

Linguistic meaning as a flexible, multi-faceted space: constraints on the uniqueness of communicative events

While mainstream linguistic theories tend to see language as a relatively stable “code”, and to consider symbols as performing a mainly representational function (e.g. Fodor 1975; Chomsky 1980), in the last decades alternative perspectives have risen, which advocate a more interactive, social, and emergent view of the linguistic system (e.g. Langacker 1987; Tomasello 2003). According to a particularly radical approach, language could be better conceived as a dynamic system, characterized by fluidity, fuzziness, emergence, and context-dependence (e.g. Elman 1995, 2004; Spoelman and Verspoor 2010; Gibbs 2011; Zheng 2012). On this view, the understanding of linguistic utterances is driven by the persistent interaction of several syntactic, semantic, and contextual factors. In particular, Rączaszek-Leonardi (e.g. 2009, 2010, 2013) proposes that language is a system of *replicable constraints*, where the meaning of a linguistic symbol lies in its ability to constrain the dynamics of an interaction. From this perspective, linguistic symbols underdetermine the message which is being conveyed, while the rest of the communication is supplied by the context. As a consequence, the linguistic system is inherently dynamic, flexible, and self-organizing.

In the present study, I will address the problem of meaning in idiomatic constructions. The choice of this topic is due to the fact that idiomatic expressions represent a class of linguistic constructions whose meaning conventionally fluctuates between different levels (literal vs figurative). While idioms have traditionally been dismissed as non-decomposable items of non-literal language (e.g. Nicolas 1995), several recent studies have shown that they display different levels of structural modification and show a range of variation patterns according to their specific properties (e.g. Langlotz 2006; Tabossi et al. 2009). In the light of these findings, I will carry out an empirical investigation of the level of stability and variation in the use of Italian idioms.

With regard to methodology, my first step was to select a sample of idiomatic construction from a dictionary of Italian idioms (Sorge 2010). Then, for each of them, I identified the keywords and checked their co-occurrence in a 10-word (-5, +5) span in the large web-based Italian corpus *ItTenTen*, explored with the aid of the *Context* function of the online corpus-query system *SketchEngine* (<http://www.sketchengine.co.uk>). Next, I looked through these co-occurrences and, after making sure that they showed some degrees of idiomaticity, I downloaded up to one-hundred examples and carried out a detailed analysis of the variational behavior of the relevant idiom in use. On the basis of the tendencies observed in my analysis of the data, I will argue that their patterns of systematicity and variability can be satisfactorily explained by adopting a *dynamic-systems* perspective, which takes variation, rather than stability, as a starting point (e.g. Rączaszek-Leonardi and Kelso 2008; Gibbs and Colston 2012).

Indeed, each idiomatic construction seems to display a bundle of formal, semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural features working as an attractor state (cf. Cameron and Deignan's 2006 notion of *metaphoreme*), and a combination of motivation patterns functioning as a basin of attraction, which constrain the possible uses of the idiom. At the same time, though, the occurrences of each construction also display an unstable trajectory defined by the sum of the interactions between lexical, morphosyntactic, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, affective, socio-cultural, discursive, and situational factors. I will then argue that the actual use of idiomatic expressions is governed by a principle of *causal circularity* (e.g. Kelso 1995, 2008), whereby on the one hand, the attractor state constrains the possible uses of a construction, but at the same time, the bulk of the actual occurrences of an idiom shapes the attractor, in an ongoing, non-linear process of self-organization. Due to the variation created by the persistent action of this principle, it seems more reasonable to see idiomatic meaning as soft-assembling in the “here and now”, rather than

having a fully “pre-packaged” content.

Therefore, linguistic meaning does not seem to reside in either individual minds or objects of the external world (Rączaszek-Leonardi 2013); on the contrary, it seems conceivable as a flexible, multi-faceted space, characterized by several interacting dimensions, features, and time-scales. Thus, converging with Rączaszek-Leonardi's perspective on the ontological status of linguistic symbols mentioned above, it seems plausible to argue that the meaning of each communicative event fully comes to life only in the situated context, as a result of the compression of its degrees of freedom (cf. Thelen and Smith 1994).

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