

Spoken language semantics

A long-standing assumption in many schools of linguistics, including cognitive linguistics, is that the semantics of a word or morpheme does not depend on whether the linguistic form is used in writing or speaking. This indifference to usage makes sense for approaches whose claims concern *competence* as opposed to *performance*. However, a basic premise of cognitive linguistics is that the semantic structure of language as it is used is conceptual structure; cognitive linguistics is explicitly concerned with how linguistic structure reflects conceptualizations of events in context. Notions such as ‘usage event’, ‘perspective’, and ‘embodied experience’ play important roles in cognitive linguistic analyses. Yet even in most cognitive linguistic research, the semantics of a linguistic form is not considered to be dependent on the modality of its linguistic expression (e.g., written texts or spoken language).

In this talk I will explore several programs of research in and related to cognitive linguistics which, taken together, suggest that the semantics of spoken language is different in both form and content from that of written language. The focus will be mainly on spoken language as used in the “canonical encounter” (Clark 1973) of face to face conversation; examples will be drawn from videorecorded data from American and British English and Russian, but the hypothesis being proposed is based on data from languages, cited in the research below, which show various typological properties. I will argue for the special status of spoken language semantics in light of what we currently know about:

- intonation units and their syntactic/semantic structures (Croft 1995), particularly preferred argument structure (Du Bois et al. 2003) and the one-new-idea constraint (Chafe 1994)
- thinking for speaking (McNeill & Duncan 2000; Slobin 1987)
- gesture with speech (e.g., McNeill 2005)
- the roles of metaphor in talk (Cameron 2007) and in gesture (Cienki & Müller 2008; Müller 2008)
- the wealth of cues of and for potential mental simulation (Barsalou 1999; Bergen 2007) provided by language speakers through audio and visual imagery (e.g., Cook & Tanenhaus 2008)
- and finally, grammatical (and thus semantic) differences between languages with and without writing systems (cf. Güldemann & von Roncador 2002).

One conclusion from this research is that not only the traditionally dominant theories of semantics, but even cognitive linguistic theories have an implicit bias toward language as it is objectified in writing. We see that converging advances in several fields point the way toward a developing area of research concerned with the semantics of spoken language as a multimodal process, rather than as a thing.

Another conclusion is that current academic practices for presenting semantic analyses reflect and perpetuate the written bias in our understanding of the relation between language and meaning. If recent cognitive linguistic research can help foster a new, dynamic approach in the field of semantics which is more faithful to spoken language processes, then new methods of presenting these analyses will need to be developed, e.g., ones which take advantage of graphic possibilities now available with new media.

References:

- Barsalou, L. 1999. Perceptual symbol systems. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 22: 577-660.
- Bergen, B. 2007. Experimental methods for simulation semantics. In M. Gonzalez-Marquez, I. Mittelberg, S. Coulson & M. Spivey (eds.), *Methods in cognitive linguistics*, 277-301. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Cameron, L. 2007. Confrontation or complementarity? Metaphor in language use and cognitive metaphor theory. *Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 5: 107-135.
- Chafe, W. 1994. *Discourse, consciousness, and time*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cienki, A. & C. Müller (eds.). 2008. *Metaphor and gesture*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Clark, H. 1973. Space, time, semantics, and the child. In T. Moore (ed.), *Cognitive development and the acquisition of language*, 27-64. New York: Academic Press.
- Cook, S. & M. Tanenhaus. 2008. Speakers communicate their perceptual-motor experience to listeners nonverbally. In *Proceedings of the 307th annual meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, 957-962. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Croft, W. 1995. Intonation and grammatical structure. *Linguistics* 33: 839-882.
- Du Bois, J. W., L. E. Kumpf & W. J. Ashby (eds.). 2003. *Preferred argument structure: Grammar as architecture for function*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Güldemann, T. & M. von Roncador (eds.). 2002. *Reported discourse: A meeting ground for different linguistic domains*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- McNeill, D. 2005. *Gesture and thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McNeill, D. & S. Duncan. 2000. Growth points in thinking for speaking. In D. McNeill (ed.), *Language and gesture*, 141-161. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Müller, C. 2008. *Metaphors dead and alive, sleeping and waking: A dynamic view*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.