Discourse expectations and meaning-construction

Our understanding of meaning construction has advanced by over 20 years of research in Cognitive Semantics. It is now widely accepted that meaning construction proceeds on the basis of linguistic units ‘prompting’ for highly complex conceptual processes which help construct meaning based on sophisticated encyclopaedic knowledge. Words and constructions provide points of access to large knowledge structures with respect to which a given expression is understood and a given utterance is interpreted. Linguists have modeled these structures in various ways: they are Fillmore’s semantic frames (1975), Langacker’s domains (1987), Lakoff’s ICMs (1987) etc. The conceptual knowledge consisting of the representations of linguistic and extralinguistic experience gives rise to a number of expectations concerning discourse in specific interactive circumstances. The present analysis emphasizes the role of discourse expectations in online meaning construction. It supports the view that normal language use is always ‘argumentative’ and it involves the coordination of distinct minds as the interlocutors engage in orientating one another towards certain conclusions by invoking shared models of interaction and socio-cultural knowledge (see Verhagen 2005 on intersubjectivity). Two kinds of discourse expectations are distinguished – “horizontal expectations” about the prior or later discourse, and “vertical expectations” which pertain to the relation between a specific interactive situation and the content overtly expressed. The two types of discourse expectations overlap in a specific communicative situation which serves as the basis for the present analysis. The interlocutors are husband and wife, and their exchange evokes a knowledge structure for a sequence of events associated with ‘betrayal’ (comparable to Schank and Abelson’s (1977) script).

(1) WIFE: …. and I found a woman’s earring in your car!

HUSBAND: oh great! next thing you’ll say is that I’m having an affair on you!

The aim of the present analysis is to show a mechanism in linguistic manipulation which consists in anticipating the speaker’s utterance and rendering it nonsensical or absurd by making it explicit before the speaker. The discussion may contribute to a cognitive linguistics account of manipulative discourse. On a different level, it concerns the role of discourse expectations in dynamic meaning construction, highlighting the intersubjective nature of human interaction.

References


