WHAT CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR CAN TELL US ABOUT CATEGORIAL STRUCTURE? A CASE STUDY OF CONTAINERS IN RUSSIAN

Container is one of the basic topological categories (L. Talmy) which is relevant for different languages and is one of the earliest in language acquisition. The concept of ‘container’ is commonly represented as having a radial structure, which presupposes, on the one hand, a clearly defined categorical center (as boxes or bowls), and, on the other hand, a periphery, assembling various names of objects (like hats or spoons) which do not readily fit into what a prototypical container is supposed to be. Still, it is not a priori clear, whether containers can be represented as an integral notional category with a common structure – so that it would display the same type of behaviour in different linguistic conditions.

From the point of view of Construction Grammar the structure of this category can be seen in a new perspective. As CG suggests, it is not a notional category which determines the meaning of a given construction, but, on the contrary, each construction sets its own way of how the world’s properties are to be interpreted and, so to say, builds its own categorization.

We examine four Russian constructions which have a slot that can be filled by the names of containers: locative construction ‘Y in X’ (cf. kasha v tarelke ‘porridge in the bowl’), attributive construction with an adjective like глубокий ‘deep’ (deep X, cf. глубокая тарелка ‘deep bowl’), comitative construction ‘X with Y’ (cf. тарелка с кашей ‘bowl with porridge’), and genitive construction of measure ‘X of Y’ (cf. тарелка каши ‘a bowl of porridge’). Although all these constructions involve nouns with a container-like topology, each construction prefers its own classes of containers, and this choice is motivated by the semantics of the construction.

The locative construction combines with all sorts of containers, among other things, those without bottom (in a crack), without entrance (in a belly / shoulder), and oriented horizontally or upside-down (in a niche / cupola). In this construction the concept of a 3D-space is opposed to a 2D-surface (another categorial center), so the notion of “container” can be extended here to layers and substances (in sand / dust) and some spaces (in the taiga / tundra).

The adjective construction (deep X) is found only with those containers which are “measured inside” (cf. *a deep glass, deep shoes) and most likely “rigid” (*deep sack). We can also measure the depth of layers (deep snow, sand, water), but not substances per se (*deep pebble, dust).

The comitative construction ‘X with Y’ usually refers to two objects unequal in natural conditions which occur to be in one and the same space (cf. passengers with children; meat with vegetables; tea with sweets; a man with his paper). The first slot of the construction can be filled by the name of a container only if “container” and “contained” are conceptualized as different objects (cf. vase with flowers, but river with water).

In genitive construction ‘X of Y’ container is considered a measure (a glass of water). Containers are possible here only if they refer to a special place for keeping something (cf. river of water, crack of sand), have a standard capacity (cf. aquarium of fish, pocket of keys), and contain obviously more than one object (cf. case of spectacle).

The paper demonstrates that each construction sets its own center and periphery for containers. This idea is entirely in keeping with the theory of Construction Grammar, but at the same time it implies that we can’t propose once-and-for-all fixed center and periphery for the concept. Does this mean that there is no unified radial conceptual structure of a container?