Lectures on deixis 38 years later

This paper aims to discuss the topicality of Fillmore’s work on deixis. Undoubtedly, the lectures on deixis held by Fillmore in Santa Cruz in 1971 are a milestone in the study of deictic forms. He explored every aspect of deixis: space, time, person, discourse and social deixis are investigated. This is not at all an easy task to do: “the phenomena of deixis impose a number of serious empirical, conceptual, and notational problems for grammatical theory” (Fillmore 1997: 26).

Although ancient Greek and Latin grammarians had already noted the importance of deictic categories in language, a scientific study on this topic started only in the last century. Bühler’s *Sprachtheorie* (1934) is probably the first complete account of deixis. But it is only with Fillmore that we have a systematization of this complex subject. Then, starting from the 1980’s, we witness a real ‘deictic boom’ (Kryk 1987: 19).

We owe to Fillmore important definitions which we still use now in order to classify deictic forms: for example, the classical distinction between ‘person-oriented systems’ and ‘distance-oriented systems’ in the classification of demonstrative systems: in ‘distance-oriented systems’ all demonstratives indicate the relative distance between the referent and the deictic center, whereas in ‘person-oriented systems’ a fundamental role is also played by the addressee, as one of the demonstratives denotes a referent in the proximity of the hearer (this distinction was later supported by Anderson/Keenan 1985 and Diessel 1999).

Another fundamental study on spatial deixis done by Fillmore is the article “Towards a Descriptive Framework for Spatial Deixis”, in Jarvella/Klein (1982), in which the theoretical point of view is that of prototype semantics. Fillmore underlines the importance of distinguishing linguistic elements which are primarily deictic from linguistic elements which are primarily non-deictic.

He also tries to sketch out a useful ‘descriptive vocabulary for spatial deixis’, signalling the difficult task of investigating deictic systems in a field situation: “I have found it difficult, in my own work, to set up the right elicitation contexts for exploring the uses of deictic elements in field investigations, and from the often unsatisfactory descriptions of deictic systems in published grammars, I am convinced that other investigators have experienced similar difficulties” (Fillmore 1982: 42).

Another important definition coined by Fillmore (1982) is ‘demonstrative adverb’: according to him, in spatial deixis we can label ‘demonstrative’ not only adjectives and pronouns, but also adverbs, like *here* and *there*.

It is a fact that the theory on deixis has evolved, but Fillmore’s lectures are still a crucial point of departure, as every bibliography testifies, and, as we can easily do now, searching ‘Charles Fillmore deixis’ in Google scholar.

References