

The verbalization of experience: An old/new theme for cognitive-functional linguistics

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The idea of the *verbalization of experience* was first articulated in a set of papers by Wallace Chafe beginning in the late 1970's, which would soon blossom into a research agenda involving a short film about a man who picks some pears and a boy who steals them. The paper titles are evocative of a new kind of inquiry, grounded in aspects of human cognition as much as in the use of language: "The recall and verbalization of past experience" (1977b), "Creativity in verbalization and its implications for the nature of stored knowledge" (1977a), "The deployment of consciousness in the production of a narrative" (1980). Chafe dared to ask about the process that leads from the cognitive to the linguistic, from the nonpropositional to the propositional: "verbalization ... is meant to include all those processes by which nonverbal information is turned into words" (Chafe 1977b). The essence of Chafe's idea is that verbalization is a process, and not necessarily an easy one: the move from wordless experience to grammatically organized utterance is fraught with challenges for the speaker. In a methodological innovation, Chafe planned, scripted, and produced the Pear Film, which would become famous as a tool used worldwide for establishing a kind of proxy for the controlled elicitation of wordless experience, which could then be verbalized in the telling of the film's story.

The verbalization of experience was an idea that captured the imagination of a number of contemporary researchers, engendering a flurry of research projects and publications over the following decades. In some ways the verbalization of experience was an idea ahead of its time; yet now this "sleeper" of an idea seems poised to reawaken, and to awaken the interests of a new generation of linguists. One of the goals of this theme session is to fulfill the promise of the verbalization of experience for cognitive-functional linguistics, as we seek to push the envelope forward, exploring creative applications to new problems. We propose that the field of cognitive-functional linguistics has much to gain from exploring the implications of this idea in combination with the current repertoire of conceptual tools, some of which were unavailable to Chafe when he first introduced his idea. On a theoretical level, we explore the potential for a synthesis of verbalization research with ideas such as construal, coherence, event structure, linking, binding, blending, categorization, figurative language and more, in order to shed new light on the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in the verbalization of experience.

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