Lecture 1: Cognitive Linguistics
A General Introduction

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Topic 3

How to deal with linguistic universals and cross-linguistic variation in Cognitive Linguistics

References

- Evans, Vyvyan & Melanie Green. 2006. *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

- Geeraerts, Dirk. 2006. 'A rough guide to cognitive linguistics'. In Dirk Geeraerts, ed. *Cognitive Linguistics: Basic Readings*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 1-28.

Introduction

- Two commitments in cognitive linguistics:

1. The Generalization Commitment

   a commitment to the characterization of general principles responsible for all aspects of human language

2. The Cognitive Commitment

   a commitment to providing a characterization of general principles for language that accords with what is known about the mind and brain from other disciplines (Lakoff 1990)

Introduction

➢ Important consequence of this approach:

- Language does not result from an encapsulated "module" of specialized knowledge, separable from general cognition.

→ Language reflects and is informed by non-linguistic aspects of cognition.

Introduction

➢ Linguistic universals and cross-linguistic variation:

- General cognitive principles are common to all humans.

→ Linguistic universals:

Explained by the existence of general cognitive principles shared by all humans, in addition to the fundamentally similar experiences of the world also shared by all humans due to embodiment

Introduction

- All languages are not the same, in terms of grammatical structure or semantic structure.

→ Cross-linguistic variation:
Speakers of different languages have different underlying conceptual systems.

Linguistic universals

- Two ways to understand linguistic universals:

1. Typological studies
2. Generative Grammar

Linguistic universals

1. Typological studies

   Patterns of similarity that are attested in typological studies

- All languages have oral vowels.
- If a language has noun before demonstrative, then it has noun before relative clause.

→ Large-scale comparative studies set out to discover linguistic patterns in relation to a given phenomenon

→ Empirical fact and hence uncontroversial

Linguistic universals

2. Generative Grammar

"Universal" refers to underlying principles of linguistic organization and structure that are represented in the human mind

- Universal Grammar:

  a set of innate universal principles that equips all humans to acquire their native language

→ This is held to account for patterns of cross-linguistic similarity.

→ Not a fact, hence controversial for many linguists, including cognitive linguists

Cross-linguistic variation

➢ Variation in the conceptualization of time:
Aymara vs. English

- Aymara:
an indigenous language of South America (spoken in the Andean region of Peru, Chile, and Bolivia)

Cross-linguistic variation

➢ FUTURE and PAST:

Aymara speakers conceptualize the FUTURE as being located behind the ego, while PAST is conceptualized as being in front of the ego (Núñez and Sweetser, forthcoming)

- English FUTURE and PAST:

(a) The years ahead of us will be difficult.

(b) My childhood is behind me.

Cross-linguistic variation

- Aymaran FUTURE and PAST:

(a)	mayra	pacha
	front/eye/sight	time
	“past time”	
(b)	q’ipa	pacha
	back/behind	time
	“future time”	

Linguistic relativity and cognitive linguistics

- The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis:
  The hypothesis consists of two parts.

1. Linguistic determinism
   Language determines non-linguistic thought.

2. Linguistic relativity
   Speakers of different languages will therefore think differently.

Linguistic relativity and cognitive linguistics

➢ The strong version of the hypothesis:

- Language entirely determines thought.

→ A speaker of language X will understand the world in a fundamentally different way from a speaker of language Y.

→ A speaker will only have access to cognitive categories that correspond to the linguistic categories of his or her language.

Linguistic relativity and cognitive linguistics

➢ The weak version of the hypothesis:

- The structure of a language may influence how the speaker performs certain cognitive processes.

→ Because the structure of different languages influences how information is “packaged”

Linguistic relativity and cognitive linguistics

➢ The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and Generative Grammar:

- Generative Grammar has tended to reject the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis altogether.

→ Due to its incompatibility with the hypothesis that there might exist a universal set of pre-linguistic conceptual primitives

Linguistic relativity and cognitive linguistics

- Findings in cognitive psychology, linguistic anthropology, and language acquisition

- Suggest that the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is untenable.

- Language can and does influence thought and action.

→ e.g. Language facilitates conceptualization. (Gentner and Gentner 1982)

Linguistic relativity and cognitive linguistics

➢ Cognitive Linguistics:

- It makes the case for a common conceptualizing capacity (general cross-linguistic patterns).

→ But it is consistent with and even predicts substantial cross-linguistic variation.

Linguistic relativity and cognitive linguistics

- The linguistic system both reflects the conceptualizing capacity, and in turn influences the nature of knowledge by virtue of the language-specific categories it derives.

→ Cognitive linguistics is consistent with a weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Exercises

1. How does cognitive linguistics differ from formalist approaches in terms of its approach to universals?