Highlightedness in Conceptual System

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This paper proposes the notion of *Highlightedness* which is based upon the frequency of structures used in a language. Highlightedness is the phenomenon resulting from the entrenchment of particular language structures in our conceptual system, affecting the conceptual representation and making it available for non-linguistic cognitive abilities to be able to use it. Highlightedness can be defined as the availability of a particular linguistic structure and its associations to other cognitive abilities for use. For the purpose of the current paper, the notion of highlightedness is substantiated drawing from the issues of linguistic relativity. The two main empirical examples provided are of Frame of Reference and Grammatical Gender. Studies by Borodistsky et al. (2000), Bassetti (2007), Forbes et al. (2008) etc. establish that the presence or absence of Grammatical Gender affects our cognitive abilities. Mukherjee (2018) shows that speakers of Hindi (with Grammatical Gender) categorize inanimate objects adhering to their language structure, whereas Bangla (no Grammatical Gender) speakers assign gender more randomly. This finding calls for the involvement of frequency of usage of grammatical gender. The same is applicable for the studies in the domain of Frame of References. Pederson et al. (1998) and Levinson et al. (2002) conducted a series of surveys on a large number of languages and found that if a language uses one frame of reference more frequently than the other, then, its speakers employ the more frequent frame of reference in other problem solving tasks. In both the cases, it is the more frequent linguistic structure which is made available to the other cognitive abilities through highlightedness. The paper attempts to discuss highlightedness from a relativistic point of view to show how highlightedness evidently manifests in language.

Now, it is not the case that highlightedness manifests only in these domains. It is not just a linguistic phenomenon but a conceptual one. The bifurcation between lexical elements and grammatical elements can also be considered under the purview of a conceptual domain where highlightedness comes into play. As Talmy (2000) suggests, the bifurcation of lexical and grammatical categories is a continuum of concepts encoded linguistically, yet language exhibits two distinct classes of linguistic units, namely the closed class grammatical elements and open class lexical elements. It is to be noted that the concepts which are encoded in closed class words and open class words cannot be strictly considered as lexical concepts or grammatical concepts. Then what is the difference between the lexical concepts and grammatical concepts. It is proposed here that highlightedness operates within the categorization of concepts to be encoded into open class elements in language. It is also discussed how highlightedness, as a conceptual phenomenon, operates in other linguistic phenomena like metaphorical expressions, polysemy, grammaticalization, etc.

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