

## **FURNITURE, VEGETABLES, WEAPONS: THE SEMANTICS AND GRAMMAR OF FUNCTIONAL MACRO-CATEGORIES.**

Full presentation

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### **Abstract**

Functional macro-category words pose interesting semantic challenges. They also vary across languages much more than true taxonomic words. Unlike true taxonomic macro-categories (*bird, fish, animal*, etc.), functional macro-categories do not designate ‘things of one kind’, but ‘things of many kinds’ unified by factors such as shared functions, contiguity, and similar origins (Wierzbicka 1985; Goddard in press). This paper investigates three grammatically distinct subclasses of such nouns, dubbed “singular-only”, “plural-mostly” and “regular”. For each subclass I propose a semantic template that motivates its distinctive morphosyntactic profile. The analytical framework is the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach.

Though invariably singular in form, the singular-only nouns (e.g. *furniture, cutlery, clothing*) cannot take a singular article or the word *one*. To indicate a specific number of individual referents requires the *item/piece(s) of X* construction. The plural-mostly nouns (e.g. *vegetables, cosmetics, drugs*) mainly occur in the plural, except when they are bare stems in compounds. Their most distinctive property is that when counting their referents, one counts not individual items but kinds, e.g. *There were only two vegetables on the plate* means ‘only vegetables of two kinds’. Regular functional nouns (e.g. *weapon, toy, tool*) also tend to occur in the plural, but less markedly.

It is shown that the semantic templates for all three subclasses begin with the component ‘things of many kinds’, followed by an exemplar component listing one or more salient examples. Both these aspects contrast sharply with the semantic structure of true taxonomic nouns. Then follow components setting out the potential unifying construals in terms of function, contiguity and/or origin. Aside from its implications for lexical typology, the study has relevance to categorisation in cognitive psychology (Rosch et al 1976; Wisniewski et al 1996) and for semantic networks in natural language processing (Veres and Sampson 2005). In both fields, functional macro-categories are usually mistaken for true taxonomic categories, leading to erroneous or misleading results.

### **References**

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**Keywords:** semantics, categorisation, semantic templates, mass nouns, lexical typology

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