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Maarten Lemmens

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A cognitive, usage-based view on lexical pragmatics: Response to Hall

Maarten Lemmens, Université de Lille & CNRS UMR 8163, France

Abstract

In her chapter on lexical pragmatics, Alison Hall aims at resolving the problem of contextual modulation of word meaning, where the latter is often seen as highly schematic and invariant across contexts. She suggests a model that preserves the schematic meaning yet allows for stored contextualised conceptual clusters. However, as we will show, her notion of “type meanings” leads to theoretical inconsistencies and does not give a sufficiently organised view on processes of contextual modulation which is often more systematic than Hall’s account suggests. In fact, her account is only one step away from a usage-based, cognitive approach which we argue presents a more viable alternative to answer the fundamental question of lexical (or linguistic) meaning and contextual modulation. The usage-based perspective of grammar as a structured inventory of symbolic units allows the seamless integration of both schematic (i.e., contextually neutral) meanings and specific (contextually-enriched) instantiations. In addition, its encyclopaedic view on meaning and its integration of general semantic operations like metaphor and metonymy resolve some of the vexed issues that have troubled linguistic theories when dealing with contextual modulation and/or semantic multiplicity. [183 words]

Keywords: lexical pragmatics, usage-based linguistics, contextual modulation, encyclopaedic semantics

Introduction

The key postulate of lexical pragmatics as presented in Hall’s chapter is that the linguistically encoded meaning of an utterance is (invariably) modulated by the context.¹ The model builds on a (strict) separation between linguistic meaning and what is explicitly expressed by an utterance (‘explicature’) after pragmatically-motivated processes of modulation of the expressions occurring in it. In her chapter, Hall first critically evaluates three accounts that have been suggested in the literature, i.e., (i) an account based on truth-value judgments (heavily criticised by Borg) – which Hall maintains with some modification, (ii) indexicalism – which she rejects altogether, and (iii) a relevance theory view on modulation, in which she finds inspiration for her own account, which she briefly presents in the last part of her chapter.

Strikingly, Hall’s account is but one step away from being fully compatible with a cognitive view, yet it is still theoretically incompatible with it, because of her underlying assumptions on the nature of semantic structure and the linguistic system. This response will first (section 1) give a critical view on Hall’s lexical pragmatics; section 2 briefly presents a cognitive-usage based alternative that provides a more coherent architecture for the issues that lexical pragmatics aims to resolve.

¹ I would like to thank Ilse Depraetere, Raf Salkie, Ad Foolen and Hans-Jörg Schmid for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper; all remaining inaccuracies are, of course, my responsibility.

A critical view on Hall's lexical pragmatics

After her critique of truth-value judgments and indexicalism, Hall discusses Relevance Theory, which holds that modulation occurs through the rearrangement of the “information stores” that (simple lexical) concepts give access to. Such concepts give rise to three kinds of information: lexical (i.e., linguistic) information, logical information (inference rules or meaning postulates, such as RED → COLOURED), and encyclopaedic information. It is particularly the latter which plays a major role in the relevance theory account of modulation, as the context will activate items of encyclopaedic information and thereby modulate the linguistic (lexical) meaning. To use Hall's example, the modulation of the linguistic meaning of *milk* (including properties such as LIQUID, WHITE, DRINKABLE) in the utterance *There's milk in the fridge* is due to the activation of the encyclopaedic knowledge that “milk for using in food/drink comes in certain kinds of containers and gets refrigerated” (p. 10); that is, for a hearer looking for milk to put in his/her coffee, “some drops of spilt milk on the shelf of the fridge would not make the utterance true” (ibid.) The explicature Hall gives for this example is THERE IS MILK* IN THE FRIDGE, where MILK* can be paraphrased as something like “milk in its usual container and appropriate for use”.²

