

Linguistic metastabilities: a case-study on Italian idioms

Recent developments in the study of figurative language have shown that, contrary to the traditional belief, idiomatic constructions display an inner organization and can undergo structural modification, just like more “regular” expressions (e.g. Langlotz 2006; Naciscione 2010). In the present contribution, I will outline the results of an empirical investigation of the occurrences of a sample of Italian idioms, drawn from the large web-based corpus *ItTenTen*, interrogated with the aid of the online corpus-query system *Sketch Engine*. The tendencies observed in my analysis suggest that the behavioral patterns of idioms in use can be satisfactorily explained by adopting a dynamic-systems approach, which takes variation rather than stability as a main drive (e.g. Thelen and Smith 1994; Rączaszek-Leonardi and Kelso 2008). Indeed, each idiom seems to be governed by a principle of *causal circularity* (e.g. Kelso 1995, 2008), whereby on the one hand a bundle of formal, semantic/pragmatic, affective, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors works as an attractor state (cf. Cameron and Deignan 2006; Gibbs and Cameron 2008), constraining the possible uses of the construction, but at the same time the bulk of actual occurrences of the construction in context constantly (re-)shapes the attractor state. This persistent tension lies at the roots of linguistic variation and leads the system into a state of *metastability*, providing it with a certain degree of stability and plasticity at the same time (cf. Bressler and Tognoli 2006; Kello et al 2008; Kelso 2012). From this perspective, linguistic events are conceived as networks of attractor states, where the utterances tend to converge to specific constructions over time (at different levels of abstraction), remaining nonetheless sensitive to the situated dynamics of the ongoing interaction (cf. Rączaszek-Leonardi 2013).

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