"Tall"

Gradation and Comparison

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The purpose of this paper is to determine whether linguistics can provide a better understanding of the meaning of the word *tall* as restricted to its primary definition "of more than average height" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary), given the linguistic relativity of the concept.

Perhaps less rigorous than other compartments of linguistics (phonology, grammar) which could explain the word *tall*, and bordering on philosophy, logic and psychology, semantics is however the one most appropriate in our case, since it is defined as the study of word meaning. This implies two types of relations: the word "tall" in direct relation to the designated person/object in the physical reality (the Saussurian relation signifier/signified or referent); and the system of relations contracted by the word "tall" with other words in the vocabulary. We will thus be operating with the well-known triangle of form, meaning and referent (extra-linguistic reality) representing the linguistic sign.

Given the question "What is the meaning of tall?", one can answer through an ostensive definition - indicating the referent of the word (be it a person or object) available in the physical world. *Tall* is a property that referents possess to a larger or lesser degree, and the indication itself will most likely result from a comparison with a conventional standard. It is largely a matter of estimation on our part when deciding whether a person is tall or not, a rough, approximate judgement. The comparison we make is based on perception and therefore can be very tricky. If a person of 1.80 m is pointed to as being tall, then one of 1.79 will also be considered as such, the difference being imperceptible to the eye. The same goes for 1.78, 1.77, etc. A problem is the very standard (that average height) which we can't say for sure where it begins and where it ends.

Let us look at how Bertrand Russell defined *long* : in practice, the length of an object is also determined by its comparison with a standard. When we say that x is one meter long, we mean that if x were compared to the iridium bar kept with the International Weights and Measures Office , we could see that x is as long as the distance between the two lines drawn on the bar. When asking "How long is x?", the answer is given through a procedure that actually answers a question of the type "*Is x as long as z?*" (z being the standard). Given two objects x and y, they can be compared to each other or to a third object z (for instance, the iridium bar or a ruler adjusted according to the measuring standard agreed upon). Either way, the question "How long is x?" depends on and comes down to questions of the type "*Is x as long as y*". Since there is no way of empirically determining the length of x, Russell suggested that "long" be defined based on the relation "*as long as*".

The idea of implicit comparison present in this definition of "long" is valid for *tall* as well, since when we assess a person as being *tall*, we do so as a result of an automatic mental comparison between that person and ourselves or others we know of, based on an internal scale possessed by each of us (quite similar for everyone as a result of sharing more or less the same kind of experience): *x is tall* actually means *x is taller than...* . There is no precision in our evaluation, but most of the time it is a close enough one to reality. The referential borders are quite arbitrary and undetermined, but it does not usually cause misunderstandings in communication. Absolute precision is hard to achieve, since there is no limit of the number or ways of distinctions that can be made between different objects, and to have to make more distinctions than necessary for a purpose is not an advantage.

The idea of comparison takes us to structuralism and the relations established between the words of a vocabulary.

Structuralism (as initiated by Ferdinand Saussure) is a comparative method and can be applied to semantics as well. Namely, the fact that each word is part of a system and its role or value derives from the relations established with other words of the system. The meaning of *tall* results from its relation with others of its meanings or of other words, through linguistic oppositions. We have relations of meaning such as synonymy and antonymy, polysemy and homonymy, ways of organizing the vocabulary.

As we have seen, the meaning of *tall* resides basically in a comparison ("taller than"), performed mentally (with an invisible ruler) or physically. That implies the pair *tall/short*, therefore antonymy, one of the most important semantic relations. I shall discuss the antonymy along two of the distinctions made by John Lyons in "An Introduction into Theoretical Linguistics" regarding opposed words: complementarity and antonymy proper.

In the case of **complementarity**, Lyons discusses a linguistic binary relation at the level of opposed words characterized by the fact that negating one member of the pair implies asserting the other just as asserting one of them implies negating the other. For instance the opposition *alive/dead*:

    a. John is alive implies John is not dead.

    b. John is not alive implies John is dead.

