

Cognitive perspectives on Linguistic Creativity

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Creativity is an important evolutionary adaptation that allows humans to think original thoughts, to find solutions to problems that have never been encountered before and, potentially, to fundamentally change the way we live. This theme session focusses on one particular domain of human creativity – language. Languages are complex symbolic systems that allow speakers to produce novel utterances that they have never heard before. In fact, linguistic creativity is considered one of the design features (Hockett 1960) of human language, or as Chomsky (1965: 6) put it, ‘an essential property of language’. Now, for Chomsky, linguistic creativity is the result of abstract universal syntactic principles and parameters. Over the last 30 years, however, a large body of scientific evidence from L1 acquisition (cf. Diessel 2013), L2 acquisition (cf. Ellis 2013), psycho- as well as neurolinguistics (cf. Bencini 2013 and Pulvermüller, Cappelle & Shtyrov 2013) has accumulated against models of language that assume a strict dichotomy of meaningful words and purely syntactic rules/principles. Instead, the empirical evidence supports holistic and cognitively plausible approaches such as Construction Grammar (Croft 2001; Goldberg 2006; Hoffmann and Trousdale 2013; Hoffmann 2017a,b).

However, while usage-based studies in cognitive linguistics have achieved considerable success in describing and explaining everyday language use, so far little attention has been paid to linguistic creativity. Goldberg (2006: 22), e.g., claims that ‘[c]onstructional approaches share with mainstream generative grammar the goal of accounting for the creative potential of language’ and that ‘[a]llowing constructions to combine freely as long as there are no conflicts, allows for the infinitely creative potential of language’. Yet, when looking at literary examples of linguistic creativity, it becomes clear that this definition is problematic: in the final scene of *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray’s character says *Today is tomorrow*, which should lead to conflict due to the different temporal semantics of subject and complement – yet, if you know the context of the movie, it turns out to be a perfectly natural thing to say.

In this theme session we will look at linguistic creativity from a cognitive point of view. Our topics will range from definitional or theoretical problems to empirical studies of creative language use in everyday utterances and in literary discourse, and from particular linguistic frameworks, such as construction grammar, to interdisciplinary perspectives incorporating findings from psychology, cognitive science, and philosophy.

Selected References

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