

An analysis of the use of cognitive verbs in American English conversation

Traditional accounts of verbal categories base class membership on two main criteria: semantic similarity and the ability of the verbs to occur in the same syntactic frames (Palmer 1988, Levin 1993). Such accounts treat verbal categories as homogeneous, without considering differences among the individual members. However, functional linguistic research on highly frequent verbs such as *know* and *think* has demonstrated that these verbs behave differently from other so-called 'cognitive verbs'. Within frequent collocations, such as *I don't know*, and *I think* the verbs have moved away from their canonical meanings, so that they no longer function as main verbs, but the collocation as a whole functions as an epistemic device, also showing signs of phonological reduction (Bybee and Scheibman 1999, Thompson and Mulac 1991).

By combining discourse analysis with the Natural Semantic Metalanguage methodology (Wierzbicka 1996), this study offers a new account of what has traditionally been called the cognitive verb class. The analysis is based on a total of 2000 tokens of cognitive verbs, drawn from the Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English (Du Bois 2000). The use of verbs with high frequency, such as *know* and *think*, mid-frequency, such as *guess* and *believe*, and low frequency, such as *wonder* and *understand* is examined. It will be shown that the highly frequent verbs behave somewhat differently from verbs of mid and low frequency, in that they display a preference for 1st person subjects and tend to occur without traditional objects. Furthermore, the semantics of collocations such as *I know*, *I think*, and *I believe* is examined in detail, in order to identify how these related constructions differ in meaning and use. A semantic difference is proposed, whereby the collocation *I believe* is found to contain a component of meaning which is not shared by the more frequent, more generalized collocations.

An account of the cognitive verb class, which does not treat all members equally but recognizes the specific discourse and semantic functions of the highly frequent members, supports a functional view of grammar, whereby highly frequent phrases and collocations are stored and processed as single units from which structure emerges as a result of our everyday experience with language use.

References:

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