Basics of a Theory of the Expression of Thought in Language

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In this research, I present the basics of a theory of the cognitive process of how language users construct linguistic expressions from language-independent thought. The expression produced by this process can be externalized in speech or text, but it does not have to—it can, for example, be used in thinking in an 'inner voice'.

Every expression will have a particular *fine structure* of its meaning and a particular *compartmentalization*. The fine structure is the mechanistic-level structuring of meaning, and is particularly important because the meaning of the expression will be nearly (but not exactly) identical to the original thought. In language, there is a wide variety of ways to generate approximately-equal meanings from different fine structures (which can be found both in paraphrase in a single language and in translations between languages). 'Compartmentalization' refers to how the information contained in an expression is cut up and organized. Different expressions that have approximately-equal meaning can have significantly different compartmentalizations—see, e.g., verb-framed and satellite-framed expressions (Talmy 2000).

The fine structure and compartmentalization of a linguistic expression are properties of the expression itself, and, in general, not of the original thought. Expressing a thought in language involves *approximating* it. Language is generative; expressions are constructed creatively, and this requires a thought that mirrors the fine structure of the expression. The central problem is then how to transfer a language-independent form of thought to a language-dependent one. There must be an intermediate stage—the *middle thought*—where the thought is manipulated so it can be compatible with the available fine structure of the target language.

This process is recursive in two aspects. The first arises from interdependencies in different parts of an expression. For example, let us suppose that (1a) and (1b) are the best possible approximations of their respective bits of thought in the target language. Direct constructional integration (c.f. Langacker 2003) of (1a) and (1b) is not possible (1c), so the thought must be adjusted to a different form that allows integration and produces an approximately-equal meaning, like (1d).

(1) a. my friends and I
b. (X)'s time
c. *my friends and I's time
d. my friends' time and mine

The other is that the middle thought and final expression are recursively determined by each other: the idea is to find a middle thought that fits an expression that fits the middle thought. This entails simultaneous manipulation of thought and elements of its expression in language. The process involves a particular kind of *abduction* as its crucial mechanism, which I will explain in detail.

References

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