Evaluative Morphology and the Cognitive Structuring of Color Categories in Chilean Spanish

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This study examines the role of evaluative morphology in the cognitive organization of color categories in Chilean Spanish (Valencia, 2010). Evaluative suffixes in Spanish are typically associated with affective, expressive, or scalar meanings; however, this study explores the possibility that they may also contribute to the internal structuring of perceptual categories.

Drawing on Prototype Theory (Rosch, 1973; 1975) and research on color categorization (Berlin & Kay, 1969; Kay & Cook, 2016), the paper investigates whether evaluative suffixation participates in the organization of COLOR categories by signaling degrees of prototypicality, saturation, and luminance. The analysis focuses on derived forms built from basic color terms using diminutive, augmentative, pejorative, similative, and superlative suffixes in Spanish.

Data were collected from 42 speakers of Chilean Spanish through three experimental tasks involving Munsell color chips and suffixed color terms. Participants evaluated (i) the prototypicality of color tones, (ii) the prototypicality of derived lexical forms, and (iii) associations between color tones and suffixed forms.

The results show recurring correspondences between evaluative morphology and perceptual categorization. Non-derived forms and superlatives were more frequently associated with highly saturated and prototypical tones, whereas diminutives tended to correlate with higher luminance values, augmentatives with darker tones, and pejorative suffixes with more peripheral category members. These tendencies suggest that evaluative suffixes may contribute not only expressive meaning, but also information related to category gradience and perceptual organization.

The paper argues that evaluative morphology may function as a linguistic resource for structuring category-internal contrasts within cognitively continuous domains such as color. More broadly, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on the relationship between evaluative morphology, semantic gradience, and embodied categorization.

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