Tomatoes are fruits and other tales from category-land

Simone C Niquille

in conversation with Eleanor Rosch

A fruit, botany tells us, is any body that develops as the result of a flower's ovary being fertilised. Botany also tells us that a vegetable is any edible segment of a plant that is not a fruit. A tomato is then, botanically speaking, a fruit. However, tomatoes' longstanding culinary use alongside vegetables has led to their common labelling as a vegetable. In this essay-interview between designer and researcher Simone C Niquille and professor of psychology Eleanor Rosch, this seemingly mundane example of understanding and negotiating categories becomes a wormhole for exploring the limits and fuzzy borders of categorisation in the world. Seeking to make legible the otherwise hidden frameworks of knowledge production embedded in machine learning, Niquille turns to Rosch, whose prototype theory involves a "graded degree of belonging rather than strict boundaries". Together, in a conversation that centres on Niquille's video work *Homeschool,* they refuse "categorisation as a tool to control a system of relations" and instead propose "a network of objects, things, and concepts that are all connected and yet more or less alike."

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'
Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* [1]

Eyes don't know what they are looking at. Cameras don't know what they are looking at. To make sense of visual input, the brain (or neural network) organises these signals into categories. Chairs are 'furniture,' an apple is 'fruit.' Like a paint-by-number landscape, the world is constantly segmented into digestible parts by machines and humans alike. To the human mind, the scientific accuracy of such mental sorting isn't crucial. In the world of botany, a tomato is classified as fruit. In the supermarket, to most nutritionists, and in my mind, it is a vegetable. Organising what one sees into mental groups is essential to understanding the surroundings. Categorisation simplifies complexity by drawing comparison and pointing out similarity. In doing so, it also defines what belongs – and what doesn't. Without categories, there is no anomaly, no possibility to fall outside of their scope. Where a category's borders are drawn is deeply personal and communal; it reveals cultural context, a set of references and personal beliefs. Categories are a reflection of someone's

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