Partially drawing on these insights, Hall presents her own account (section 3), for which she suggests a different view on word meaning. She recognises a growing consensus amongst contextualists that the view that (open-class) words code simple concepts may not be correct and that they rather should be regarded as “a kind of instruction to construct a concept, or pointer to an area of conceptual space, or concept schema, or ‘grab bag’ of encyclopaedic information” (this volume, p. 12). One of the arguments for this “non-conceptual approach” (a very unfortunate term, see below) that she gives, referring to observations by Searle, is that many lexical items (such as *open* or *cut*) can refer to widely diverging concepts depending on the context of use (e.g., *cut the cake*, *cut her finger*, *cut his hair*, etc. or *open his mouth*, *open the curtains*, *open the drawer*, etc.). This casts doubts, she says, on the existence of a “context-invariant content” (this volume, p. 14) since it would be “too abstract and general to function as a constituent of thought” (ibid.). This presents a major theoretical challenge for Hall who continues to hold the view that the concept should be able to function as an element of thought (this volume, p. 12, 15). As a solution, she suggests “type meanings of lexical items” (this volume, p. 15) that do not have any representational content: “they are mere placeholders for content” (ibid.) that acquire content (in context) to be able to act as thought constituents (the Fodorian mental symbols combined to form sentences in the language of thought). In other words, “although [the type meaning] is the kind of thing that *can* carry content, it initially doesn't” (this volume, p. 15). A contextually modulated concept is then an inferred “cluster of features”. Importantly, she adds that many of these inferred concepts (such as the MILK* in the example above) are not really novel, but

² In lexical pragmatics, it is a convention to mark contextually modulated concepts with an *.

“ones that we have encountered many times previously, so that they may have become stable elements of our language of thought” (this volume, p. 14).

To some extent, Hall’s suggestion of the existence of ‘conventionalized modulated (inferred) concepts’ (my phrasing) resonates with ideas that, since long, have been defended by cognitive linguistics. This is also true for some of the other observations she makes, e.g., about open-class words not denoting simple concepts, about encyclopaedic information playing a more prominent role in meaning construction than is often assumed, etc. At the same time, her overall linguistic model makes radically different claims about the nature of (linguistic) meaning and, more generally, about the structure of language than the cognitive model does, which leads to some empirical and theoretical inconsistencies in her proposal.

Firstly, Hall (as many other linguists) assumes the existence of a universal language of thought (Mentalese). For example, *red* encodes the concept RED; *raw* encodes the concept RAW (her examples, p. 9); it is assumed that the concepts RED and RAW are units of thought and these are considered to constitute the linguistic meaning of the lexical items. All other semantic information is either due to encyclopaedic knowledge, logical inferencing, or contextual specification. However, the existence of such a universal language of thought is an *a priori* that can be, and has been, legitimately questioned; for limitations of space, we cannot afford to have an extensive theoretical discussion on this issue here (but see Levinson 2003).³ We will limit ourselves to remarking that not only has it never been very clear what exactly the basis is for postulating a given linguistic meaning (apart from intuition which, however, is quite unreliable) but also a full specification of linguistic meaning is generally simply absent. For example, on p. 9, Hall says that “*red* encodes RED; “*raw*” encodes RAW”; using these labels is quite convenient, but in no way do they suffice to explain and justify what exactly the conceptual structure is that RED and RAW represent. Once one attempts at spelling this out, one quickly comes to the conclusion that the distinction between linguistic and encyclopaedic meaning is misconceived (see section 2).

Secondly, postulating lexical type meanings as empty placeholders seems like a mere construct to salvage the theory and it leaves many questions unanswered, e.g., What is their initial state (when they don’t carry content)? Where does this initial state come from? When does it occur (both in language acquisition and in the on-line processing of language use)?

Thirdly, Hall’s suggestion that many of the inferred concepts have become stable elements in our language of thought (this volume, p. 16) leads to a theoretical contradiction, as earlier she defined them as initially empty carriers of thought that cannot be contentful constituents of thought (this volume, p. 15). Moreover, if they have become “stable elements of thought”, what distinguishes these conventionalised clusters of features from different senses of a polysemic word?

