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## Semantic vs morpho-syntactic categories: resolving a paradox

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A central puzzle in linguistics is that while grammatical categories and semantics are clearly related, this relation is not one-to-one. This can be seen for both lexical and functional categories.

For lexical categories, it seems intuitive that *cat* is a noun because it denotes an entity, and *sing* is a verb because it describes an activity. Yet this link is far from perfect: nouns can also denote states, activities, or events – concepts often expressed by verbs – while not all verbs refer to events or states (e.g., modal auxiliaries). Attempts to define nouns and verbs semantically have failed, showing that the main morpho-syntactic divide does not fully align with semantics. In fact, nouns and verbs are semantically similar, both denoting sets of individuals. Conversely, one of the key semantic distinctions – between quantifiers (e.g., *everybody*) and individuals – is not reflected syntactically, as both function as DPs. Thus, major categorial distinctions in syntax and semantics often fail to correspond, even though the noun–entity and verb–eventuality links cannot be purely coincidental.

A similar mismatch occurs among functional categories. Zeijlstra (2022) shows that negation behaves as a grammatical category only in languages with Negative Concord. In such languages, not every morpho-syntactically negative item is semantically negative. In languages without Negative Concord, negative elements pattern like adverbs or quantifiers instead. Comparable form–meaning mismatches appear with tense and number morphology, where complex patterns like multiple number marking arise.

This paper proposes that these mismatches are not deviations but *the source* of grammatical categories. Grammatical features emerge precisely when form and meaning fail to align one-to-one. From a learnability perspective, a child initially assumes each form corresponds to one meaning (*Humboldt's principle*, cf. Clark 1987). Only when this assumption conflicts with input does the child posit a grammatical feature (Zeijlstra 2014).

Hence, form–meaning mismatches are not exceptions but the very trigger for morpho-syntactic categories.

**References:** • Clark, E. (1987). The principle of contrast: a constraint on language acquisition. In B. MacWhinney (ed.), *Mechanisms of language acquisition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. 1–34. • Zeijlstra, H. (2014). On the uninterpretability of interpretable features. In P. Kosta, S. Franks, T. Radeva-Bork & L. Schürcks (eds.), *Minimalism and beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 109–129. • Zeijlstra, H. (2022). *Negation and negative dependencies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.