PhR 2019
Philological Readings

SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION IN SYNTAX: HOW THE MIND STRUCTURES REALITY

Liudmila A. Furs (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Derzhavin Tambov State University, 33 Internatzionalnaja Street, Tambov, Russia, liudmila.furs@gmail.com

Abstract

Syntax has long been assumed to be the source of instructions for the assembly of the concepts represented by words. Under this view, the process of sentence construal is rule-dependent when the cognitive dynamics of human cognition   is not taken into account. This paper challenges this view. People are seen as actively making sense of what they describe and syntax serves a leading role in the active construal of situations. It further focuses on the mechanism of cognitive dominance which governs subjective interpretations in syntax as a response to contextual factors. This mechanism will be described with respect to such types of contextualized interpretation as subjective interpretation based on world knowledge modification; subjective interpretation based on the reconfiguration of sentence structure and associative implication. On the basis of these three case studies, I will argue that subjective interpretations arise as people actively cooperate while drawing on their individual forms of understanding.

1. Introduction

The notion of interpretation is central for an anthropocentric principle of cognitive linguistics (Kubryakova, 2008) and Boldyrev's (2014, 2015) view of knowledge as conceptually configured by interpretation - and shared interest in subjective and interpreted knowledge.

This allows knowledge to be context-based (Croft & Cruse, 2004; Langacker, 1999) but, at the same time, part of distributed cognition (Cowley, 2010) or as having a collective aspect that determines a word-world within which active construal occurs. By combining these views people become individual-collective agents who use language as a system of communication that depends on sign relations that connect form and meanings.

The process of sentence construal is based on how a human mind activates collective knowledge (semantic meaning of lexicon and sentence configurations). This is manifest in knowledge configurations that reflect active interpretations of current situations. In historical time, these come to be represented in syntax in the form of constructional schemas (see also for further details about syntactic construction schemas in Croft, 1991; Goldberg, 1995; Langacker, 2009).

Following Givon (2005), it is posited that there are three major interacting systems of mental representation: (1) semantic memory (represents encyclopedic information, which is communicatively equivalent to the generic lexicon); (2) episodic memory (represents propositional declarative information); and (3) working memory (represents current information that is available for activation by attentional and long-term memory systems)). As a result all utterances are perceived against the background of stored knowledge. While, construing a meaning links the three systems of mental representation, the working memory is central to contextualized interpretations. It alone can link the on-line situation with a speaker's communicative intentions.

From this perspective, people are seen as actively making sense of what they describe and imagine, and syntax serves a leading role in the active construal of situations. People draw on collective resources that are associated with particular languages (or varieties): far from invoking brains that map forms onto semantic representations. Interpreted knowledge is said to accumulate with syntactic experience. Using a principle of cognitive dominance, we accentuate aspects of the world perceived while also making judgements about properties of intensity and quality. Far from 'reflecting' mental states, these judgements are intrinsic to human meaning-making: syntactic interpretation is thus something that happens in response to contextual factors. While shared pattern, syntax sets off results that do not rely on common neural representations. Rather, interpretations arise as people actively cooperate while drawing on their individual forms of understanding. With such a focus, we consider specifics of subjective interpretation in syntax.

2. Problem Statement

The anthropocentric approach regards the human being as actively construing the meaning of a sentence. This dynamic process integrates knowledge and experience as meaning is created 'on the fly'. Not only are interpretations contextually construed meanings (Croft & Cruse, 2004) but, as Boldyrev (2011) points out, this makes linguistic interpretation an on-line cognitive process. It is an individual

process that is aimed at construing a situation around "subjective understanding" (Boldyrev, 2011, p. 9). Interpretations arise as people actively cooperate while drawing on their individual forms of understanding.

Crucially, construing or contextualized interpretation is subjective and provides interpreted knowledge. In so doing, this requires one to consider syntactically represented subjective interpretation as a response to contextual factors.

3.   Research Questions

For current purposes, the emphasis is placed on three main aspects of the setting. First, a sentence is a complex sign that consists in both a syntactic component (a schema) and a semantic component (a proposition).

Second, there are three types of contextualized interpretation: (1) subjective interpretation based on world knowledge modification; (2) subjective interpretation based on the reconfiguration of sentence structure; (3) associative implication.

