Lecture 1: Cognitive Linguistics
A General Introduction

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Topic 4

The usage-based perspective on language

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

➢ History of linguistics:

- Separation of the mental knowledge of language from language use

→ The generative grammar approach

Introduction

- Tomasello (2003: 5):
  "language structure emerges from language use"

→ This is the usage-based thesis.

Language in use

- Usage event:
  central concept underlying usage-based approaches to linguistics

- a usage event = an utterance

Language in use

➢ An utterance:

- It is a situated instance of language use.

→ culturally and contextually embedded

→ represents an instance of linguistic behavior on the part of a language user

Language in use

- Definitions of “utterance”:

[An utterance is] a particular, actual occurrence of the product of human behavior in communicative interaction (i.e., a string of sounds), as it is pronounced, grammatically structured, and semantically and pragmatically interpreted in its context. (Croft 2001: 26)

Language in use

- Definitions of “utterance”:

An utterance is a linguistic act in which one person expresses towards another, within a single intonation contour, a relatively coherent communicative intention in a communicative context. (Tomasello 2000: 63)

Language in use

➢ Usage event/utterance:

- It has a unit-like status.

→ It represents the expression of a coherent idea, making use of the convention of the language.

Language in use

- An utterance is a “somewhat” discrete entity.

→ Why “somewhat”?

Because the utterance is not an absolutely discrete or precisely identifiable unit.

Language in use

- Properties involved in utterances:

  grammatical forms (e.g. word order)
  semantic structures (patterns of meaning)
  speech sounds
  patterns of intonation (e.g. pitch contours)
  slight pauses
  accelerations/decelerations

Language in use

- These properties do not co-occur in fixed patterns.
- They do not provide a set of criteria for collectively identifying an utterance.

→ Utterances differ from sentences.

Language in use

➢ A sentence:
An abstract entity

- It is an idealization.

→ It has determinate properties.

→ It is often stated in terms of grammatical structure.

Language in use

➢ Sentence vs. utterance

- The notion of a sentence is based on prototypical patterns found in utterances, but is not the same as an utterance.

- Utterances do not conform to the grammaticality of a well-formed sentence.

Language in use

- An utterance may consist of:

→ a single word (*Hi!*)
→ a phrase (*No way!*)
→ an incomplete sentence (*Did you put the …?*)
→ a sentence that contains errors of pronunciation or grammar because the speaker is tired, distracted or excited, etc.

Language in use

➢ Formal linguistics:

- It has been concerned with modelling the properties of language that enable us to produce grammatically well-formed sentences.

→ But utterances often exhibit graded grammaticality.

Language in use

- A sentence can be precisely and narrowly defined.

→ An utterance cannot.

- Sentences represent the structure associated with a prototypical utterance.

- Utterances represent specific and unique instances of language use.

- Once a sentence is given meaning, context and phonetic realization, it becomes a (spoken) utterance.

Language in use

- Cognitive linguists place little emphasis on the sentence as a theoretical entity.

→ The notion of usage event or utterance is central to the cognitive perspective.

The relationship between usage and linguistic structure

➢ The generative model:

- It separates knowledge of language (competence) from use of language (performance).

→ Competence determines performance.

- Performance can be affected by language-external factors.

→ So performance often fails to adequately reflect competence.

The relationship between usage and linguistic structure

- Cognitive linguists:

- Knowledge of language is derived from and informed by language use.

The relationship between usage and linguistic structure

➢ Language acquisition in cognitive linguistics:

- It is understood from the usage-based perspective, not as the activation of an innately pre-specified system of linguistic knowledge.

→ But as the extraction of linguistic units or constructions from patterns in the usage events experienced by the child

The relationship between usage and linguistic structure

- This process relies upon general cognitive abilities.

- The set of units or constructions eventually build up the inventory that represents the speaker's language system or knowledge of language.

The relationship between usage and linguistic structure

➢ Language change in cognitive linguistics:

- Change is seen not as a function of system-internal change.

→ But as a function of interactional and social (usage-based) pressures that motivate changes in the convention of the language system

Exercises

1. In your own words, provide a definition of the usage-based thesis.