

Prototypes and Metonymy in Food Naming—A Case Study of Tuna Fish Sandwiches vs Chicken Bird Sandwiches

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Abstract: Many scholars have noticed the metaphorical meaning of things that are concerned with food. But the metonymic mechanisms in food naming sometimes are ignored by people. In daily life, food of the same type may have different ways of being named. For example, both as sandwiches, tuna fish sandwiches are easier to accept than chicken bird sandwiches. This study employs prototype theory and metonymy from cognitive linguistics to investigate the divergent naming patterns in “tuna fish sandwiches” versus “chicken bird sandwiches. The analysis reveals that on the one hand, “tuna” is a non-prototypical member of the “fish” category due to its atypical features, contrasting with prototypical fish. Adding “fish” resolves referential vagueness by suppressing these deviant traits and anchoring tuna within the target category. In addition, “fish” functions as a metonymic operator, activating the “aquatic vertebrate-edible material” schema, thus explicitly signalling the food source. On the other hand, “bird” is unsuitable as a food category modifier due to biological traits conflicting with edibility, and cultural symbolism inhibiting its culinary association. Adding “bird” to “chicken” creates cognitive dissonance. Besides, “chicken” itself exhibits strong metonymic entrenchment, where its culinary meaning has semantically overshadowed its zoological referent, rendering “bird” redundant. In conclusion, the necessity of a category term hinges on the prototype status of the entity, cognitive salience of the category, and socio-cultural conventionalization, governed by principles of cognitive economy.

1. Introduction

It is common that people see a type of sandwiches called tuna fish sandwiches from a menu of a restaurant or from the packages of sandwiches; however, chicken bird sandwiches are seldom to be seen. They are both sandwiches and both are named by the rule: material plus sandwiches. Why “tuna” needs “fish” but “chicken” does not need “bird”? What does this phenomenon reflect? This essay will focus on the questions above and analyze them in detail based on the theory of prototype and metonymy from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

2. The Need of “Fish” in “Tuna Fish Sandwiches”

The requirement for the modifier “fish” in “tuna fish sandwiches” can be explained from two aspects. On the one hand, tuna’s status as a non-prototypical member of the fish category causes people’s vague cognition of “tuna”, which creates a specific cognitive gap that the modifier serves to bridge. On the other hand, in order to decrease the vagueness mentioned above, it is necessary to add “fish” to specify “tuna”.

2.1. The Non-prototypical Role of “Tuna” in “Fish” Category

In the process of understanding things, when confronted with the multiple attributes of objects, events, and concepts, people tend to pay more attention to the principle of salience in the human mind that helps identify things^[1]. Fish has a concrete schema in human mind for its salient features. For example, the small to medium size, visible fins or gills, white or pale pink flaky flesh etc. According to these distinctive features of fish, people may say carp or cod if they are asked to give an example of a fish that first occurs to their mind. In addition, because of these distinctive features, jellyfishes, shrimps, clams etc. are also not typical member of the category of fish.

However, compared with “fish”, people may not have such concrete schema of “tuna”. Based on the definition of prototype put forward by Rosch, prototypes of categories are the clearest cases of category membership defined operationally by people’s judgments of goodness of membership in the category^[2]. And according to the dictionary, the denotation of “tuna” is a large sea fish that is used for food. Therefore, the distinctive features of tuna are large and sea fish, which do not much overlap with the distinctive features of fish. Besides, because of its large body, the exposure of tuna to human beings may not as much as the exposure of cod or carp, which influences people’s cognition of tuna.

As a result, “tuna” is not a good representation of the “fish” category as equal as cod or carp but a peripheral member.

2.2. Adding “Fish” to Resolve Vagueness

The addition of “fish” to tuna is a cognitive strategy to overcome the referential instability caused by tuna’s non-prototypicality. The modifier “fish” functions as a linguistic override command, coercing the atypical member into the target category. It corrects categorical drift by suppressing tuna’s prototype-deviant traits. According to Rosch, as an organism, what one wishes to gain from one’s categories is a great deal of information about the environment while conserving finite resources as much as possible^[2]. By means of adding “fish”, the cognitive costs will be reduced.

Besides, “fish” is not only a modifier, but also a metonymic operator that converts species names into food terms. Bare “tuna” activates multiple competing frames; for example, fish, as living creature in sea, food, like a can of tuna etc. Lakoff holds that metonymy involves substituting a perceptible and recognizable part within the same cognitive domain for the whole or other parts of the whole^[3]. Fish is a culturally entrenched metonymic trigger in English food discourse, “x + fish” means edible flesh of aquatic vertebrate x. And “fish” activates material for source schema, which helps people recognize “tuna” as an edible product more quickly and directly. Metonymy involves speaking about a salient reference point which allows people to access another conceptual entity, the target^[4]. “Fish” serves as a reference point in “tuna fish sandwiches”, and edibility is thus emphasized to reduce ambiguity.

To sum up, it is necessary to adding “fish” to “tuna” because of its atypical role in the category of fish. By adding “fish”, people can activate the frame of edible product frame more quickly and

easily. As a metonymic operator, the appearance of “fish” makes people associate “tuna” with a certain type of fish flesh.

3. The Absence of “Bird” in “Chicken Bird Sandwiches”

Different from the role of “fish” in “tuna fish sandwiches”, “bird” is not necessary in “chicken bird sandwiches”, which also can be explained from two aspects: the weakness of “bird” as a food category and the metonymic entrenchment of “chicken”.