Third, three factors govern how we construe interpreted knowledge. These are: (1) discourse; (2) semantics; and (3) syntax. Let us consider them in turn. First, the discourse factor assumes that information is directed to a listener. Second, the semantic factor implies that word semantics make meaning components into an object of appraisal. Third, the syntactic factor co-relates with constructional knowledge. It therefore follows that humans are aware of the constructional schemas needed in construing propositions.

4.   Purpose of the Study

In this paper, subjective interpretation is examined with respect to how the individual mind imposes interpretations on reality. To describe a subjective nature of on-line interpretation the mechanism of cognitive dominance (Furs, 2004) has been proposed as an explanatory construct, aiming to account for individual active construing.   The mechanism is posited to be at work whenever specific parts of an event are accentuated. When we describe a situation, we name only elements that are salient at a given moment. The mechanism of cognitive dominance uses intentions to structure a situation as a person (or parties) orient to the current speech situation. It is grounded in working memory, which represents what is available for current activation by the attentional system (Givon, 2005).

Cognitive dominance is a metacognitive strategy that enables people to construe the meaning of syntactic constructions (Furs, 2017, 2018). This is because it co-functions with human intentions and, thus, allows a person (or mind) to control knowledge interpretation. In appraisal, it has five main characteristics. It is: (a) cognitively dynamic; (b) reflexive; (c) controllable; (d) intentional; and (e) interactional. Together, these allow the mechanism of cognitive dominance to be defined as characteristic of human cognitive systems.   The mechanism ensures that any given situation can be described by focusing on various details.

5.   Research Methods

Most of the research has focused on the discourse analysis which observes the human use of a language and examines the art of appraisal. This analysis allows to reveal how the experience to be communicated is structured by the mind and is syntactically constructed. Linguistic constructions in discourse are a window on how the mind structures reality. A cognitive approach is in line with a discursive point of view. As Hart (2015) notes, Cognitive Linguistics offers a number of theories which have in common a specific set of assumptions including that linguistic (semantic and grammatical) structures are based on the same general cognitive abilities as other domains of cognition, that linguistic knowledge is conceptual in nature, that meaning is grounded in experience, and that words and constructions both construe experience. The assumption that linguistic structures correlate with conceptual structures brings forward a conceptual analysis as a research construct. Based on Langacker (1987), Taylor (2002), Croft and Cruse's (2004) the concepts are profiled against different domains, and understanding the meaning of a linguistic unit presupposes understanding the domain as a structure of human experience, which underlies subjective interpretation.

6.   Findings

The findings of the study have a few theoretical implications, including how the mind structures reality and the role of cognitive dominance mechanism in appraisal and also such types of contextualized interpretation as   subjective interpretation based on world knowledge modification; subjective interpretation based on the reconfiguration of sentence structure and associative implication. As noted earlier above, subjective interpretation in syntax is something that happens in response to contextual factors. Syntax sets off results how the mind structures reality taking into account what is cognitively dominant at the moment. Interpretations arise as people actively cooperate while drawing on their individual forms of understanding.

6.1. Interpretation on the basis of world knowledge modification

The process of using syntactic representation to relate a described situation is thus seen as depending on filtering out certain elements while focusing on other aspects of the situation (e.g. He got a little confused – the caused event is represented, whereas the causing event is not verbalized). As a result, some elements of the situation become cognitively dominant in ways that can be described in more detail. In active construal, different aspects of the situation can be focused with respect to how the speaker orients to communicative goals. It follows that the capacity to control knowledge configuration permits the range of construals that can describe a situation. Let's demonstrate it on the example of constructions with adverbs with a grading function.

Adverbs with a grading function collocate with different parts of speech in ways that represent the human capacity for comparing, judging, evaluating and appraising. A person can measure the intensity of any object property or the degree of an event's perfection. While objective criteria (e.g. a scientific scale for measuring temperature) shape some appraisals, the domain of quantity is often activated. This exemplifies numerical assessment or, looking at an object in absolute terms (e.g. 2 degrees, 2 feet or 2

pounds). Likewise, objects can be viewed on a schema of a relative scale by assessing the quality or worth of objects or events in terms of an indefinite quantity: this shows the graduality principle (Furs, 2007, 2011; Furs & Nazarova, 2008). In examining subjective appraisal criteria, we can apply this principle along with the mechanism of cognitive dominance to account for active construals. Since there are stages in action, there are also variations by degrees in property intensity and of quality or worth ascribed to objects/situations. It therefore follows that, in such cases, one relies on taking into account one's own knowledge and a capacity for contextual adjustment that applies during communication.

The graduality principle governs evaluation, appraisal and the formation of interpreted knowledge. Dealing with quality assessment may increase or decrease the importance adjudicated to apply (based on subjective criteria): a speaker can manipulate norms and standards. While moral criteria are relatively stable, this is less applicable in other spheres. Indeed, it is hard to define standards of human experience. In illustration, consider the following examples:

(a) He is completely experienced;

(b) He is highly experienced;

(c) He is experienced enough;

(d) He is quite experienced.

With regard to gradable property construal, the principle of graduality is primary because, without it, there would be no such appraisals. The mechanism of cognitive dominance thus defines the degree of experience measured as well as contextual adjustments arising in social interaction and communication. Let us therefore now apply the mechanism of cognitive dominance to appraisals:

(1) We totally achieved our goals.

(2) It must be entirely strange.

The adverbial semantic structure of (1) refers to a concept PATH that implies a source, a way, and a goal. Since motion towards the goal is gradable, any change in motion can become the object of appraisal. Although attention can be focused on any stage of the action, the final stage, all things being equal, usually "stands out" as a successful completion of human action. The adverb "totally" (to the highest degree) represents the pre-eminence of logical outcomes. By contrast, the adjectival semantic structure of (2) invokes the concept CONTAINER while deeming the relevant object/situation "strange" or "out of the ordinary". In so doing, this too reflects on variation by degrees with regard to property intensity.

6.2. Interpretation on the basis of sentence structure reconfiguration

Another type of subjective (contextualized) interpretation is based on reconfiguration of a sentence structure: (a) He danced the first waltz with his mother; (b) He danced her to the door. Different aspects of the situation become dominant. Whereas (a) accentuates the Agent, Patient and Comitative or represents action construal, (b) makes cause construal dominant. In describing the situation in different ways, the speaker specifies relationships between its participants: he or she uses syntactic constructions that represent how the human mind structures reality.

The rigid word order of English sentences contributes to the reconfiguration of sentence structure. Apart from the conventional order "subject – predicate – direct object – indirect object – adverbial

modifiers", there is another way of construing the information. Inverting word order can impact on sentence meaning and show perspectival adjustment. This cognitive operation is a significant basis for reconfiguring sentence structure to represent active construal. Consequently, any change in the sentence schema is a reconfiguration that shows a change in the speaker's communicative focus. In this case a transformation to a conventional configuration also leads to loss of expressive meaning:

(1) And there, dim in the darkness, was the hummock of Mrs. Winslow's shoulder (H.G.Wells).

(2) The hummock of Mrs. Winslow's shoulder was dim there in the darkness.

Inversion of the adverb "there" and the construction "dim in the darkness" show that these aspects matter to a speaker. In the transformation process, these elements lose cognitive dominance. Inverted constructions are also used with verbs of being, movement, emergence, localization. These go hand in hand with the inversion of adverbial modifiers of place (see locative inversion in: Michaelis, 2003).

The use of intensifiers integrates the inversion of auxiliary verbs:

Only once had old Piers slipped (Wilson, 1998, p. 258).

Only on the stairs did she identify that face (Galsworthy, 1975, p. 113).

Adjectival predicative inversion also occurs:

Very green and neat and precise was that yard (Montgomery, 1987, p. 4).

Syntactic reconfiguration allows to make a subjective appraisal that conveys interpreted knowledge.

6.3. Associative implication

Associative implication is linked with implicit communicative intentions, when an active listener will interpret more about the situation than was explicitly said. Relating the situation with the background knowledge, humans can understand the subjective interpretations based on associative implication. One of the means to syntactically represent associative implications is a copulative construction. It has been claimed that a copulative construction can represent various implications. This is typically shown by a metaphoric use of words. In metaphor the link between two senses of a word is based on similarity between two elements or situations belonging to different domains (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Thus we can associate animals' behaviour (the source domain) with a human one (the target domain) and specify some characteristic features (the example in (1)), or the domain "artifact" can correspond to the domain "human being" (the example in (2)) and the example in (3) introduces a mapping relation between domains "incurable disease" and "human being". These associations are evaluative in character, as it is shown below:

(1) She is a cute chick (Parker, 1998).

(2) She is the engine (Parker, 1998).

(3) The man is a cancer (Parker, 1998).

A partitive construction can also function as a means of representing an associative implication.

A "part-whole" relation is a kind of semantic relation that holds between a part and a whole. The process of part-whole relation construing can be based on different cognitive models, one of them is a metaphorical model. With abstract nouns the use of metaphorical models allows to express the subjective interpretation of different phenomena.

Let's consider the utterance: "Who are the secret investors who already own a good slice of our newest casino?" (Marsden, 2000).

The construing of part-whole relation is based on the metaphorical model: slice → part. The use of evaluative adjective "good" indicates the subjective view of the situation. In the constructions "a pinch of respect", "a pinch of creativity", "a large pinch of skepticism", "a spoonful of nostalgie" the lexemes "pinch", "spoonful" represent the concept CONTAINER. This allows to project the domain of substance onto the domain of emotional state, indicating the event subjective interpretation.

In the utterances "I'm just a hunk of love/ a slice of joy"; "He enjoys a slice of luck/ a lump of fear" the abstract nouns love, joy, luck, fear represent emotions, which are understood in terms of material substance that can be divided into parts, represented by lexemes "hunk", "slice" and "lump".

As Croft and Cruse (2004) say, "a speaker uses an expression figuratively when he/she feels that no literal use will produce the same effect" (p. 193). This explains why emotions are often interpreted as "a living being":

Fear pulsed through him (Osborne, 1992);

Anger pulsed in his chest (Wilson, 1998).

When emotions become very intense and spread quickly, they are interpreted as natural phenomena, which are impossible to control:

A wave of fear washed through her body (Osborne, 1992);

A wave of heat swept over his body (Parker, 1998);

A wave of agony swept through her (Wilson, 1998);

A delicious warmth crept over her (Wilson, 1998);

Relief flooded through him so strongly (Parker, 1998).

Metaphorical interpretations express subjective understanding and are fully based on associative implications.

The utterance "Well, Mr. Punctuality" (Parker, 1998) demonstrates a transfer of an abstract noun "punctuality" to a class of proper names. The syntactic pattern sounds complimentary. Subjective interpretation is achieved via the change in the grammatical status of the noun.

7. Conclusion

The cognitive dynamics of human cognition can be examined with respect to how subjective interpretation is represented in syntax. It has been argued that such an interpretation happens in response to three types of contextual factors: (1) as a result of subjective interpretation on the basis of world knowledge modification; (2) as a result of subjective interpretation on the basis of sentence structure reconfiguration; (3) as a result of associative implication. According to the first factor, one relies on taking into account one's own knowledge and a capacity for contextual adjustment that applies during communication. In the second case, reconfiguration of a sentence structure reveals the effect of losing a cognitive dominance for some contextual elements and bringing the other elements into a focus of attention. Finally, associative implication is linked with implicit communicative intentions, when an active listener will interpret more about the situation than was explicitly said.

The study reveals interpretations that arise as people actively cooperate while drawing on their individual forms of understanding. With such a focus, we have considered specifics of subjective interpretation in syntax. The findings of the study have also included how the mind structures reality and the role of cognitive dominance mechanism in appraisal.

While the process of construing interpreted knowledge can be traced to discourse semantics and syntax, the current paper has focused on the link between syntax, context and constructional knowledge. Discourse syntax and discourse semantics can function to actively construe situations; they drive subjective interpretations, modify knowledge/understanding of self/other and change appraisals of the world. On the whole, this reveals an anthropocentric principle of cognitive linguistics, proposed by Kubryakova (2008), Boldyrev's (2011) view of knowledge as conceptually configured by interpretation and Cowley's (2010) idea of distributed cognition. The dynamic manifestation of language draws on using various constructions which form the potential of subjective interpretation.

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