

# THREE FALLACIES THAT RECUR IN LINGUISTIC ARGUMENTATION

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This article discusses three theoretical fallacies that tend to recur in linguistics, and can be found for instance in cognitive grammar and construction grammar. The first fallacy concerns categories with both clear and unclear cases. It is a common fallacy that the less-than-clear cases are regarded equal to clear cases, and, consequently, the status of the whole category is considered to be less-than-clear. The clear cases are clear even if the category is not completely sharp in its boundaries. The second fallacy concerns continuums. Categories may intersect each other and form a continuum. According to the fallacy, the categories lose their independent status if they intersect with some other category. However, even if categories intersect, the intersection area does not necessarily cover the intersecting categories entirely. The third fallacy is a common one in cognitively oriented linguistics: the social properties of language are confused with the mental properties of language.

**Keywords:** argumentation, fallacy, category, continuum, convention.

Motto: “Lovejoy (1936: 57) notes that in the history of Western philosophy Aristotle has “encouraged two diametrically opposite sorts of conscious or unconscious logic”, namely “the habit of thinking in discrete, well-defined class-concepts and that of thinking in terms of continuity, of infinitely delicate shadings-off of everything into something else”. In linguistic writings of cognitivist and/or functionalist orientation, it has become customary to picture Aristotle as the arch-foe of ‘family resemblances’ and ‘prototypes’. Now we see that this picture is false. It is a curious fact that those who most vociferously claim to have renounced any type of black-and-white thinking apply precisely this type of thinking to how they write history (and to much else, besides)” (Itkonen, 2005a: 226–227).

## INTRODUCTION

For years, I have been puzzled by the following types of claims, advocated by prominent representatives of **Cognitive Linguistics** and/or **Construction Grammar**: ‘all meanings are metaphorical’ and ‘all constructions are idiomatic’. Why should anyone assert something that is so self-evidently false? In what follows, I try to reconstruct or

**abduce** those (fallacious) thought processes that have led to the emitting of claims like these (for a discussion of abduction, cf. Itkonen, 2005a: 1,5). Thus, my endeavor should be seen as part of the tradition, upheld e.g. by Kahneman and Tversky, that explores the roots of fallacies that occur in both everyday and scientific thinking.

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### FALLACY 1: BELIEVING THAT LESS-THAN-CLEAR CASES OF A CATEGORY WEAKEN THE STATUS OF CLEAR CASES OF THE SAME CATEGORY

Let us assume the existence of proponent X and opponent Y. X asserts that there is A, i.e. a set of **clear cases** (or cases known with certainty), and there is B, i.e. a set of **less-than-clear cases**. Y objects by pointing out that there is not only A but also B. Based on my experience of more than 30 years, I know that this ‘objection’ is made invariably. Nonetheless, it is fallacious because the existence of B was part of the original claim. The fallacy may be **explained** by assuming that Y (mis)interprets X as making a **contradictory** claim, in the following sense. Since B is, clearly, not A, it is taken to be not-A. Now X seems to be asserting either ‘there is something which is both A and not-A’ or ‘(there is A) and not-(there is A)’. This is the first fallacy, or **F1**. The steps that lead to F1 may be summarized as follows: *A vs. B > A & not-A > either  $\exists x(Ax \& \neg Ax)$  or  $p \& \neg p$* . (It may be added that – as could be expected – F1 has a long pedigree; see e.g. the criticism of Max Stirner in Marx & Engels [1846/1973: 259–262]).

### FALLACY 2: MISUNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CONTINUUM

In committing F1, the thrust of Y’s ‘objection’ is to emphasize the importance of B, which means that B is promoted into the status of ‘Figure’ while A is demoted into the status of ‘Ground’. This prepares the way for the second fallacy, or **F2**. Maximally, F2 contains two steps, which means that F2 has a weaker version (= only the first step), or F2a, and a stronger version (= both the first step and the second one), or F2b.

