



Discourse Grammar, focus of attention, and formulaic language

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One of the frameworks suggesting a dualistic organisation of grammar is that of Discourse Grammar (e.g. Kaltenböck et al. 2011, Heine et al. 2013), which distinguishes between two organizing principles or grammatical domains: Sentence Grammar, which is essentially restricted to the structure of sentences in a propositional format, and Thetical Grammar, which concerns the linguistic discourse beyond the sentence and whose functions relate to the situation of discourse, mainly to the organization of texts, speaker hearer interaction, and attitudes of the speaker. This basic distinction has been argued to correlate with findings in neural processing, more specifically with hemispheric lateralization in the human brain, such that the speech phenomena characteristic of Thetical Grammar correspond to a large extent with brain activity in the right hemisphere (e.g. Heine et al. 2014).

This paper further explores hemispheric correlation with the two domains of Discourse Grammar. The main focus will be on McGilchrist's (2009) account in terms of two different types of attention, i.e. two different ways in which we attend to the world: More specifically, the left hemisphere is associated with narrow, focussed attention, which sees things abstracted from context and broken into parts from which it reconstructs a 'whole'. The right hemisphere, by contrast, is seen as underwriting broad, flexible, vigilant attention, which sees things whole and in their context and helps us form bonds with others. On this view, then, the brain is a system of opponent processors whose incompatibility allows, in a dialectic sense, for something new to emerge. It will be argued that such a division of labour is also found in grammar and reflected by the two domains of Discourse Grammar. It is also highly compatible with the usage-based view of grammar as a complex adaptive system.

A central claim in the discussion of hemispheric specialisation is the close association of the right hemisphere (and hence Thetical Grammar) with formulaic language. Formulaicity is, in fact, the fundamental parameter in the dual process model (e.g. Van Lancker Sidtis 2009), which argues that novel speech is represented in the left hemisphere while formulaic speech is facilitated by a subcortical right hemisphere circuit. However, not all formulaic language can be accounted for in this way. Speakers with right-hemisphere damage still show a substantial proportion of formulaic expressions (e.g. Van Lancker Sidtis & Postman 2006), albeit considerably less than with left-hemisphere damage. The paper therefore argues against a simple equation of 'formulaic' with right-hemisphere and 'novel' with left-hemisphere. Instead, it suggests that formulaic expressions fall into essentially two different categories according to their function in discourse: those that operate within the clausal scope of Sentence Grammar (left-hemisphere dominated) and those that are anchored in the immediate situation of discourse, as accounted for by Thetical Grammar (right-hemisphere dominated). These two functional types can be related to previous distinctions made for formulaic language (e.g. Wray 2002, Hudson 1998) and arguably involve different processes in their creation.

References

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