specific generic categories. Cross-linguistic generic categories are conventional in the sense that they rest on a convention about which possible findings count as criteria for categorial status (cf. Boye 2010: Section 6), but they are non-conventional in that they do have to meet a set of criteria, and in that there is arguably a limited set of possible findings which a linguistic society can select as criterial. Semantic map continuity belongs to this limited set. Whether or not it can ultimately be explained as an epiphenomenon, as Cristofaro suggests, semantic map continuity is an empirical finding which may potentially correlate with notional coherence. As a criterion for status as a cross-linguistic generic category, it is quite easy to apply. Applying the criterion is simply a matter of checking, on an appropriate semantic map, whether or not a given set of meanings (for instance, 'source of information' meanings) together constitute a continuous region. Cristofaro (2010:25) notes that not all language-specific expressions can be assumed to be multifunctional and cover more than one of the regions distinguished on a semantic map, and she takes this to mean that the criterion of semantic map continuity "will be impossible to apply". Here again,

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[1] The distinction between language-specific structure and potentially universal substance is Structuralist heritage, but has lately surfaced on more than one occasion in typological literature. Substance may be understood as cognitive and communicative phenomena that, on the one hand, as potentially universal phenomena, constrain linguistic variation, and, on the other hand, are shaped (or given a language-specific manifestation) in language-specific structure. In contrast to what was held by the old Structuralists, it is fruitful to think of substance as not being amorphous (cf. Harder 1996).

[2] In Boye (2010: Section 2), I explicitly take cross-linguistic significance to pertain to description: "[…] cross-linguistic generic categories are endowed with a claim of being significant for the description of language-specific phenomena […]".

however, she confuses things that should be kept apart: 1) Semantic map continuity is a possible feature of *cross-linguistic* generalizations, but not of *language-specific* categories (whether descriptive or 'ontological'); 2) it is a possible feature of *sets of generalized meanings*, but not of *particular expressions* (irrespective of whether they cover only one or multiple distinguishable meanings).

Cross-linguistic generic categories are needed in linguistic theorizing because the correlations they capture are potentially interesting. It is potentially interesting, for instance, that the meanings over which the notion 'source of information' generalizes seem to form a continuum in a semantic map. It may turn out that Bybee and her collaborators are right in that such correlations must be considered epiphenomenal. However, the point is that the need for such an account arises only if these correlations are captured at all in the first place.

With her comment, Cristofaro is trying to kick in an open door. She argues that there is no unequivocal evidence that cross-linguistic generic categories "play a role" or "exist" in the grammar of individual languages, and in particular that neither semantic map continuity nor the existence of distributionally delimited systems can necessarily be accounted for in terms of cross-linguistic generic categories. But I never claimed that cross-linguistic generic categories have the kind of ontological reality that Cristofaro presupposes, and for the reasons just presented, I would never assume anything like that. In Boye (2010: Section 2), I explicitly define them "as the linguist's theoretical construct rather than as corresponding to any entity which is assumed to have an ontological reality". My position is based on the three fundamental distinctions discussed above. By contrast, Cristofaro, in her argumentation, confuses description with explanation, language-specific facts or descriptions with cross-linguistic facts or descriptions, and substance with structure. Where I speak of criteria whereby linguists' descriptive categories can be empirically validated, she talks about explanation of language-specific findings; where I talk about cross-linguistically valid generalizations, she talks about what is in the mind of speakers of a specific language; and where I talk about notional substance, she talks about structural patterns. While we both subscribe to the view that cross-linguistic generic categories are linguists' generalizations, we therefore seem to subscribe for very different reasons.

Veselinova, in her comment, raises two issues concerning the role of semantic maps as helpers in the identification of categories. She first poses the following question: "What are the reasons for assuming that semantic maps provide a better approach to defining the notion "category" than, say, prototype theory?" Let me begin my answer to this question by emphasizing again that several notions of 'category' can be distinguished (cf. Boye 2010: Section 2). I do not claim that what I call 'semantic map continuity' is central or even relevant to all of them. My claim holds only for categories in the sense of cross-linguistically significant generalizations over meanings—that is, for what I have called 'cross-linguistic generic categories'. To this notion of 'category', prototype theory seems irrelevant in two respects.

First, prototype theory can hardly be used for the purpose of identifying cross-linguistic generic categories. Prototype theory is concerned with the internal organization of categories rather than with their identification in the first place. By contrast, semantic map continuity serves this exact purpose by providing one out of several possible criteria for cross-linguistic significance of meaning generalizations.

Secondly, claims about prototype categorization are most naturally understood as claims about cognitive organization, but cross-linguistic generic categories are by definition independent of such claims: they are "cross-linguistic generalizations" rather than "assumed to

have an ontological reality" (Boye 2010: Section2); they are explicitly conceived of as distinct from the cognitive or communicative phenomena that may be invoked in order to explain or motivate linguistic generalizations (Boye 2010: Section 2).

Even when it comes to explaining or motivating the linguistic facts that lead us to identify cross-linguistic generic categories, prototype theory may in fact be irrelevant. While it makes sense to ask which of two shades of red is the better example of the concept 'red', or whether *hammer* or *love* is the better example of the structural category Noun, it is not entirely obvious that it makes sense to ask which of the meaning regions 'past' and 'present' is the better example of the cross-linguistic generic category Tense.

As for the second issue, Veselinova requests a definition of the distinction between trivial and non-trivial linguistic facts presupposed in Boye (2010, this issue). The distinction is invoked in arguing that linguistic theory needs not only notional generalizations, but also notional generalizations that are cross-linguistically significant. Semantic map continuity is one out of several possible empirical findings that would make a notional generalization cross-linguistically significant. When I say of such findings that they are non-trivial in relational to notional coherence, I simply wish to emphasize that they are distinct facts which cannot be reduced to notional coherence. By contrast, trivial facts would be facts that can be reduced to notional coherence, and thus would add nothing new to a notional generalization.

References

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