3.1. The Non-prototypical Role of “Bird” in Food Category

The word “bird” fails to function as a food category because the ways how people perceive birds and meat are different. Unlike fish, which easily fits into culinary categories, the physical and cultural images that birds carry conflicts with the idea of being food. It is predetermined that there will be context effects for both the level of abstraction at which an object is considered and for which items are named, learned, listed, or expected in a category. An important reason for why “chicken” does not need “bird” is the difference of contexts.

On the one hand, wings, lightweight bones, and feathers define birds biologically but make them seem unsuitable for eating. When people see wings, they think of flight and movement, not meals. Chicken breasts and legs become acceptable as food only after centuries of selective breeding that make them less “bird-like”. Modern chickens barely resemble wild birds; their flight wings are underdeveloped while breast meat is enlarged. This physical transformation allows chicken to enter people’s diets, but the broader category of “bird” remains disconnected from food.

On the other hand, in Western traditions, birds often symbolize freedom, spirituality, or beauty—not sustenance. Doves represent peace in Christianity, eagles signify strength in national symbols, and songbirds appear in poetry as creatures of beauty. These cultural roles make eating common wild birds—sparrows, robins—feel morally uncomfortable. When societies do eat birds, they create separate words like “poultry” for farm-raised chickens and turkeys, carefully distinguishing them from wild “birds”.

Therefore, “bird” is not the typical member of the category of “food”. Its physical appearance and cultural meanings make it unsuitable for eating. If adding it to “chicken sandwiches”, people may feel wired.

3.2. Chicken’s Metonymic Entrenchment

Except for the non-prototypical role of “bird” in food category, another reason for why chicken does not need “bird” is the semantic and metonymic entrenchment of chicken itself.

The mental process of communication between ontological and metaphorical concepts is sometimes not a simple process of linguistic reasoning about conventional connective relations, but must be a process of communication activation in the context of rich empirical knowledge as a whole^[5]. Unlike many words that maintain an uneasy balance between literal and figurative meanings, “chicken” has achieved a rare state of semantic dominance where its food meaning completely overshadows its original animal reference. Many metonyms, after being used repeatedly over a long period of time, gradually lose their rhetorical function as a means of language expression and gradually evolve into conventionalized language expressions^[6]. Therefore, people may not realize they are using metonymy when they use “chicken” in particular context referring to the meat of chicken.

When someone says “we are having chicken for dinner”, no native speaker pictures a live bird pecking at grain and the mind automatically visualizes cooked meat. Its food meaning is no longer a

contextual interpretation but a fixed dictionary definition. Attempting to insert “bird” into this established system creates cognitive dissonance, forcing speakers to mentally reconstruct a connection their language had worked so hard to erase.

4. Comparative Analysis of “Tuna” and “Chicken”

In fact, “tuna fish” and “chicken bird” have same structure with non-prototypical members plus categorical words. Since they are both atypical member in the category, why adding “fish” to “tuna” and adding “bird” to “chicken” have contrary effects? Above analysis focuses on the relation of categorical members and categories and the metonymy of “tuna” and “chicken”, but the following analysis will focus on the comparison of “tuna” and “chicken” in order to make the question clearer.

Compared with “chicken”, “tuna” is more difficult to see because it lives in sea with a large body. Being seldom exposed to “tuna”, people may not directly link it to fish. Even if they know it is a kind of fish, they may not have a concrete image of it in their mind. When people recognize external things, they follow the rule of moving from familiar to unfamiliar and from known to unknown. They are constantly making analogies and associating similar or related things^[7]. As a result, people may consider that “tuna” is a kind of fish like cod based on their experience. Making analogies is a good way to perceive things indirectly, but it also has the risk of forming incorrect or incomplete cognition. The addition of “fish” to “tuna” decreases such risks.

Different from “tuna”, people can be frequently exposed to “chicken” because it is easy to find in a farm or even in one’s house. Actually, both basic levels and prototypes are, in a sense, theories about context. Although “chicken” should be classified into the category of “bird” biographically, it is recognized as food more frequently. As a prototypical member of poultry, its distinctive features as bird fade gradually. People will not consider chicken first when it comes to bird, but they will turn to it when it comes to poultry.

To conclude, according to Radden and Dirven, a category is the conceptualization of a collection of similar experiences that are meaningful and relevant to people^[4]. And people have variable experiences with “chicken” and “tuna”. Hence “tuna” needs “fish” to avoid the potential arise of ambiguity or vagueness, but “chicken” needs no “bird” in the context of “chicken sandwiches” because adding “bird” to it increases the cognition costs, deviating from cognitive economy.

5. Conclusion

This article discusses a language phenomenon in daily life: why people say “tuna fish sandwiches” but do not say “chicken bird sandwiches”. Based on the theory of prototype and category, it has been analysed that both “tuna” and “chicken” are not prototypical member in categories of “fish” and “bird”. But “tuna” needs “fish” to reduce its vagueness, on the contrary, “chicken” does not need “bird” because it has been classified into the category of poultry by the shared experience of people and the addition of “bird” may lead to misunderstanding.

Whether to add a categorical word to a particular thing depends on whether people are familiar with the thing and have a concrete schema of it or not. How such schema forms to some extent depends on people’s shared experience of life. Besides, the context also matters concerning the addition of categorical word.

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