

The principle of no synonymy in language change: The facts and the fiction

Lauren Fonteyn, University of Manchester

lauren.fonteyn@manchester.ac.uk

In Cognitive approaches to the study of grammar, the language system is often conceived of as comprising a (connected) set of symbolic assemblies (Langacker 1987), i.e. (conventionalized) pairings of form and meaning or function. In the simplest terms, this means that linguistic items such as *cat* consist of a formal component (i.e. the sound sequence /kæt/) and a semantic pole (i.e. [CAT], feline animal). In a Saussurean conception of such symbols, the ideal situation would be one in which there is a “one-to-one” or “isomorphic” relation between form and function, meaning that homonymy and synonymy are potentially problematic (Haiman 1980, McMahon 1994:85). This conception of linguistic items as symbolic assemblies was subsequently expanded beyond individual words to multi-word units and even to grammatical patterns under the belief that ‘grammar is meaningful, [and] the elements of grammar—like vocabulary items—have meanings in their own right’ (Langacker 2008:3).

With the rise of Construction Grammar (CxG; e.g. Croft 2011, Goldberg 1995), there has been a renewed interest in the relation between the form and meaning/function of grammar. In particular, CxG has revived the idea that such form-meaning relations adhere to Bolinger’s (1968) famous “principle of no synonymy”, stating that a difference in syntactic form always spells a difference in meaning (see also: “Principle of Contrast”, cf. Croft 2011). As a result, a great many studies in the last two decades have scrutinized alternation pairs of seemingly synonymous constructions and grammatical structures in order to reveal the ‘difference in meaning’ they spell out, and how these meaning differences emerge diachronically (e.g. the dative alternation and genitive alternation; Langacker 1991, Goldberg 1995, Wolk et al. 2013, Geleyn 2017).

In this talk, I will review the concept of isomorphism as an explanatory principle of language structure and language change, and critically assess its status as a principle used to form research hypotheses. In particular, I will draw attention to a range of recent studies starting to reveal that, in fact, the ideal isomorphic organization of language is constantly violated. Moreover, diachronically, we often find that (i) superficial (i.e. etymologically unwarranted) similarity in form may affect the formal realization of neighbouring constructions (‘constructional contamination’, Pijpops & Van de Velde 2016), and may lead to diachronic merger of distinct lineages creating homonymy or polysemy (Van de Velde & van der Horst 2013, Van de Velde et al. 2013), (ii) constructions that exhibit similarity in form can start to show similarity in function and vice versa (e.g. De Smet 2010, Fonteyn 2016), and (iii) formally distinct constructions with partially overlapping functions may become even more alike over time leading to full overlap in functions (De Smet et al. forthcoming). This multitude of developments and complex interactions between constructions causes that forms and functions in the language system exhibit non-isomorphic, “many-to-many” relationships (cf. Van de Velde 2014). These studies, as well as the multidimensional nature of grammatical “meaning”, problematize the status of isomorphism as an explanatory principle of language change and raise the question whether its influence is rather fictional than factual.

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