The same with male/female, true/false, married/single. Such complementary terms used predicatively about the same object lead to contradictory propositions: a proposition P is the contradictory of Q if P and Q cannot both be True or both be False.

Let us apply the same formula to tall/short:

    a) He is tall implies he is not short;

    b) He is not tall implies he is short - false

The second proposition is false because *not tall* does not necessarily imply *short*, it can also imply *average*. The same with hot/cold (warm), young/old (middle-aged). Such terms characterize **antonymy**, namely if they are used predicatively about the same object, they lead to contrary propositions: a proposition P is the contrary of Q if P and Q cannot both be True, but can both be False.

The difference between the two types of oppositions consists in the fact that "alive" and "dead" are defined in relation to each other and not to a middle term, whereas *tall* and *short* are defined in comparison to an average:

TALL (extremity) _____ AVERAGE _____
SHORT (extremity)

The difference is, therefore, gradation. Complementary words such as "alive" and "dead" are in a binary, ungradable opposition. Antonymic words such as *tall* and *short* are in a binary, gradable opposition.

The antonymic opposition can be neutralized for some adjectives by using one of the terms in the opposition as a name for the semantic dimension organizing the pair. For instance in the opposition old/young, we can have "How old are you?", "X is older than Y", "The corn is 2 years old". The implicit gradation of antonyms explains why in such unmarked questions as "How tall is x?", there is no contrast between the two members of the given pair (tall/short). "*How tall is X*" does not mean that x will be classified as "tall" instead of "short", but is left open for the suppositions of the person putting the question. It could be seen as the equivalent of "Is X tall or short?", setting for discussion a scale acknowledged by the participants as relevant, requiring x to be normalized according to that scale. The measuring will be made in terms of "rather-taller-than-shorter" or "rather-shorter-than-taller" compared to the norm. If we stress "How" in "How tall is x?" or "How short is x?", we already place x at one end of the scale rather than the other and require the specification of the place x takes on that scale, as against the relevant norm.

As we have seen, the feature gradation distinguishing between complementarity and antonymy is related to the operation of comparison, and a proposition such as *He is tall* is implicitly comparative, *He is taller than the norm*. This norm is itself quite vague (suffice it to say that for the Japanese the norm is definitely different than for the Europeans). Edward Sapir (a representative of linguistic relativity) remarked in "Selected Writings in Language, Culture and Personality" (1949) that oppositions such as *small/large*, *little/much*, *many/few* give us the deceiving feeling that we are dealing with absolute values in point of quantity. The feeling is however an illusion due largely to the linguistic fact that the implicit

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gradation in these terms is not formally indicated, but made explicit in such judgements as: "There were *fewer* people *than* here" or "He has *more* milk *than* I". Therefore, *many*, for instance, is not the expression of a number of judgements based on a given norm quantity, but is rather a relative term with no significance outside the idea of "more than" and "less than". The logical norm of opposing features is not felt as a real norm, but as a mixed area in which there are gradable qualities in opposed directions.

Related to the idea of norm, it is interesting to look at the terms in which *tall* is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976), part of which I mentioned and took as basis of the paper: "1. (of person) of more than average height, or of specified height (he is six feet tall); (of tree, steeple, mast, ship, stag, etc.) higher than the average or than surrounding objects". As I see it, the distinction people vs. trees, steeples, etc. as related to the definition of

tall is redundant and puzzling, since there's no obvious difference between "of more than average height" and "higher than the average". What is also interesting is the two possibilities one has in comparing between trees or ships: one related to a norm (average), something which is considered to be the standard for trees or ships, and one related to *surrounding objects* taken as points of reference at a given moment. Therefore, the norm is internal as is for persons, but for objects there is also the possibility of an external norm.

REFERENCES

LYONS, J., **An Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics**, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1968.

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