

Linguistic units as complex signs: consequences for bilingual sentence processing

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In this talk I want to outline, how an understanding of language as a repository of complex signs (constructions) can help both to explain several bilingual strategies and to advance cognitive modelling of bilingual language processing.

The approach I present rests on the tenets of construction grammar as it has been outlined in the works of Langacker (1987), Goldberg (1995) and Croft (2002), to name only a few. The basic assumption within this theoretical framework is that language on every level is organised in a way that inseparably combines surface form with meaning. While this understanding of language as symbolic is widely accepted for the lexical level, the analysis of more complex linguistic units has mostly been driven by the search for rules. The conviction that lexical rules drive sentence production also mirrors in production models which often have to assume a parallel processing of meaningful items and meaningless rules (for example Levelt 1989, Ferreira & Slevc 2009). The constructionist view holds that there are no autonomous rules but only meaningful syntactic configurations. If we discard the rules, language remains nothing other than a huge repository of stored linguistic units and generalisations over those units. These generalisations are similar to what has been called "combinatorial nodes" (Koostra et al. 2012) - with the difference that they also bear meaning. At the same time, constructions exist on various linguistic levels and are heavily interconnected. Simplex signs are nested into more complex signs like argument structure constructions and form a network of interdependence. During production, lexical and constructional units have to be united. As for bilingual language production I suggest that there are three basic possibilities to use constructions from both languages: Juxtaposition of independent constructions, insertion of less complex constructions in more complex ones and imitation of constructions.

A constructionist approach to bilingual language processing implies that the modelling of language processing is less complex than often assumed (a similar approach is the Unified Competition Model, McWhinney 2005). The general principles of activation and selection of linguistic units also hold for constructions and make a separate processing of meaning, form and position unnecessary. Moreover, the general principle that meaning is always bound to form consequently also holds cross-linguistically. I will show on several examples how this helps to explain bilingual strategies like transference/interference or loan translation which I subsume under the term (constructional) imitation.

Despite being conceptually simpler, the model proves to be descriptively more powerful. It can likewise explain the matrix language phenomenon as well as its absence. I also argue that speakers can employ different strategies on different levels of complex signs. For example, code-mixed utterances can contain both inserted and imitated constructions or can be sanctioned by two constructions simultaneously. So, accounting for grammar in terms of complex signs can help us to better understand the complex outcome of bilingual sentence processing.

References

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