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

ENRICO TORRE
Department of Linguistics and English Language
Lancaster University, UK

e-mail contact: e.torre@lancaster.ac.uk

CENTRAL QUESTION:
WHAT IS (LINGUISTIC) MEANING?

6. PRINCIPLE AT WORK:
CAUSAL CIRCULARITY

- The “life-dynamics” of an idiomatic construction, and the whole set of idioms present in a language, are governed by a principle of causal circularity, whereby:
  - on the one hand, the attractor constrains the use of a construction
  - at the same time, the bulk of actual occurrences of a construction shapes the attractor

7. DISCUSSION:
THE SOFT-ASSEMBLY OF MEANING

- Due to the variation created by the persistent action of the principle of causal circularity, it seems more reasonable to see meaning as self-assembling (on the “here and now”) rather than having a fully pre-packaged content.

8. CONCLUSION:
LINGUISTIC MEANING AS FLEXIBLE, MULTI-FACETED SPACE

- Meaning does not reside in either individual signs or objects in the external world, rather it resembles a flexible, multi-faceted space, characterized by several interacting dimensions, features, and time-scales.
- The meaning of each communicative event fully “comes to be” only in the situated context.

1. BACKGROUND:
A DYNAMIC-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE

- Language as a constantly evolving dynamic system, characterized by fluidity, inconsistency, context-dependence, and emergence.
- Linguistic interactions as driven by the interplay of formal, semantic, and contextual factors, which leads to the formation of relatively stable complex patterns.

2. PROPOSAL:
LANGUAGE AS A SYSTEM OF REPLICABLE CONSTRAINTS

- The meaning of a linguistic symbol arises through usage as a material device to constrain the dynamics of an interaction.
- Linguistic symbols underdetermine the message being conveyed: the rest of the communication is supplied by the context.

3. CASE STUDY:
IDIOMATIC CONSTRUCTIONS

- Idiomatic meaning fluctuates between a literal and a figurative level.
- According to their specific properties, idiomatic constructions can display a range of variation patterns.
- Idiom-variation is the result of the persistent tension between the conventional form and meaning of idioms and the situational uniqueness of each context of use.

4. REAL LANGUAGE DATA:
ITALIAN IDIOMS IN USE

- 50 to 100 occurrences of 50 Italian idioms.
- A total of 4,809 occurrences drawn from the large web-based Italian corpus iTenTen, investigated via the online corpus-query system Sketch Engine: http://www.sketchengine.co.uk.