F2 consists in **misunderstanding** the nature of a **continuum**, in the sense of not heeding Pap’s (1958: 401) admonition that “to deny a distinction because of its vagueness is, of course, a semantic naiveté of the first order”. Because A and B are situated on a continuum, it is impossible to state with precision where A ends and B begins. This is now taken to mean that there is no real distinction between A and B. Here we have the origin of the following misguided opinions: “there is no difference between clear cases and less-than-clear cases”, “there is no difference between the grammar (or grammatical meanings) and the lexicon (or lexical meanings)”, “there is no difference between rules and exceptions”, “there is no difference between regular (= non-idiomatic) constructions and idiomatic constructions”, “there is no difference between context-independent meanings (= semantics) and context-dependent meanings (= pragmatics)”, “there is no difference between non-metaphorical (or literal) meanings and metaphorical meanings”, “there is no difference between non-ironic and ironic speech”. This is the first step of the second fallacy, or **F2a**. To show that it is indeed a fallacy, one only needs to replace the (difficult) linguistic terms by (simple) colour terms: “Since there is no clear-cut difference between black and white, there is no difference between black and white.” – Are you willing to accept this conclusion?

Having started from **asserting** the difference between A and B, we have now arrived at **denying** the existence of this difference. But remember that, as was (fallaciously) established by F1, B has by now become the ‘Figure’ whereas A only qualifies as the ‘Ground’. Therefore it is further inferred that ‘in reality’ there is just B and **no A at all**. This is the second step of the second fallacy, or **F2b**. F2b underlies the follow-

ing misguided opinions: “there are no clear cases but only less-than-clear cases”, “there are no rules, only exceptions”, “all constructions are idiomatic”, “all meanings are context-dependent (i.e. there is no semantics but only pragmatics)”, “all meanings are metaphorical”, “all speech is ironic (or non-genuine)”. That F2b is indeed a fallacy, becomes evident when it is translated into simpler terms: “Since there is no difference between black and white, there is no black but only white.” – Are you willing to accept this conclusion? One variant of F2b, due to Jacques Derrida, is as follows: “Rules are primary and exceptions are secondary; but if there were no exceptions, there would be no rules; therefore exceptions are primary and rules are secondary (and, perhaps, ultimately non-existent’)” (for discussion, cf. Itkonen, 1988). A related variant of F2b, intended to emphasize the importance of **idioms**, has been expressed in the context of Construction Grammar: “The center is the periphery, and the periphery is the center.”

Itkonen (2005b) explains in more detail how and why Cognitive Linguistics and/or Construction Grammar have in general misunderstood the central notion of **continuum**. One of the many misunderstandings consists in assuming that continuum-based thinking is a radical novelty that originated with Construction Grammar. This is false, of course, as shown e.g. by the following quotation from Itkonen (1978: 109):

“In this context two opposite mistakes are often made. Let us take as an example the ‘correct – incorrect’ distinction. On the one hand, from the fact that **some** cases are unclear, it is inferred that **all** cases are unclear; this is the standpoint of the current empiricist trend in socio- and psycholinguistics (cf. 5.4 and 7.4 below). On the other hand, presumably because of their untidiness, the factually exist-

ing unclear cases are taken to be purely apparent, so that clear cases are what exists in ‘reality’; this is the ‘classical’ standpoint of Transformational Grammar: [Quotation from Katz & Bever, 1974].

The fallaciousness of both of these lines of thought should be evident. Take the distinction between young and old: It would be equally absurd to claim that since **some** people are neither young nor old, **all** people are neither young nor old, and that in reality there are only young people and old people. I hope to avoid both of these fallacies. All distinctions concerned are **relative**, but at the same time they have huge numbers of **absolutely clear cases** in their favor.”

### FALLACY 3: CONFUSING THE REAL THING AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE REAL THING

Let us add a third fallacy or **F3**, which might be called the ‘knowledge-of-X, instead of X’ fallacy. Committed by generativism, F3 was denounced in the mid-70s by Dretske, Hutchinson, Itkonen, Kac, Ringen, Saunders, and others (for an overview, cf. Itkonen, 2003: Appendix 1). The more recent, cognitivist version of F3 is formulated as follows: “our goal is to properly characterize a speaker’s knowledge of linguistic convention” (Langacker, 1991: 268); “constructions form a structured inventory of a speaker’s knowledge of the conventions of their language” (Croft, 2001: 25). What is wrong here can be made clear by means of an analogy. Suppose I have to describe the rules (or ‘conventions’) of chess. To do this, I have to know them, of course; but this does not mean that what I am doing is describe my knowledge of the rules of chess, rather than the rules of chess *tout court*. Rules, in the sense of **conventions** or **norms**, are neces-

