

WHAT IS SPANISH CARIBBEANNESS? A COGNITIVE APPROACH

ADÁN MARTÍN-DUEÑAS AND GRACIELA NUEZ-PLACERES
UNIVERSIDAD DE LAS PALMAS DE GRAN CANARIA, SPAIN

How Can Geography Activate Our Mind?

From the discipline of geography, we learn that the term “Caribbean” is a collective name designating an area which includes the Caribbean Sea, the group of surrounding islands, and their adjoining coasts. The use of this word is generally due to linguistic economy, as the whole region takes its name from the Caribbean Sea. Therefore, by proximity, the areas of land are also designated with the name of the sea. From the cognitive-linguistic point of view, it is vital for humans to establish boundaries. This term is an example of the way we create artificial limits to keep communication from being problematic.

Whenever we refer to the Caribbean in ordinary communication, we are mentally activating a container image schema by means of which we understand that the Caribbean region embraces the Caribbean Sea. Image schemas are pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic rudimentary tools which allow us to grasp abstract concepts in terms of simple configurations or depictions of the external world. Image schemas are grounded on our bodily and sensorimotor experience. As Lakoff and Johnson indicate in the light of cognitive science, our understanding of the world is embodied (56). Our own body is a container physically delimited by a contour. We try to devise frontiers for the entities that we perceive as being outside us. The Caribbean region does not have either political frontiers (as it consists of several nations) or natural borderlines (as it combines both sea and land). That is the reason why we, as speakers, project an unreal line to discriminate what enters into “the Caribbean” and what does not. Because image schemas are so basic, they can be sketched by an elementary picture. The container is just an example of an image schema, and this schema is based on our own experience of being physically sited within some place (e.g., a house). Thus, our interaction with the world is physical and spatial. This image schema makes it possible to further trigger a metonymic operation that has been traditionally known by rhetoricians as “synecdoche.” Lakoff and Johnson would assert that our concept of the Caribbean is a case of part-for-whole metonymy because the name of the sea turns into the designation of the entire territory (36).

Cognitive Linguistics has emphasized the cognitive value of metonymy. Metonymic mechanisms are fundamental instruments for everyday thought and repeatedly emerge in ordinary speech. Metonymy consists of a conceptual operation in which one entity is used as a representative of a higher or lower level category (part-for-whole and whole-for-part, respectively). In the cognitivist direction, metonymy is far from being simply a rhetorical device typical of literary works. Instead, this phenomenon turns out to be conceptually rooted and thus rather natural in human reasoning.

An essential idea within cognitive semantics is the notion of conceptual domain, which is, in simple words, a package of knowledge. “Caribbean” is an example of a conceptual domain, as it incorporates a vast quantity of knowledge. Metonymy combines two domains, but in different senses: (i) a subdomain and a matrix domain, both of which constitute the internal structure of a metonymy,¹ and (ii) a source domain (from which we take a specific word or concept) and a target domain (where we project referential meaning). The internal logic of a metonymy always remains the same (obviously, the subdomain is at all times included in a matrix domain). It is the direction of the mapping from source to target that changes.²

In line with Ruiz de Mendoza (58), the lexical item “Caribbean” would be an example of a source-in-target metonymy in which a particular subdomain that works as a source domain (“Caribbean [Sea]”) is extended to refer to the matrix domain, which serves as the target domain (“Caribbean [area]”). Figure 1 illustrates the mapping:

