Finding a new place for pragmatics in CL through minority languages

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The so called 'social turn' in Cognitive Linguistics (cf. Harder, 2010; Sinha, 2015) challenges several core assumptions of classic Cognitive Grammar, not least of which the tenet that 'any strict line of demarcation [between semantics and pragmatics] is arbitrary' (Langacker, 2009: 93). For example, in order to understand what meaning properties are socially shared, Sinha (2015) argues that it is necessary to revalue conventional meaning (semantics) as a separate level of analysis, distinct from interpretation (pragmatics), a view recently also voiced in cognitive constructionist approaches to modality (Cappelle and Depraetere, 2016).

Determining the boundaries of conventional meaning in large written languages like English is particularly complicated by the fact that judgements about 'correctness' and the distinction between meaning and use are clouded by long histories of prescriptive grammar, and entrenched conceptualisations of written (more normative) versus spoken (less normative) versions of the respective language. This is where the study of minority languages and newly described languages can play a significant role.

In this paper I examine Australian Aboriginal views on the meaning-use distinction as a pathway towards disentangling semantics and pragmatics and finding a new place for the distinction in Cognitive Linguistics. Specifically, I examine the relevance of semantic convention vs. pragmatic use in two phenomena that are commonly taken to defy classification as either semantic or pragmatic, reported speech and genre/avoidance speech styles (Laughren, 2001; Fleming, 2015). Based on newly collected fieldwork data from three Worrorran languages (Non-Pama-Nyungan; Kimblerley region) I demonstrate that Aboriginal conceptualisations of reported speech and genre give evidence for the relevance of a socially based interpretation of convention in Aboriginal speech communities that is compatible with cognitive views of language.

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