arily **inter-subjective** or **social**, as shown e.g. by Wittgenstein's private-language argument (cf. Itkonen, 1978: 94–96, 109–113, 117–121), whereas my knowledge of conventions/norms (of language, for instance) is **subjective** or **individual-psychological** (even if, to be sure, it is **by means of** this subjective and – in principle – fallible knowledge that I have 'access' to social conventions/norms).

F3 becomes explicit in Lakoff's (1987: 446–453) and Langacker's (1991: 12–13, 23, 61) notion of 'conventional mental image'. This notion is **self-contradictory** just like e.g. the notion of a 'round square': there can be no conventional mental images because 'conventional' is social while 'mental' is individual-psychological. As pointed out in Itkonen (1997: 68–71), this confusion results from an inability to decide whether sentences refer to situations or to mental images of situations. It should be clear that the former case is the primary one. (To be sure, the same mistake has often been made during the history of Western philosophy; cf. Itkonen, 1991: 176, 220, 260–262, 274). The confusion at issue has been highlighted in Wittgenstein's (1958: §§ 398–402) discussion of the (putative) distinction between 'material room' and 'visual room'.

How is F3 to be remedied? – by treating language at **two** distinct and interacting levels, roughly corresponding to Popper's (social) 'world-3' and (psychological) 'world-2'. This duality is expressed in Itkonen (1983) by distinguishing between '(social) norms' and '(individual-psychological) internalizations-of-norms'. It was evident in 1983 that, if cognitive linguistics was to emerge one day, then in order not to repeat the mistakes of generativism, it needed a **social grounding**.

Finally, let us add that while conventions are **normative** entities, this fact is ignored by

generativists and cognitivists alike (with very few – and laudable – exceptions; cf. Zlatyev, 2006). Conventions without normativity 'deconstruct' themselves. So it is hard to tell what cognitivists may have in mind when they speak of 'conventions' (as they very often do). – The normativity of linguistic data, and what this entails, is the topic of Itkonen (1978). A recent résumé is given in Itkonen (2003).

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### KOLME KIELITIETEELLISESSÄ ARGUMENTAATIOSSA TOISTUVAA VÄÄRINKÄSITYSTÄ

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Tässä artikkelissa käsitellään kolmea teoreettista väärinkäsitystä, jotka toistuvat kielitieteessä tavan takaa. Viimeaikaisessa lingvistiikassa näitä väärinkäsityksiä on ilmennyt esimerkiksi kognitiivisessa kieliopissa ja konstruktioikieliopissa. Ensimmäinen väärinkäsitys koskee kategorioita, joihin kuuluu sekä selviä että epäselviä tapauksia. Selvät tapaukset ovat selviä riippumatta siitä, että kategoria on rajoiltaan epäselvä. Yleisen väärinkäsityksen mukaan epäselvät tapaukset rinnastetaan selviin niin, että koko kategorian oikeutuksen luullaan olevan vaakalaudalla. Toinen väärinkäsitys koskee jatkumoa. Kategoriat voivat olla jatkumosuhteessa toisiinsa niin, että niiden väliin jää leikkausalue, jonka jäsenten voi katsoa kuuluvan joko toiseen tai toiseen tai sitten ei kumpaankaan kategoriaan (esim. mustan ja valkoisen väliin jää harmaa). Vaikka kategoriat leikkaisivat toisiaan, leikkausalue ei kata leikkaavia kategorioita välttämättä kokonaan. Väärinkäsityksen mukaan kategoriat menettävät itsenäisen statuksensa, jos ne leikkaavat jonkin toisen kategorian kanssa. Kolmas väärinkäsitys on tavallinen kognitiivisesti orientoituneessa kielitieteessä: kielen sosiaalista ja konventionaalista puolta ei osata erottaa mentaalista.