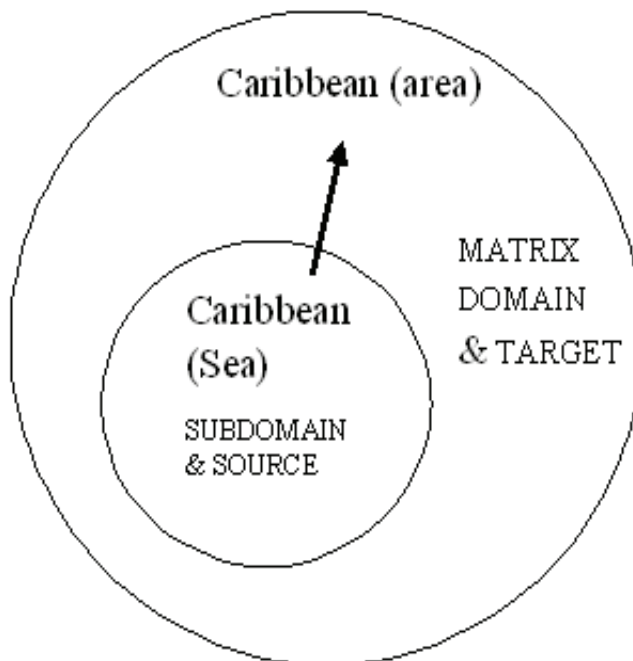


Fig. 1. Domain Extension

It is fairly easy to set up borders when dealing with territories composed of land. For example, we perceive geological edges which allow us to restrict continental areas such as Australia. In contrast, the Caribbean consists not only of landmass (islands) but also of water (the Caribbean Sea), the fact of which makes it even more difficult to categorize this region efficiently. The word “Caribbean”

is, in itself, a kind of abstraction, so the purpose of this mapping operation is to categorize a natural area which is not so clearly delimited as a continent would be. As Tsur indicates, deixis has much to do with abstractions (41). The use of the previous metonymy allows us to generalize and refer to a zone which is not physically divided. When we hear the word “Caribbean,” we rapidly recognize the region we are talking about, but a great amount of knowledge is instantly evoked at the same time, mainly information about the atmosphere, mood, and character of the Caribbean area and people.

There is a necessity to demarcate what is Caribbean and what is not, so the problem is categorial. We use the word “Caribbean” as a basic-level category. A basic-level category is the most widespread linguistic structure, but it is clear enough that one may refer to it efficiently. A categorial hierarchy exists which depends on levels of specificity. Basic categories are hierarchically organized between superordinate categories (semantically vague) and subordinate categories (much more precise). For instance, “flower” is a basic category, whereas “plant” and “tulip” are superordinate and subordinate categories respectively.

From the cognitive-linguistic perspective, we as speakers require categories or labels to organize our vision of the world. As explained at the beginning of this paper, we build imaginary boundaries in an attempt to define fuzzy categories. This is our manner of understanding the world. We give shape and assign labels to materialize the indefinite.

Thus, we conceptualize the Caribbean metaphorically as a CONTAINER in which a mixture of socio-cultural identities are included. We need to delineate not only the geographical features of the Caribbean but also its cultural character. The same conceptual tools are used in both cases; indeed, the two are interconnected. From the geographical term, we derive the name for the culture. Some subordinate categories of *Caribbean* are Spanish Caribbean, English Caribbean, and French Caribbean, categories which are in reality the fruits of European colonial ventures in the American continent. The following diagram illustrates this hierarchical configuration of the category Caribbean:

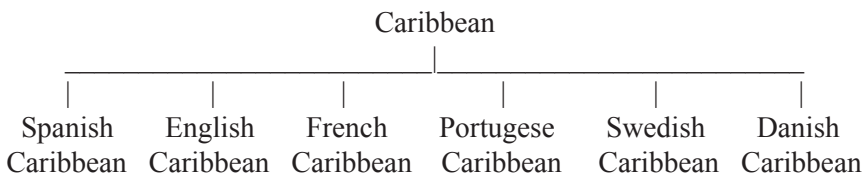


Fig. 2. Categorial hierarchy of “Caribbean”

We have found some linguistic expressions which would support the hypothesis that the lexical concept “Caribbean” needs to be fine-tuned to count as a deictic. Most occurrences of the term “Caribbean” combine with a noun in the plural. The title of this publication is, in fact, *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, a name which suggests there is no such thing as a uniform “Caribbean literature” (Lee

1). Incidentally, there is a BBC radio program called *Caribbean Voices*. Further examples would be:

(1) But since Omeros repeatedly blends with other Western and non-Western influences in the poem, his homage is not mere subservience to the West but part of a larger celebration of *Caribbean hybridity*. (Aegerter 9; emphasis added)

