Observing idiom-variation through dynamic ecological lenses: linguistic phenomena as shaped by the organism-environment interaction

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1. LANGUAGE AS A SYSTEM
- COMPLEX: characterized by different dimensions, facets, and time-scales.
- EMERGENT: learned through interactive experience in the social world.
- SELF-ORGANIZING: evolving over time as a result of the interaction of its components.

2. IDIOM-VARIATION
The product of the constant tension between the conventional form and meaning of idiomatic constructions and the situational uniqueness of each context of use.

3. MOTIVATION AS A COGNITIVE ANCHOR
A speaker’s ability to understand why an idiom has the specific figurative meaning it has with a view to its literal meaning.

FOUR PATTERNS:
- conceptual metaphor
- conceptual metonymy
- conceptual blending
- emblems

4. IDIOMS' VARIATIONAL BEHAVIOR AS A DYNAMIC SYSTEM
- Constructions associated to the keywords + semantic, pragmatic, affective, and socio-cultural values = ATTRACTOR
- Combination of motivation patterns = BASIN OF ATTRACTION
- Each particular usage event = STATE
- Amount of all observed occurrences = TRAJECTORY
- Competition between a new and a pre-existing attractor = BIFURCATION POINT
- Drift of the standard usage toward different properties = PHASE SHIFT

5. DATA
- 70 to 100 occurrences of 15 Italian idioms
- A total of 1,422 occurrences from the ItTenTen corpus, investigated via the corpus-query system Sketch Engine: http://www.sketchengine.co.uk

6. RESULTS
- Different variation patterns, along a cline of systematicity/creativity.
- The actual use of as a result of the interaction of morphosyntactic, syntactic, lexical, semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, socio-cultural, affective, discursive, and situational factors.
- Emergence of flexible, massively interconnected idiomatic networks.

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

8. A FRACTAL ARCHITECTURE
- The same mechanisms work at different dimensions, time-scales, and levels of granularity.
- Language shows a self-similar architecture.
- The same conclusion may be extended to cognition as a whole.
- Thus, language and cognition stand in a part-whole relationship, displaying a fractal structure.

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