

A Dynamic Systems approach to language embeddedness: insights from a cognitive-linguistic exploration of idiomatic constructions

Recent developments in linguistic and cognitive studies show that, nowadays, the notion of language as the product of a symbol-manipulation device hard-wired in the brain is no longer tenable. Indeed, over the last decades, the observation of actual linguistic events demonstrated that the structure of language and cognition is amazingly complex, being characterized by a number of different facets, dimensions, and time-scales. In my paper, I will address the topic of self-organization in the linguistic system, choosing idiomatic expressions as a target phenomenon. First, I will introduce a sample of Italian idioms and, following Langlotz (2006), I will describe their conceptual nature and formal structure according to cognitive-linguistic notions like “metaphor”, “metonymy”, “conceptual blending”, and “construction” (e.g. Langacker 1987; Goldberg 1995; Geeraerts 2002; Coulson and Oakley 2006). Next, I will explain them in terms of basic notions of Dynamic Systems Theory like “attractor”, “basin of attraction”, or “phase transition” (already employed in the elucidation of a variety of cognitive processes: e.g. Kelso 1995; Thelen et al. 2001; Warren 2006; Rączaszek-Leonardi and Kelso 2008). Then, I will show the emergence of flexible networks of idioms from the interplay of formal, semantic/pragmatic, cognitive, socio-cultural, and contextual factors (which work at both ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels, at distinct time-scales). Finally, I will argue that the explanatory adequacy of Dynamic Systems Theory complements the descriptive power of Cognitive Linguistics, allowing a comprehensive account of empirical data and accounting for the distributed, embedded nature of language.

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