³ I do want to emphasize that while Levinson offers convincing arguments to the contrary, (universal) language-independent “constituents of thought” may very well turn out to exist. What is crucial, and Levinson emphasizes this as well, is that their existence cannot be assumed as an *a priori* absolute. It is, or should be, an empirical question and not the element of faith that it now often appears to be.

A fourth point (related to the previous one) is that in Hall's description it remains unclear how *different* modulations of one and the same lexical item will be represented. To take one of her own examples, if MILK*, as used in her example (3), refers to the contextually modulated meaning of "drinkable milk as stored in refrigerated containers" (my paraphrase), how to represent the modulated meaning when it is used as a superordinate term in reference to all kinds of animal milk (of cow, goat, horse, etc.), or that at issue in the expression *no use crying over spilt milk* (figurative use not involving any real milk), or in even further extended uses as in *almond/rice/soy milk* (looks like milk and functions as surrogate of milk but isn't milk) or in *milk of magnesia* (medicine that looks like milk but isn't and does not function as a surrogate for milk). Conflating all of these under the same notation MILK* would clearly obscure the regularities of meaning extension that underlie many of these (conventionalised) contextual modulations. Or would extensions that are 'further out' be represented as MILK** or MILK***? But how would that be a verifiable and operationalisable representation?⁴

Finally, it is not because one cannot find a context-invariant meaning that holds across all uses of a given lexical item, that one should give up the claim that lexical concepts themselves have content and relegate everything to pragmatic processes (of whatever type). In a usage-based account, both (lexical) semantic multiplicity and contextual modulation (often called "accommodation") can be maintained.

The underlying fundamental issue is the relationship between words and their enriched meaning in context, where two extreme positions can be adopted: either words are assumed to have a only very schematic meanings which are then modulated in context (pragmatic enrichment) or words are assumed to have a rich semantic structure that is only adjusted slightly by the contexts for which they are mobilised. As we hope to show below, the usage-based, encyclopaedic view on meaning as advocated by cognitive linguistics provides an architecture that allows reconciling these two extreme positions in a model leaving room for both schematization and contextual specificity. At the same time, the challenge of carefully describing and explaining the observed "semantic plasticity" and its effect on the structure of grammar remains a challenge, also for the cognitive linguist.

A cognitive, usage-based alternative⁵

As the term indicates, usage-based linguistics holds that language is learned through usage. As Chouinard & Clark (2003: 638) say, "[c]hildren don't learn language in a void, they learn it in conversation. They learn how to express their intentions and interpret the

⁴ In all fairness, with regard to the latter question, it must be acknowledged that the schematic network representations one sees in cognitive analyses (also described below) may also suffer from the same problem, as the "elaborative distance" between different meanings within the network is often left unspecified or unsupported by empirical evidence.

⁵ The following description of a usage-based model is a gross simplification whose main function is to show how many of the theoretical issues mentioned by Hall are resolved in a bottom-up, usage-based account. For a more detailed discussion the reader is referred to some of the sources already cited, or to Goldberg (1995, 2006), Hilpert (2014), Lemmens (2015, *forthc.*), or Tomasello (2003), among others.

intentions of others as they use conversation to accomplish such goals as deciding what cereal to have for breakfast, getting help with a game, or finding a toy.” Similarly, Langacker (1987:155) says: “Language is learned and used in context. We can talk about any facet of our conceptual universe, and a given expression permits indefinitely many specific interpretations depending on the conceived situation to which it is applied.” Such a usage-based view brings in contextual specifications right from the start and semantic structure is thus necessarily the *contextualised meaning* of an expression.

At first sight, such contextualised meaning merely seems the equivalent of an explicature, i.e., nothing more than the contextually enriched linguistically encoded meaning. The fundamental difference, however, is that in cognitive linguistics the starting point is not the stable, contextually neutral linguistic meaning (regardless of whether this is a simple concept or not) that gets “enriched”, but the rich contextual specification itself. The semantic value of an expression is thus arrived at via a generalisation process over different contexts to which the expression is applied. This generalisation process is not exclusively linguistic, but a more general cognitive process of categorization (see below for some more technical details on this). This illustrates one of the basic tenets of cognitive linguistics, i.e., that language does not constitute a separate innate faculty of mind (cf. Langacker 1987:13) and that the full articulation of the linguistic system depends on experiential factors (physiological as well as cultural) and cognitive abilities that are not unique to language.