(2) Reggae is perhaps the most popular of the *Caribbean musics*,³ but there are a lot of them. (Snider; emphasis added)

Theoretically, we might use the concept “Caribbean” to refer to any of its subcategories. But this is not the case, as not all the subcategories of the term Caribbean have equal status. Some members are even more prototypical than others. For instance, the subordinate category “English Caribbean” is, paradoxically, a marginal or peripheral category. In fact, English-speaking Caribbeans do not refer to themselves as Caribbeans but as West Indians,⁴ as shown in these utterances:

(3) The strength of the West Indian short story tradition is obvious. (Ramchand 25)

(4) There were, ironically, more practical expressions of West Indian connections in the years of Crown Colony rule before the formation of island nations each with its own government and civil service. (Ramchand 25)

The categories of Danish Caribbean, Swedish Caribbean, and Portuguese Caribbean are also marginal subcategories, mostly because these social communities are a minority in the Caribbean region. Hence, these concepts do not commonly count as good exemplars of the Caribbean.

The previous arguments allow us to infer that the subcategory “Spanish Caribbean” has somehow gained prototypical effects. Indeed, in Spanish, the word *caribeño* is usually associated with Hispanity due to a process known as *perspectivisation* or *adjustment* (Evans 523). The lexical concept *caribeño* serves as an access point to subcategorical meaningful information (Spanish Caribbean). Let us look at some examples:

(5) El mandatario electo de Venezuela explicó que la política exterior que profundizará su Gobierno buscará la integración en el contexto latinoamericano, *caribeño* y americano. (Sala de Prensa)
The president-elect of Venezuela explained that the foreign policy permeating his government will pursue the integration in the Latin American, Caribbean and American context.*

- (6) Al finalizar la ceremonia, bailaron un bolero *caribeño*.⁵
 At the end of the ceremony, they danced a Caribbean bolero.

In sentence (5), from the many possible meanings of the word *caribeño*, its reference is of the Hispanic frame. Therefore, from *caribeño* we perspectivize a central element of the category: *hispanocaribeño*. This view is reinforced by the fact that *caribeño* is juxtaposed with a reference to the Anglo-American context. In utterance (6), once again the lexical entry *caribeño* permits access to the Hispanic character of the Caribbean culture.

This access to meaning is possible because there is a metonymic link between the basic-level category and the subordinate element. If we apply the terminology developed by Ruiz de Mendoza, this would be a case of target-in-source metonymy (59). The basic category of “Caribbean” is reduced to allude to a relevant subdomain, as explained in the following diagram:

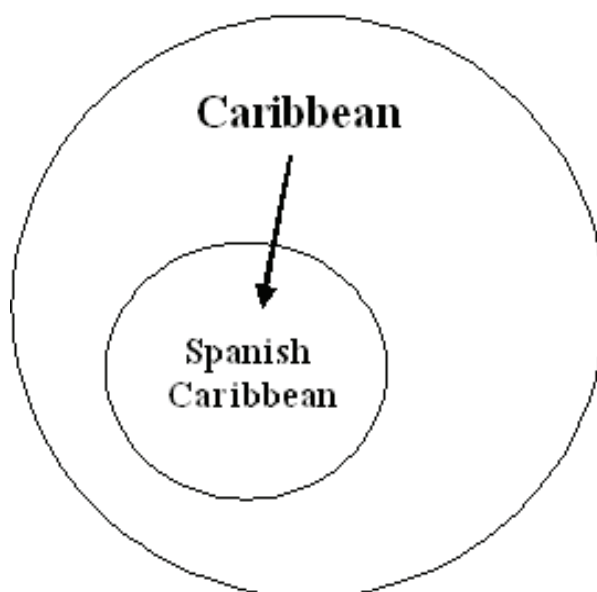


Fig. 3. Subdomain

To arrive from the name of a sea to a specific feature of a group of people, we need a model which explains the intermediate steps of the cognitive-conceptual operation. We have decided to use Barcelona’s model of metonymic chain as a way to illustrate the mental sequence that has occurred (216).

