Modeling Figurative Action in Embodied Speech Acts

Klaus-Uwe Panther[1] & Linda L. Thornburg[2]
[1]University of Hamburg & [2] Independent Researcher

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As Cognitive Linguists, our approach to analyzing grammar, and language in general, is based on conceptual and functional principles, taking language to be best studied and described with reference to its cognitive, experiential, and social contexts, as well as the pragmatic background of language-in-use (speech act theory). Moreover, we maintain that folk models, i.e. cultural models/cognitive schemas intersubjectively shared by a social group, impact grammatical structures and usages and, in themselves, constitute a basis for associative and analogical reasoning; i.e., they give rise to conceptual metonymies and metaphors.

Using data from COCA (and other online sources) we present in this talk a detailed qualitative analysis of verbal expressions in English that figuratively involve bodily activity – movement – but, interestingly, can be used to code speech acts; more narrowly, illocutionary acts in the sense of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). For example, *commissive speech acts* can be performed by means of sentence patterns such as (1a,b), and *declarations* via structures like those given in (2a,b):

(1)   a. I **give** you my promise that p
      b. You **have** my word that p

(2)   a. I hereby **open** the conference on cognitive linguistics.
      b. I **withdraw** my petition.

In examples (1a,b), the illocutionary act of *promising* is performed via utterances denoting *acts of transfer*, as in (1a), resulting in "bodily" *possession*, as in (1b). The OBJECT that is moved can be a message, an idea, or an illocutionary act whose propositional content *p* can be coded as e.g. a finite or non-finite complement clause, or as a nominalized construction. Such "embodied performatives" rely on (i) a folk model of verbal interaction we term the Transfer Model of Communication (TMC) and (ii) the reasoning tools of conceptual metaphor and metonymy.

Furthermore, we show that a variety of illocutionary acts known as *declarations* in speech act theory (Searle 1976), exemplified in (2a,b), may be enacted figuratively by means of verbs of bodily movement. These and similar verbs, such as *step down* 'resign', *motion* 'propose', *put forward* 'submit', again testify to the important functions of not only embodiment and enaction in natural language to convey communicative concepts, but also to the centrality of knowledge structures – e.g. action and speech act scenarios, folk models, cognitive schemas, etc. derived from and embedded in social and cultural contexts – that provide the input for the extended inferential mechanisms of conceptual metaphors and metonymies.

We conclude by asking: Which speech act types are realizable in English via explicit embodied performatives? That is, can the TMC be implemented to perform e.g. representative/assertive speech acts? Patterns like [?]*I give you my assertion* and [?]*You have my assertion* seem unacceptable in ordinary English. Likewise, we ask whether there exist restrictions on the use of verbs of bodily movement to perform declarations. Our study of embodied speech acts in English paves the way for comparisons with other languages w.r.t. their language-specific cultural models of enaction and embodiment, and the extent to which conceptual metaphors and metonymies facilitate reasoning to target meanings.

References

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