It follows logically from this then that cognitive linguistics rejects the idea that a clear and stable distinction can be drawn between linguistic and encyclopaedic meaning. In a ‘dictionary’ view of semantics, an expression’s linguistically relevant meaning is limited to the minimal literal sense, as recorded in dictionary definitions. This linguistic meaning then gets modulated in context, and one suggestion that Hall explicitly discusses is that encyclopaedic knowledge plays a role in this. No one will deny the importance of contextual modulation, but this does not provide evidence that meaning should not, or cannot, be encyclopaedic. Take a simple example (given by Langacker 1987), the concept BANANA. It requires characterization in the spatial and visual domain, as it has a specific shape and colour, in the domain of taste and smell, and in other, more abstract domains, pertaining to the knowledge that they are eaten, that they grow on trees in bunches, in tropical areas, etc. Which of these elements is linguistic in nature (and thus part of the meaning of *banana*) and which is encyclopaedic (and thus to be excluded)? The cognitive point of view is that all of these are part of the semantic structure of *banana*. Clearly, that doesn’t mean that all have the same status: some are so central to semantic specification that they can hardly be excluded; others are more peripheral that they hold little relevance for linguistic analysis. For instance, while the fact that my brother-in-law likes green bananas and I don’t or that my neighbour is allergic to them is part of my individual knowledge structure of bananas, it is highly

implausible that they will ever become relevant for linguistic structure. The crucial point is that the demarcation line between the two is to a large extent, arbitrary.⁶

Such an encyclopaedic view also entails that no strict demarcation is made in cognitive linguistics between semantics and pragmatics, even if, also here, some things may be more semantic (i.e., stored with the linguistic item as part of its meaning), whereas others may be more pragmatic, i.e., determined by the immediate (linguistic or social) context in which an expression is used. In other words, cognitive linguistics does not deny the existence of pragmatic processes or that linguistic expressions have a stored meaning, they clearly do. But how is that meaning characterised then? In a nutshell, meaning is regarded as “conceptualisation tailored to the specific of linguistic convention” (Langacker 1987: 99).⁷ The conceptual structure that provides the conceptual content of linguistic expressions can range from fairly simple concepts or a perceptual experience to quite complex knowledge clusters, cf. Langacker’s (1987, 1991a) *cognitive domains*, Lakoff’s (1987) *Idealised Cognitive Models* or Fillmore’s *frames* (“unified frameworks of knowledge, or coherent schematizations of experience” 1985: 223).

The notion of *frame* is probably the most appropriate one to clarify this point of view. Consider words like *weekday*, *weekend* or *school night*. Their meaning can only be understood against the frame of a (cultural-specific) week schedule with Monday till Friday as days when one goes to work or school (weekdays) and Saturday and Sunday as free from work or classes (weekend). Given that (typically) you have to get up early on a weekday to go to work/school and need to have a clear head, certain activities are not considered appropriate (like staying up late, drinking alcohol, partying, etc.) on a school night. Weekends, on the other hand, are typically associated with these and other leisure activities. In other words, the meaning of these expressions is understood against the background of a coherent (culture-specific) conceptual frame. Similarly, *wife* evokes the MARRIAGE frame relative to which one also understands terms such as *husband*, *divorce*, *in-laws*, etc. Frames can thus be defined as “tightly linked chunks of conceptual knowledge which get evoked together” (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 18); lexical frames are those that occur sufficiently regularly to have been assigned a name.