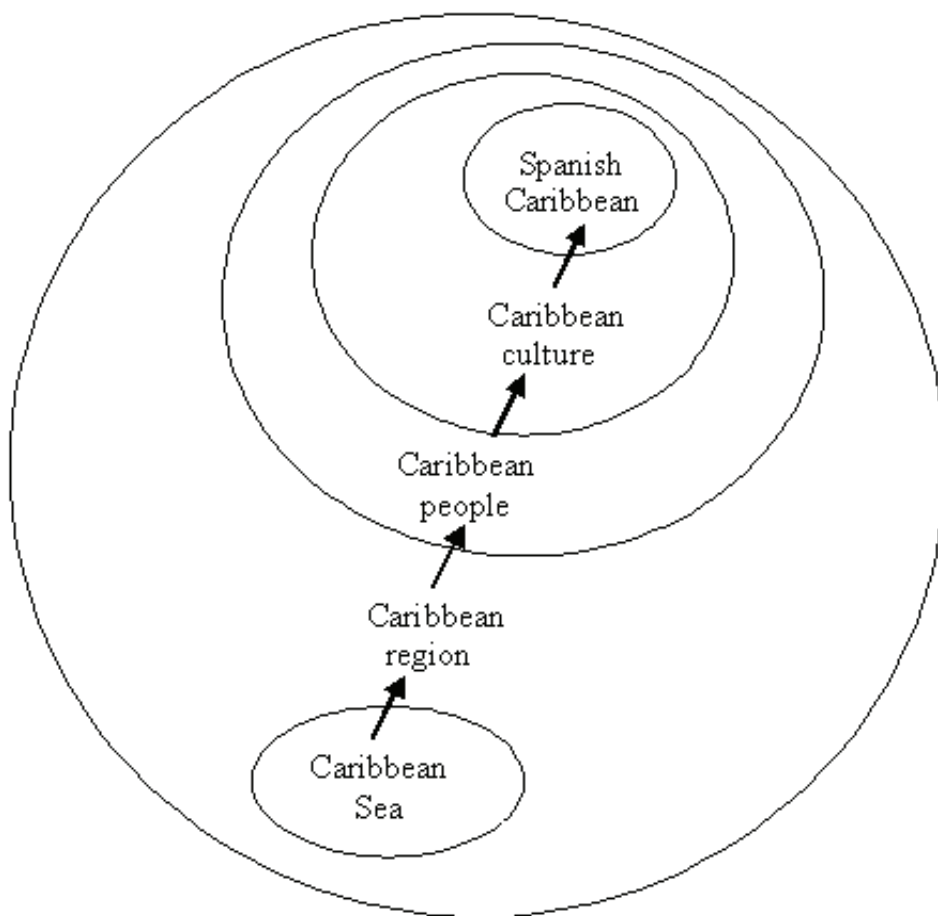


Fig. 4. Metonymic Chain

The previous diagram summarizes the process of metonymic perspectivisation of Spanish Caribbeanness. This progression from the name of a sea to a specific cultural group is carried out, even if we are not aware of the entire complexity of mental operations involved. Each link in the chain represents a stage of brain activity. Our purpose with the previous figure is to illustrate systematically the way information is processed in the brain, even though the processing occurs very quickly.

Situatedness and Synergy

As Evans asserts, situatedness is the basis for access routes to meaning (527). The pair *Caribbean/caribeño* is a multi-faceted category, but when it is used in actual language, only one of these facets is relevant and thus becomes metonymically highlighted. Because of the linguistic context (co-text) and the extratextual (social) situation, we activate the pertinent sense of the term “Caribbean” or “caribeño.”

However, it is logical to think that, if the social atmosphere changes, the conceptualizations of the world need to vary across cultures. Our knowledge of what is “Caribbeanness” is cooperatively constructed in our own society, which could be the reason why citizens from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean dislike to be identified as Latinos or Hispanics.

