

GRE Reading Comprehension

Many readers, I suspect, will take the title of this article *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* as suggesting that women, fire, and dangerous things have something in common—say, that women are fiery and dangerous. Most feminists I've mentioned it to have loved the title for that reason, though some have hated it for the same reason. But the chain of inference—from conjunction to categorization to commonality—is the norm. The inference is based on the common idea of what it means to be in the same category: things are categorized together on the basis of what they have in common. The idea that categories are defined by common properties is not only our everyday folk theory of what a category is, it is also the principle technical theory—one that has been with us for more than two thousand years.

The classical view that categories are based on shared properties is not entirely wrong. We often do categorize things on that basis. But that is only a small part of the story. In recent years it has become clear that categorization is far more complex than that. A new theory of categorization, called prototype theory, has emerged. It shows that human categorization is based on principles that extend far beyond those envisioned in the classical theory. One of our goals is to survey the complexities of the way people really categorize. For example, the title of this book was inspired by the Australian aboriginal language Dyrirbal, which has a category, *balan*, that actually includes women, fire, and dangerous things. It also includes birds that are not dangerous, as well as exceptional animals, such as the platypus, bandicoot, and echidna. This is not simply a matter of categorization by common properties.

Categorization is not a matter to be taken lightly. There is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action and speech. Every time we see something as a kind of thing, for example, a tree, we are categorizing. Whenever we reason about kinds of things—chairs, nations, illnesses, emotions, any kind of thing at all—we are employing categories. Whenever we intentionally perform any kind of action, say something as mundane as writing with a pencil, hammering with a hammer, or ironing clothes, we are using categories. The particular action we perform on that occasion is a kind of motor activity, that is, it is in a particular category of motor actions. They are never done in exactly the same way, yet despite the differences in particular movements, they are all movements of a kind, and we know how to make movements of that kind. And any time we either produce or understand any utterance of any reasonable length, we are employing dozens if not hundreds of categories: categories of speech sounds, of words, of phrases and clauses, as well as conceptual categories. Without the ability to categorize, we could not function at all, either in the physical world or in our social and intellectual lives.

1. Consider all three answer choices and select all that apply.

The author probably chose *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* as the title of the article because

(A) he thought that since the Dyrirbal placed all three items in the same category, women,

fire, and dangerous things necessarily had something in common.

(B) he was hoping to draw attention to the fact that because items have been placed in the same category doesn't mean that they necessarily have anything in common

(C) he wanted to use the Dyirbal classification system as an example of how primitive classifications are not as functional as contemporary Western classification systems.

2. Consider all three answer choices and select all that apply.
According to the author,
 - (A) categorizing is a fundamental activity of people.
 - (B) whenever a word refers to a kind of thing, it signifies a category.
 - (C) one has to be able to categorize in order to function in our culture.
3. Which one of the following facts would most weaken the significance of the author's title?
 - (A) The discovery that all the birds and animals classified as balan in Dyirbal are female
 - (B) The discovery that the male Dyirbal culture considers females to be both fiery and dangerous
 - (C) The discovery that all items in the balan category are considered female
 - (D) The discovery that neither fire nor women are considered dangerous
 - (E) The discovery that other cultures have categories similar to the balan category
4. If linguistic experts cannot perceive how women, fire, and dangerous things in the category balan have at least one thing in common, it follows that
 - (A) there probably is something other than shared properties that led to all items in balan being placed in that category.
 - (B) the anthropologists simply weren't able to perceive what the items had in common.
 - (C) the anthropologists might not have been able to see what the items had in common.
 - (D) the items do not have anything in common.
 - (E) the Australian aboriginal culture is rather mystic.
5. Which one of the following sentences would best complete the last paragraph of the passage?
 - (A) An understanding of how we categorize is central to any understanding of how we think and how we function, and therefore central to an understanding of what makes us human.
 - (B) The prototype theory is only the latest in a series of new and improved theories of categorization; undoubtedly even better theories will replace it.
 - (C) The prototype theory of categories has not only unified a major branch of linguistics, but it has applications to mathematics and physics as well.
 - (D) An understanding of how the prototype theory of categorization evolved from the classical theory is essential to any understanding of how we think and how we function in society.
 - (E) To fully understand how modern Australian society functions, we must study how it

is influenced by aboriginal culture—most specifically how aborigines organize and classify their surroundings.