

Modal constructions: constraints on polysemy

At least since Sweetser (1990), modal words – and modal auxiliaries in particular – have been considered a schoolbook example of polysemy. There is, however, no consensus in the literature on the number and the kind of modal senses to be distinguished, nor on the exact relationships between these senses (see e.g. Nuyts 2005). In this paper, the problem will be approached from the perspective of construction grammar (in the general sense outlined by Croft & Cruse 2004: 225-257). I will show how constructions impose constraints on polysemy: in actual language use, modal forms occur exclusively as part of *modal constructions* and such constructions as a whole are, in principle, monosemous rather than polysemous.

To substantiate this claim, I will present a constructionist analysis of two intriguing phenomena from the study of modality in Dutch.

- (i) the conditional use of the modal verb *mogen* ('may'), as in (1):

(1) *Mocht je me nodig hebben, moet je even bellen.*
'Should you need me, just give me a call.'

- (ii) the modal use of the temporal adverb *straks* ('soon', 'in a little while'), as in (2):

(2) *Straks is hij al weg!*
'He could have left already!'

On the basis of data from the 9 million word Corpus of Spoken Dutch (CGN), it will be shown that the *form* of these constructions is highly specific. In addition to the 'modal' form (auxiliary or adverb) itself, definite formal properties are required for the specific reading to arise. Such formal specifications include intonation pattern and word order. For instance, in the modal *straks*-construction demonstrated in (2), the adverb obligatorily occupies the first position of the clause; in (3), *straks* can only get a strictly temporal reading.

(3) *Hij is straks al weg!*
'He will be gone in a little while!'

The *meaning* of modal constructions is, likewise, much more specific than – or even different from – any of the senses that are assumed in existing polysemy networks for modality. The conditional construction in (1), for instance, has specialized in expressing non-content conditional relations (in the sense of Dancygier & Sweetser 2005).

If the different readings of modal words can be systematically related to formal properties of the larger constructions in which they are used (cf. Diewald 2006), the result is basically a monosemous rather than a polysemous description. It will be argued that, indeed, construction networks are principally 'monosemy networks'. Since a modal form, just like any other word, is never used in isolation, independently of a specific construction, this account in fact raises the interesting question if, in a constructionist approach to modality, there is *any* place left for polysemy.

References

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