Abstract submission

Stability, variation, and causal circularity: disclosing dynamic patterns in Italian idiomatic constructions

Idiomatic expressions have always represented a thorny problem in linguistic theory. Indeed, they represent a class of linguistic constructions which tend to challenge categorization. In my contribution, I will define idioms as “complex constructions whose meaning can shift, to different extents, between a literal and a figurative level”.

Ontologically, mainstream generative theories dismiss idiomatic constructions as non-decomposable items of non-literal language, uninteresting and “peripheral”. Contrary to this view, in the last decades psycholinguistic and corpus-linguistic studies have shown that idioms can often undergo structural modification and display different variation patterns.

In the light of these findings, the present contribution will empirically analyze the occurrences of a sample of idiomatic constructions in the large web-based corpus iTenTen, interrogated via the online corpus-query system Sketch Engine. On the basis of the tendencies observed during the analysis, I will argue that the patterns of systematicity and variability displayed by the data can be satisfactorily explained by adopting a Dynamic Systems perspective.

Indeed, I will propose that, for each idiomatic construction, it is possible to empirically identify a cluster 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 use of the idiom. On the other hand, the occurrences of the constructions also show a trajectory shaped by the bulk of the interactions between lexical, morphosyntactic, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, affective, socio-cultural, discoursive, and situational factors in a mutually determining fashion.

I will then conclude that the use of idiomatic expressions can be characterized as governed by a principle of causal circularity (e.g. Kelso 1995), whereby the attractor state constrains the possible uses of a construction, but at the same time, the bulk of the occurrences of an idiom shapes the attractor, in an ongoing, non-linear process of self-organization. Looking beyond idioms, it seems plausible to posit that similar mechanisms regulate the functioning of the linguistic system as a whole, consistently with the cognitive-linguistic view of language as a network of interconnected units (e.g. Croft 2001).
References:

