

The socio-cognitive individual: Exemplars, identity, and speech production

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Most analyses within the cognitive linguistics framework assume a process-neutral grammar, that is, one in which a single grammar covers both comprehension and production. This assumption can be seen, for instance, in the use of frequency data from corpora (based on multiple speakers) to reveal the degree of entrenchment of linguistic expressions. And in general, reference to a single undifferentiated notion of entrenchment is quite common within cognitive linguistics analyses.

We show, based on four spoken language corpora representing four different spoken situations: informal speech, counselling sessions, education committee meetings and White House press conferences, that there is evidence of stable individual differences in the output of speakers and these differences are based not on peripheral idiosyncracies but hold for core constructions in the grammar.

The corpus data shows that the production patterns for speakers are maintained over a period of months or years and differ from the patterns of input or comprehension. Thus it is not feasible to refer to a simple grammatical model of comprehension/production in which production is seen as a reflection of (or a simple subset of) comprehension. Nor is it realistic within a usage-based grammar to refer to a single notion of entrenchment or spreading activation.

After briefly summarising the data on individual differences in production, we explore an explanation based on exemplar theory (Pierrehumbert 2001, Bybee 2006, Walsh et al 2010). In particular, we take as a starting point the position of Hay & Bresnan (2006) who discuss phonetic and syntactic exemplar theories and link exemplars to contextual information:

“individual exemplars are not only phonetically rich, but are also indexed with a variety of social information (the identity of the individual, their gender, regional origin, approximate age, what they are wearing, their hairstyle ..., anything that could be perceived as sociolinguistically or sociologically relevant)”

We extend this notion and propose a saliency index in an attempt to capture some of the contextual information related to the output of the spokesperson below. One particularly aspect of the index is the tracking of the speaker's own speech – presumably salient – and distinct from the speech of others. In sum, we explore the linking of exemplars and a saliency index in order to provide a usage-based account of how differences in production and comprehension are instigated and maintained.

References

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