

Construction and situation types: metonymic constraints on the ‘What’s X doing Y?’ construction

This presentation regards metonymy as an automatic conceptual relation that not only applies to lexical items but to whole situations, as originally proposed by Panther & Thornburg (1998) for illocution and later by Ruiz de Mendoza (2007) for all forms of pragmatic implication. The focus of this paper is on the further development of Ruiz de Mendoza’s metonymic view of Kay & Fillmore’s (1999) “What’s X doing Y?” construction. Ruiz de Mendoza & Díez (2001) have argued that the construction is motivated by metonymic thinking and that its interpretation is grounded in the metonymic chain ‘action-result-request’. In this presentation, it is further argued that the meaning of this construction is heavily constrained by the situation type in which it appears. Thus, from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective, we make the following two claims:

1. The situation type is the decisive factor in determining the actual meaning interpretation of this construction. Many examples are analyzed and the constraints for metonymic thinking within the construction are systematized according to the different situation. It is postulated that the construction requires, on one level, the activation of the metonymy ACTION FOR RESULT (for example, "What's the child doing with those scissors?" can be paraphrased as 'What's the child doing with those scissors that may result in him getting hurt?'). On a second interpretive level, the potentially bad outcome (e.g. the child cutting his finger) calls for the activation of a more complex warning scenario. In other situations we may have a request, a complaint or other directive meanings (e.g. *What's that lamp doing there?* ‘Please, put that lamp where it belongs’).

2. It is argued that the Y element is decisive in supplying the conventional constructional value of the construction. For this reason, *What’s the child doing?* does not necessarily convey the idea that the situation described troubles the speaker. But once the Y element is developed, it carries the whole interpretive weight of the construction. In order to make this point, the presentation examines occurrences of the construction obtained from the British National Corpus and WebCorp searches. Exploring a large number of linguistic realizations of the Y element in their context of production allows us to correlate them, in a systematic way, with their meaning implications and corresponding situational parameters.

References

- Kay, Paul and Fillmore, Charles J. 1999. Grammatical constructions and linguistic generalizations: The *What's X doing Y?* construction. *Language* 75, 1: 1-33.
- Panther, Klaus-Uwe, and Linda Thornburg. 1998. A cognitive approach to inferencing in conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 30: 755-769.
- Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, F. J. y Díez Velasco, O. 2003. "High-level metonymy and linguistic structure". In Carlos Inchaurralde & Celia Florén (eds.), *Interaction and Cognition in Linguistics*; Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang.
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