

Culturally motivated animal metaphors in an expressive construction

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This talk presents an analysis of the pattern *a N₁ of a N₂*, which exhibits an interesting case of constructional homonymy. On the one hand, there is the more frequent “unmarked” construction exemplified by noun phrases such as *a copy of a magazine*; on the other hand, one finds the less frequent “marked” construction instantiated by *a nailbiter of a campaign* (CNN anchor commenting on the Obama-Romney race, October 24, 2012) – termed ‘expressive’ in this presentation. The two homonymous constructions exhibit the same surface syntax, but they differ considerably in conceptual content, pragmatic function, and expressivity. The goal of this presentation is to make the case that the expressive construction is at least partially motivated by cultural factors, pointing to the necessity of integrating cultural models into the description and explanation of lexicogrammar.

The expressive *a N₁ of a N₂* construction in English and similar constructions in other Germanic and Romance languages have been analyzed insightfully by Ad Foolen (2004). The focus in the present study is on a subclass of the expressive *a N₁ of a N₂* construction in which the syntactic head position *N₁* is filled by an animal term, as e.g. in *a bear of a man*, *a lamb of a husband*, *a rat of a boyfriend*, and *a mouse of a woman*. The data discussed are taken from the two corpora COCA and WebCorp. Going beyond Foolen, this study elaborates and refines the syntactic and conceptual-pragmatic features of the homonymous constructions. To this end, the expressive *a N_{ANIMAL} of a N* construction and the unmarked *a N₁ of a N₂* construction are contrasted in terms of the following parameters:

- i. notions of syntactic head, conceptual head, and expressive head;
- ii. entailment;
- iii. referential properties of the indefinite noun phrases;
- iv. capacity of the indefinite noun phrases to function as antecedents to anaphors;
- v. topicality;
- vi. figure-ground organization.

In conclusion, it is argued that a proper understanding of the semantics of the expressive *a N_{ANIMAL} of a N* construction requires richly structured animal folk models; in particular, it is shown how animal models shape the metaphorical conceptualization of human character and behavioral traits, and are reflected in syntactic structure. In a broader context, the work presented here is part of a project to investigate the influence of culture on lexicogrammar.

Keywords: *animal folk models, conceptual metaphor, constructional homonymy, culture-grammar interaction, expressive syntax*

Reference

Foolen, Ad. 2004. Expressive binomial NPs in Germanic and Romance languages. In: Günter Radden & Klaus-Uwe Panther, eds. *Studies in Linguistic Motivation* [Cognitive Linguistics Research 28], 75–100. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.