In addition, situatedness is not the only element that is significant in sustaining these construals of what is “Caribbean” or what is not. Synergic cognition plays a vital role in our theories and ideas about the world. According to Bernárdez, we inherit certain patterns of thought which are already conventionalized from our social ancestors (“Synergy” 27). Throughout history, each social group builds an image or model of what is Caribbean. Here we will deal with two different cultural models of Caribbeanness, that of Spaniards and that of the Spanish speakers residing in the Caribbean.

In order to explain these cultural models, it is useful to remember the cognitive notions of *figure* and *ground*. Let us take into account a simple phrase like *Spanish Caribbean*. As said earlier, Spanish Caribbeans do not like to be referred to as belonging to the Hispanic or Latin ethnicity, so they prefer to highlight their native Caribbean essence (Figure 5). In contrast, Spaniards profile the Hispanic character of the Spanish Caribbeans rather than their indigenous roots (Figure 6).

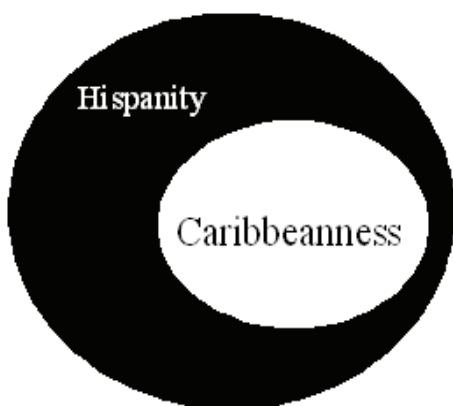


Fig. 5. Spanish Caribbean View

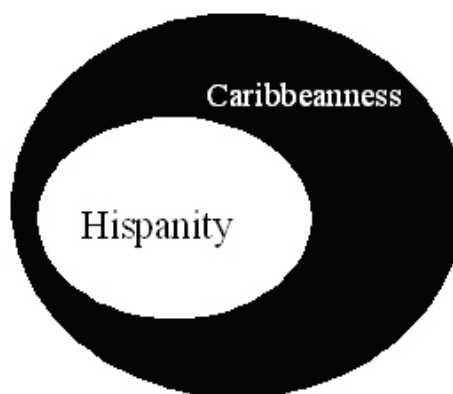


Fig. 6. Spanish View

These are, in reality, stereotypical visions of Spanish Caribbeanness that derive from centrality effects. In accordance with Lakoff (85), social stereotypes emerge when a particular element of one category (*figure*) takes precedence over (i.e., intentionally becomes more prototypical) other features that are judged uncommon or exceptional (*ground*), a trend which clarifies why Spaniards and Spanish Caribbeans hold such opposite views.

Stereotypical views are then partial construals of the world. Any individual from a social community holds a fragmentary and limited vision of what “Spanish

Caribbean” means. But in addition, such an individual, in some measure, contributes to the building of a cultural schema of what “Spanish Caribbean” is (Sharifian 190). This particular cultural conceptualization is spread among the variety of members that constitute such culture. The construction of a cultural schema is comparable to patchwork, in which small pieces (semantic information) are gathered to form a whole pattern (the cultural schema itself). This construction is a result of the distributed character of human cognition, for cognition is a collective activity (Bernárdez, “Collective Cognition” 154).

Following the profound research on metonymy conducted by Barcelona (221-236), we can say that social stereotypes (and, in turn, cultural conceptualizations) are motivated by metonymic processes. If we look back to Figures 5 and 6, we notice that just one aspect of the entire category of *Spanish Caribbean* is metonymically focalized. This particular referent stands above the other possibilities which are also valid but not salient. Although this view is not necessarily true, the phenomenon constitutes a cultural convention since it is culturally chosen by a certain group of people. The previous lines corroborate that stereotypes are built on metonymic operations and show evidence that the process of metonymic selection is always present in human cognitive activity, even though it is not consciously noticed.

