

The semantic diversity of inferentials in some endangered languages of North and South America

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Inferentiality encompasses different types of inference as the source of information. In this presentation, I will discuss the meanings of inferential forms in some endangered languages of North and South America, such as Maricopa (Gordon 1986), Hupda (Epps 2008) and Tariana (Aikhenvald 2003). I will also consider the question of how the encoding patterns of inferentiality in these languages could be motivated. The presentation is based on my typological study of inferentiality and epistemic modality, involving hundreds of grammatical expressions which are gathered from descriptive material of 130 languages of the world. From the typological perspective, the languages included in this presentation exhibit unusual and intriguing encoding patterns in the domain of inferentiality in addition to the usual ones. This kind of diversity provides fertile ground for considering language-independent factors of motivation. My discussion focuses on the mental models theory (e.g. Johnson-Laird 2006) and some construal operations, used in cognitive linguistics (e.g. Verhagen 2007) for different possibilities of viewing various kinds of phenomena. The mental models theory is a psychological theory of reasoning, and the construal operations are arguably special cases of general cognitive processes and capacities independently posited by psychologists.

In my typological study, I distinguish 33 functions as comparative concepts (cf. Haspelmath 2010) which capture the relevant semantic similarity of language-specific meanings. The inferential functions may be purely inferential, essentially distinguished on the basis of grounds for inference. They may also be combinations of inferential properties and epistemic degrees of certainty. For instance, 'inference from results' corresponds to commonly occurring language-specific meanings which indicate that the speaker infers some prior event on the basis of the present visible or tangible evidence. Arguably, it also matches with unusual fine-grained semantic distinctions of some Maricopa inferential constructions, such as inference of prior events that is based either on the subject's state, or the subject's actions, or the way the subject sounds. Inferential forms of individual languages may also be polysemous: they may cover more than one of the functions.

I will argue that the illustrated semantic distinctions as well as different kinds of polysemy patterns are in conformity with the assumptions of the theory of mental models. According to this theory, inferences can be based on one type of ground or on several grounds at the same time. It is quite natural that meanings indicating different kinds of ground for inference may be differentiated in linguistic inferential forms. Since reasoning starts sometimes with one kind of ground and sometimes with some mixture of grounds, it is also not surprising that these related types of inference may be conveyed by the same linguistic inferential form. In addition, I will argue that especially two types of construal operations are important in accounting for diverse encoding possibilities in the domain of inferentiality. Granularity accounts for the difference between fine-grained and more coarse-grained inferential distinctions, and focusing involves, for example, the selection of inferential properties for linguistic presentation. Both granularity and focusing are matters of attention and salience.

References

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