In fact, as I understand it, the stored “clusters of features” that Hall talks about, for example in the context of the milk in the fridge (her modulated concept MILK*) finds a straightforward explanation in a frame-semantic model: it is part of the MILK-frame that it (usually) comes in containers one stores in the fridge (or a similar cool place). What’s more, this feature is something that is shared across different frames for many other liquids for consumption (e.g., water, fruit juice, beer, wine, etc.). This is one way in which different frames can be structurally connected in our larger knowledge system. Our conceptual

⁶ Cf. Haiman (1980:331): “the distinction between dictionaries and encyclopedias is not only one that is practically impossible to make, but one that is fundamentally misconceived [...] dictionaries are encyclopedias” (cf. also Croft 1993).

⁷ Note that this doesn’t mean that all conceptualisation or thought is linguistic.

knowledge is structured and thus amenable to empirical analysis and description; Hall's use of the characterization of word meanings in terms of a 'grab bag' of encyclopaedic information (p. 12) is thus unfortunate since it incorrectly suggests that it's a mere unstructured amalgam.

Many linguists (Hall included) still cling to the idea of a 'purely' linguistic meaning. One reason may be an empirical-methodological one, *viz.* that an encyclopaedic characterization of meaning would entail that the task of semantic description becomes basically open-ended and thus empirically impossible; limiting oneself to the purely linguistic may seem much more feasible than losing oneself in the (vast) description of human conceptualization. As I understand her, Hall seems to align with this impossibility when she says "Atomism may be the only option for lexical concepts given the impossibility of specifying what features or inferences constitute them" (this volume, p. 15). She makes a similar comment in her criticism of indexicalism, when she points out that the number of 'part'-variables for even a simple adjective like *green* is infinite, since it depends on the object (=context) it is being predicated of. Strikingly, she adds, "[working out which part-variable *green* is being predicated of] is a phenomenon arising from use rather than in the linguistic form" (p 9). The usage-based linguist will immediately agree that it does, but will add that use and linguistic form are not as diametrically opposed as Hall has it. An encyclopaedic view on meaning does *not* preclude an empirically verifiable semantic description; quite the contrary, as it often necessitates a careful and meticulous analysis of usage.

But, the critic will object, isn't that simply conveniently conflating semantics and pragmatics and avoiding the issue of how contextual modulation operates on (stored) meanings? It is true that cognitive linguistics has a non-modular approach to language, which means that no strict systematic distinction is made between semantics and pragmatics as clearly distinct modules of the linguistic system. It does *not* mean, however, that (temporary) contextual modulation is not recognised or that pragmatic inferencing is not recognised as an important meaning-providing process. In what follows, we will (again, very briefly) try to sketch how this would work in a usage-based approach, starting by how linguistic expressions are learned.

Recall that cognitive linguistics embraces an emergent view on language learning. This means that grammar is learned from usage. As Bybee (2006:711) puts it, for a usage-based linguist, "grammar is the cognitive organization of one's experience with language". Similarly, Tomasello (2000: 61-62) states that "[t]he linguistic skills that a person possesses at any given moment in time – in the form of a "structured inventory of symbolic units" – result from her accumulated experience with language across the totality of usage events in her life". Two clarifying comments are in order here. First, the notion of "usage event" is crucial and refers to "a symbolic expression assembled by a speaker in a particular set of circumstances for a particular purpose" (Langacker 1987: 67). It is thus a detailed, context-

dependent conceptualisation (Langacker calls this the “target”) which may occur in *any* context of use of language.⁸ Secondly, Tomasello reproduces the (by now well-known) Langackerian definition of grammar as a “structured inventory of symbolic units”. Symbolic units (called *constructions* in Construction Grammar) are pairings of form and meaning (or rather, form and function, since there is no strict and principled distinction between semantics and pragmatics). All elements of grammar, be they morphemes, lexical items, idiomatic phrases or larger syntactic structures are considered as symbolic units (or constructions) stored in the grammar (hence, an *inventory*) as long as they are sufficiently conventionalized. In other words, also syntactic patterns (like the ditransitive construction (NP-V-NP-NP), or the Caused Motion construction (e.g., *She broke the eggs into a bowl*) are considered as having a semantic component (i.e., they are meaningful).