It would be helpful to consider the dichotomy between folk models and expert models of conceptualization apart from these culture-specific construals of Spanish Caribbeaness. The cultural conceptualizations analyzed above belong to two folk models. For that reason, perspectivisation is so stereotypical and the construal so partial. Spaniards tend to focus on the Hispanic characteristics of the Spanish Caribbean people, whereas Spanish Caribbean residents concentrate on their native qualities. Both social groups hold an impoverished worldview determined by their ideologies. On the other hand, a scholar researching in the field of Spanish Caribbean Studies would operate with an expert cognitive model and so would probably have a broader view in which both Hispanity and Caribbeaness are equally salient elements.

Furthermore, to assume any expert has a more richly-detailed model than a layperson is reasonable. The cognitive model of the specialist takes into account other facets of meaning which are more wide-ranging and less biased. Indeed, much of this meaning is novel and emergent. If we apply the theory of conceptual integration introduced by Fauconnier and Turner (180), we will arrive at the conclusion—surely supported by many researchers—that *Spanish Caribbean* is a completely new structure which comprises features not present in the colonial culture or in the local culture. If we are to find *a* Caribbean identity, we must keep in mind the creative fusion (or *blend*, as Fauconnier and Turner put it) of many aspects. Only in this way can we talk about a unique Spanish Caribbean concept.

¹ The notion of *subdomain* roughly corresponds to the term “part.” The *matrix domain* is somewhat equivalent to “whole.”

² In our figures, an arrow indicates the direction of the mapping.

³ It is interesting to note that “music” is often an uncountable noun appearing in the singular form. In this example, however, the word is in plural, which is a symptom of the proposed taxonomical division of the concept “Caribbean.”

⁴ “West Indies” is often considered an alternative tag for the Caribbean. Nevertheless, Caribbean is a more extensive term, for it includes the mainland territories of South America.

⁵ This example is our own creation.

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(Forthcoming).

JUANI GUERRA received her PhD in Philology from the University Complutense in Madrid. She is an Associate Professor at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain), where she teaches courses in English and American Literature, Literary Theory, and Translation Theory. She is also the Director of ULPGC's Cognitive Studies of Language Program and the ULPGC's Research Group on Cognitive Poetics. She has edited and translated into Spanish several works in English, including those of Jane Austen (*Emma*, Cátedra 1997) and Katherine Mansfield (*Relatos Breves*, Cátedra 2000, 2005), and she is presently preparing the edition of a Spanish Anthology of Contemporary American Short Fiction. Her research in various languages addresses formal complexity as the most creative characteristic of human beings. Her current research addresses the field of cognitive science, focusing upon socio-cognitive poetics, conceptual processings, and meaning constructions in literature, particularly in the short story.

MARÍA LEMA-QUINTANA received her PhD from the University of Las Palmas in 2009. She taught Spanish in Poland at the University of Poznan until 2007. Presently, she teaches Modern Languages at the University of Las Palmas in Spain. She is a member of the Research Group *Cognitive Poetics*, and her interests include Translation Studies, Cognitive Linguistics, and Ethnolinguistics.

ADÁN MARTÍN DUEÑAS holds a BA in English Studies from the University of Córdoba in Spain, where he won an Excellence Award for Academic Achievement. He is a junior researcher in Spain at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and is conducting his doctoral research on the concept of Time in the light of Cognitive Theories. He recently cooperated in the teaching of undergraduate courses on English literature and Anglo-American literary studies. He has also participated as a speaker in a number of national and international conferences on Cognitive Linguistics. Currently, he is completing a research stay at the University of California in San Diego as a visiting graduate student.

GRACIELA NUEZ-PLACERES is a PhD student from the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain), where she is conducting a doctoral research on second language acquisition and learning in the light of Cognitive Theories. She is currently an assistant teacher of English at the ULPGC, where she teaches courses on English literature and Anglo-American literary studies. She is also a member of the research group on Cognitive Poetics at the ULPGC. She holds a BA from the University of Evangel Missouri in the United States and a BA in English Studies from the University of Las Palmas in Spain.

YNÉS M. OGGE received her PhD in Education and Spanish from Michigan State University. She was Professor and Chair of the Spanish Department at Briar Cliff University in Sioux City, Iowa. Her interests include Latin American literature and

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