

Lexical and constructional density in parentheticals: cognitive aspects and metadiscursive functions

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Parentheticals are elements, phrases or clauses that deviate from the discursive line to introduce some kind of information, commentary, evaluative judgement, or data of various kinds (Dehé and Kavalova 2007, Fuentes Rodríguez 2018, Müller 2020). Prototypically, they exhibit a disruptive character, both in spoken and written discourse, which can go so far as to dismantle a well-established grammatical construction. Although there is a relatively extensive tradition of research on parentheticals in various languages which, among its focuses of interest, contemplates the analysis of the discourse functions associated with different types of constructions (cf. Dehé and Whichman 2010), certain marks of function recognition remain unexplored. From a linguistic-cognitive (Cognitive Grammar and Construction Grammar) and pragmatic approach (metadiscourse studies), this paper proposes the measurement of the lexical and constructional density of the parenthetical as a relevant key to the recognition of metadiscursive functions in argumentative discourse. Lexical density is calculated by dividing the number of lexical items contained in the parenthetical by the total number of orthographic words in the parenthetical (cf. Johansson 2008). Constructional density is defined by the number and structural complexity of the constructions contained in the parenthetical. The focus of the investigation is only on parentheticals enclosed in dashes or parentheses. It is considered that the fact of establishing a separation space larger than that established by commas and, therefore, clearly identifiable, would represent a call for attention to the probable cognitive relevance of the semantic-pragmatic content of the parenthetical. As a first hypothesis, it is argued that there is a link between the degree of lexical density of the parenthetical (high, medium, or low, according to a quantitative scale established on the basis of the data obtained) and the specific type of metadiscursive function it performs. The need, from a theoretical and analytical point of view, to complement the analysis of lexical density with the measurement of constructional density, leads to the proposal of a second hypothesis: there is a directly proportional relationship between both types of densities; in direct correlation, in turn, with the metadiscursive functions identified. The analysis is carried out on a corpus of data (one hundred cases), extracted from essays by renowned latinamerican writers (Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Beatriz Sarlo, among others). The results allow us to confirm both hypotheses and to establish a semantic-functional differentiation within each of the categories of metadiscursive functions.

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