

DOCTORS, TEACHERS, LAWYERS: EXPLORING THE SEMANTICS OF HUMAN SOCIAL CATEGORIES

Full Presentation

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Abstract

The words *doctors*, *Australians*, and *friends* designate three different sub-types of social categories, although these categories do not necessarily represent ‘kinds’ in a strict sense. To say that someone is a *doctor*, for example, does not preclude that person from being a *teacher*, a *client*, or a *neighbour*. People can belong to a number of different social categories without this restricting them to being of one particular ‘kind’. So what does it mean to say that someone is a *doctor*, an *Australian* or a *friend*?

This paper explores the semantics behind a selection of human social categories. It first analyses the syntactic, grammatical and phraseological properties of three different subcategories. It then zeros in on one of these subcategories, namely that represented by words like *doctors*, *teachers*, *lawyers* and *nurses* (“professional occupations”). I then propose a series of semantic explications for *doctors*, *teachers* and *lawyers*, using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach developed by Anna Wierzbicka. The main goals of this project are (i) to determine the semantic structures of a number of human social category subclasses, and (ii) to demonstrate that the grammatical and phraseology properties of these subclasses can be correlated with and accounted for by their semantic structures. Aside from linguistics, the paper draws from literature in psychology, philosophy, anthropology and computer science (esp. semantic networks) (Berlin, 1992; Cruse, 2002; Goddard, In press; Rosch, 1978; Veres, in press; Wierzbicka, 1985).

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