

Conceptualization as semiotic modeling

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This paper proposes the adoption of the notion of modeling from semiotic systems theory (Sebeok, Danesi 2001) in the scope of cognitive linguistics. In this specific semiotic vein, modeling is understood, broadly, as the interpretative process of constructing meaningful worlds by the channeling of capacities to interpret towards the representation of some referent. Construing all conceptualization as modeling allows for a differentiation of conceptualization types according to the specific types of signs employed, from simple images to symbols, propositions and complex arguments.

The three levels of modeling systems that Sebeok and Danesi (2001) identified from a semiotic perspective are discussed in relation to cognitive models (Lakoff 1999), as identified in cognitive linguistics. This follows Geeraerts' (2016) argument that in cognitive linguistic scholarship the cognitive commitment should be complemented by a sociosemiotic commitment. This means that while the concept of *language* must be in accord with a state-of-the-art understanding of *mind* and *the brain*, it must also be acknowledged as intersubjective, socially variable and transcending the individual. Even though, at a close look, the latter is observed to stem from the former, more work can be done to bridge the enduring gap in the humanities between cultural and cognitive approaches. To this end, semiotic systems theory is employed to discuss cognition as unfolding through three types of modeling systems, roughly identified as nonverbal, linguistic and supralinguistic. On this account, all linguistic modeling is deemed to rely on nonverbal capacities to organize meaning. As such, complexity of meaning is not seen to parallel complexity of cognition. Complex interpretations (e.g., propositions, arguments) may not require strenuous cognitive efforts, as well as *vice versa*. In inspiration of Stjernfelt (2014), I argue that this leads to a view on modeling as the cognitive work to decompose complex into simple signs, which can then be recomposed into new structures of meaning. This perspective contributes to the effort in cognitive linguistics to undermine classical humanistic assumptions about the centrality of language for thought while maintaining, in contradiction to mainstream views in cognitive linguistics, that propositions are basic structures for conceptualization. The key lies in understanding propositionality as multimodal, not as (necessarily) linguistic structure.

I conclude by explaining how this perspective opens interdisciplinary dialogue possibilities for cognitive linguistics with recent developments in social semiotics, cognitive semiotics and enactivism (Paolucci 2021).

References

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