Subjective/Objective Construal and Individual Preferences

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In this study we examine how language and gesture are used to indicate stance within the complex dynamics of White House Press Conferences, paying particular attention to individual preferences concerning a more subjective or more objective construal (Langacker 2008, 72) of the communicative setting. Although each White House press secretary takes up multiple positions within the discourse space of the press conference, there are options in the construal of the dynamics of the press conferences. In this situation we take the most subjective viewpoint to be one where the press secretary is fully involved in a personal dialogue with the members of the media. In contrast, taking a more objective viewpoint means that the press secretary tends to see their role as one of reporting or facilitating a conversation between the President and the media (or the wider public.)

We investigate the extent to which individual press secretaries have a preference for a more subjective or more objective conceptualization of the conduct of the press conferences. We look at specific interactions, but the main focus is on overall patterns that indicate stable individual preferences for a more subjective or more objective style. We use large speech samples (600,000 to 1,200.000 words) for each of the five press secretaries investigated. We also look for interactions in around 15000 adjacency pairs involving each press secretaries' response to questions. In addition, we observe videos of the press conferences to search for multimodal constructions and locate instances of the use of gesture to indicate stance.

For this study, we calculate the relative frequency of use over several months of linguistic items such as personal names and lexical phrases (*I am, I think, we are*, *the president,* etc.) to assess the preferred position or viewpoint of the different press secretaries. Here, we can give an illustrative example related to the intermediary dimension. For each set of press conferences, we calculate the frequency (per 1000 words) of *the President* in questions asked by the media (in each set of press conferences) and compare that with the use by the different press secretaries. As expected, the use among the media is fairly constant (10.3, 9.7, 9.0, 9.8, 10.8) and the usage by the press secretaries is much more variable (15.3, 6.7, 7.9, 9.8, 8.0). Thus, it turns out that Ari Fleischer (15.3) has a strong preference for referencing 'the President' and he also has by far the lowest use of personal names in responses to questions, amongst all the press secretaries. We take this to be indicative of an objective perspective in that while Fleischer is obviously interacting with representatives of the media, the conceptualisation tends towards a more abstract communication between the President and the wider public.

We find from the data that Robert Gibbs has a strong tendency to use *I am*, which is one indication of a strong subjective perspective. We also see evidence of a multimodal construction based on *I think* and a deictic gesture. In the presentation we elaborate on these individual differences in the use of language and gesture by the five press secretaries. The results show not only the normal shifts in construal in usage events, but also the existence of stable individual preferences.

References

Langacker, R.W. (2008). *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.