

Corpus evidence for non-modularity

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Modularity is a key concept in the debate between autonomous and non-autonomous conceptions of language (with Cognitive Linguistics clearly belonging to the latter): claims for autonomy – for the linguistic faculty as such, or for specific components of language – are often based on a strategy of compartmentalization. The existence of an autonomous grammar, for instance, translates into the assertion that syntax constitutes a separate, discrete module of linguistic knowledge.

Empirical evidence regarding modularity primarily comes from psychological research, in the form of interactions between different modes of cognition in human cognitive processing, or in the form of double dissociations between cognitive faculties. But could we also test modularity when we follow a corpus-based method of linguistic analysis? In this paper, I will explore the consequences of the ‘usage-based turn’ in cognitive linguistics for an analysis of modularity in language behavior.

Three steps will be taken. First, starting from the idea that in the case of modularity, the different modules should exert their influence in an independent way (a feature sometimes referred to as ‘encapsulation’), I will argue that convincing evidence for non-encapsulation may take the methodological form of interaction effects in regression analyses (regression analysis being the dominant confirmatory technique in quantitative corpus-based cognitive linguistics). Second, reviewing a number empirical studies using such regression techniques, I will present an overview of the types of non-modular effects that have so far been observed in the growing body of corpus-based cognitive linguistics. Third, by way of theoretical discussion, I will analyze two problems arising from the overview: the question whether encapsulation is indeed a diagnostic feature of modularity (the point is considerably debated in psychological research), and the question whether lectal factors may be legitimately included in the discussion of modularity, or whether they should rather be considered as defining different linguistic systems, each with their own (non-)modularity.