

Borges attributes the following taxonomy of the animal kingdom to an ancient Chinese encyclopedia entitled the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*.

On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance. (Borges 1966, p. 108)

Borges, of course, deals with the fantastic. These not only are not natural human categories—they could not be natural human categories. But part of what makes this passage art, rather than mere fantasy, is that it comes close to the impression a Western reader gets when reading descriptions of nonwestern languages and cultures. The fact is that people around the world categorize things in ways that both boggle the Western mind and stump Western linguists and anthropologists. More often than not, the linguist or anthropologist just throws up his hands and resorts to giving a list—a list that one would not be surprised to find in the writings of Borges.

An excellent example is the classification of things in the world that occurs in traditional Dyirbal, an aboriginal language of Australia. The classification is built into the language, as is common in the world's languages. Whenever a Dyirbal speaker uses a noun in a sentence, the noun must be preceded by a variant of one of four words: *bayi*, *balan*, *balam*, *bala*. These words classify all objects in the Dyirbal universe, and to speak Dyirbal correctly one must use the right classifier before each noun. Here is a brief version of the Dyirbal classification of objects in the universe, as described by R. M. W. Dixon (1982):

- I. *Bayi*: men, kangaroos, possums, bats, most snakes, most fishes, some birds, most insects, the moon, storms, rainbows, boomerangs, some spears, etc.

- II. *Balan*: women, bandicoots, dogs, platypus, echidna, some snakes, some fishes, most birds, fireflies, scorpions, crickets, the hairy mary grub, anything connected with water or fire, sun and stars, shields, some spears, some trees, etc.
- III. *Balam*: all edible fruit and the plants that bear them, tubers, ferns, honey, cigarettes, wine, cake
- IV. *Bala*: parts of the body, meat, bees, wind, yamsticks, some spears, most trees, grass, mud, stones, noises and language, etc.

It is a list that any Borges fan would take delight in.

But Dixon did not stop with a list. He was determined to learn what made these categories of the human mind, categories that made sense to Dyrirbal speakers—that they could learn uniformly and use unconsciously and automatically. In the course of his fieldwork, Dixon observed that speakers do not learn category members one by one, but operate in terms of some general principles. According to Dixon's analysis, there is a basic, productive, and fairly simple general schema that operates unless some specialized principle takes precedence. Dixon's proposed basic schema is this:

- I. *Bayi*: (human) males; animals
- II. *Balan*: (human) females; water; fire; fighting
- III. *Balam*: nonflesh food
- IV. *Bala*: everything not in the other classes

Here are some cases that fit this schema: Men, being human males, are in class I. Kangaroos and possums, being animals, are in class I. Women are in class II, since they are human females. Rivers and swamps, being bodies of water, are in class II. Fire is in class II. Wild figs are in class III. Tubers are in class III. Trees that don't bear fruit are in class IV. Rocks are in class IV. Language is in class IV.

The cases of particular interest are those that Dixon found to follow certain general principles beyond the basic cases given above. Perhaps the most general principle, which Dixon takes for granted and doesn't even bother to state explicitly, is what I will call the domain-of-experience principle:

If there is a basic domain of experience associated with *A*, then it is natural for entities in that domain to be in the same category as *A*.

For example, fish are in class I, since they are animate. Fishing implements (fishing spears, fishing line, etc.) are also in class I, even though they might be expected to be in class IV, since they are neither animate