

The metaphors of “theme”

This paper is concerned with the expression of **theme**, that is, the topic or subject, of a discussion, e.g. *to talk about politics*.

The aim of the study is to investigate and contrast the use of different theme-markers in Spanish in order to describe the various ways of conceptualizing the semantic notion of theme (cf. Dirven’s (1995) account of cause prepositions). In addition to an in-depth analysis of the situation in Spanish, I will also comment on a number of other European languages, including English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, and Swedish. As such, the study is conceived to be an introductory exploration into the cross-linguistic expression of theme.

Theoretically the study rests on a broad conception of metaphor theory as conceived by Kövecses (2003), Lakoff (1987), and Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 1999), among others. It also draws on works on prepositional semantics, e.g. Dirven (1993, 1995), Lakoff (1987), Langacker (1992), Tyler & Evans (2003) and Zelinsky-Wibbelt (1993).

The expression of theme varies both across languages and language-internally. At the same time the markers used (be they prepositions or declinational suffixes) show quite a few similarities as to the metaphors that underlie the theme-expressions. We find, for example, Spanish *hablar de política* and Finnish *puhua politiikasta*, which both appear to evoke the idea of ‘origin’ of the subject of conversation, while in languages like English and Swedish, the prepositions *about* and *om* give rise to the idea that the discussion evolves around the subject (cf. Dirven’s (1993: 82, 88–89) and Hudson & Wiktorsson’s (2007) remarks on English *about*).

My main focus lies on the synchronic variation between the different linguistic options each language has available. What difference is there in Spanish, for example, between *hablar de política* and *hablar sobre política*? In addition to discussing the present state of affairs, I also comment on the historical evolution of the theme-expressions in Spanish.

The Spanish data has been retrieved from a sample of 17 historical texts dating from the 13th to the 21st century. The comparative data from the other languages is based on the corpora belonging to the University of Helsinki Language Corpus Server. The searches have been made according to different verbs of “communication”, e.g. *to talk, speak, say, tell*, as well as their nominal equivalents, e.g. *idea, story, tale, speech, lecture*, etc.

In my paper I point both to the common motivations as well as to the varying realizations that are manifest in the languages under study. Two metaphors appear to have a special status for the construal of theme in Spanish as well as in other languages, namely the ideas of ‘source’ and ‘circling/moving proximity’. As a result of my investigation, a picture emerges of the different metaphors involved in the expression of this very central part of everyday language. The study also raises some interesting questions regarding the generality of these findings, especially in a broader typological perspective. Finally, the investigation sheds new light on this abstract but nevertheless very important aspect of prepositional semantics.

References

Dirven, René (1993): “Dividing up physical and mental space into conceptual categories by means of English prepositions”, in Zelinsky-Wibbelt (ed.), pp. 73–97.

—(1995): “The construal of cause: The case of cause prepositions”, in J. Taylor & R. E. MacLaury: *Language and the Cognitive Construal of the World*. Berlin / New York: Mouton de Gruyter. Pp. 95–118.

Hudson, Jean & Maria Wiktorsson (2007): “Path morpheme constructions: the case of *about*”. Paper presented at the 10th International Cognitive Linguistics Conference, Cracow, Poland 15–20/7/2007.

Kövecses, Zoltán (2002): *Metaphor. A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lakoff, George (1987): *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things. What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, George & Mark Johnson (1980): *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

—(1999): *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

Langacker, Ronald W. (1992): "Prepositions as Grammatical(izing) Elements", *Leuvense Bijdragen*, 81, 287–309.

Tyler, Andrea & Vyvyan Evans (2003): *The Semantics of English Prepositions: spatial scenes, embodied meaning, and cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zelinsky-Wibbelt, Cornelia (ed.) (1993): *The Semantics of Prepositions*. Berlin / New York: Mouton de Gruyter.