Children learn these form-meaning pairs in usage events when linguistic structures are used to refer to highly contextualized and thus highly specific situations. Repeated uses of particular linguistic expressions across contexts trigger processes of entrenchment and abstraction. Entrenchment means that the form-meaning pairing will be stored in the mental grammar as a unit (or a construction), in particular if the contexts are the same (or sufficiently similar); repeated uses lead to higher degrees of entrenchment, which means that these structures become cognitively more salient. Abstraction occurs when the expression is used in usage contexts that are (slightly) different; such contextual differences trigger adjustments to be made to the initial (stored) cognitive structure. For instance, if the child learns the word *dog* being applied to a poodle but then later hears it being applied to a different breed of dog, it necessarily has to accommodate by building a more schematic semantic structure DOG that generalises over these differences.

Through continued exposure of usage over different contexts, increasingly schematic meanings are construed that capture the similarities between these contexts. This gives rise to schematic networks where different uses of a given linguistic expression are hierarchically organised (hence, a *structured* inventory). The example that I have used elsewhere (Lemmens 2015) is that of the different uses of the verb *kill* (*kill a human being, kill an animal, kill weeds*, etc.) but any other lexical item would do, e.g., the examples with *cut* and *open* mentioned by Hall. In other words, the semantics of such lexical items builds a schematic network of related meanings (comparable to Croft & Cruse’s 2004 microsenses) that themselves are each time a schematization over different contexts of use. Importantly, in answer to Hall’s comments, the meaning of the item cannot be reduced to one of these or to the most schematic meaning; it is the entire network that provides the semantic pole of the expression.

Since in a usage-based model all linguistic units are of the same type, such schematic networks also apply to morphemes, to semi-filled idiomatic expressions (e.g., the constructional idioms discussed by Jackendoff *VERB one’s BODY PART off* or *N by N*, or *the*

⁸ For Langacker, a usage event is the on-line construal of the target structure; this is why he calls his model a *dynamic* usage-based model and why he systematically talks about *conceptualisation* rather than of concepts.

best X in Y), and to larger syntactical patterns (such as the ditransitive or subject-inversion (*Had I known...*), see e.g., Goldberg 2006). These are clearly more schematic patterns, but even here one sees specific instantiations that are more entrenched than others; for instance, *work one's head off* is surely a more salient instantiation of the VERB *one's BODY PART off* construction than *laugh your head off* or *dance one's ass off*. These constructions all together form a structured network, with structures of varying degree of schematicity. For example, *work one's head off* and *bust one's head off* are united by a low-level schema neutralizing over the verb (something like WORK *one's head off*); conversely the schema that relates these uses to, e.g., *dance one's feet off* will be more schematic. Importantly, cognitive linguistics adopts a non-reductionist view on language, in that both the schema and its instantiations can be, and often are, stored in memory; it is not because a schema has been found that the instantiations are forgotten (Langacker 1987 calls this the *rule/list fallacy*).⁹ Another important element is that these various instantiations of the VERB *one's BODY PART off* construction are also all linked *semantically*, as they all are hyperbolic references to an intensive (or even excessive) degree with which the activity expressed by the verb is carried out. In other words, this is not considered as “contextual modulation” as some linguists might, but as part and parcel of the semantics of this construction (and thus stored in the grammar).¹⁰

It follows logically from a usage-based perspective on language that linguistic expressions (again, of whichever type) underspecify the (rich context-specific) conceptualisations they encode. (If they wouldn't, grammar would simply be impossible to learn and lexical items too numerous to be remembered.) When speakers want to express a given situation, they will draw on different resources, the most important of which is, obviously, the inventory of symbolic units stored in their grammar. Given that the target to be expressed is a detailed, context-dependent conceptualisation, there is invariably some tension between the target structure and that of the conventionalised units stored in the grammar (which are, by definition, schematisations). In Langacker's terms, the conventional unit is said to only partially sanction the usage event. The extent of this mismatch is a matter of degree; sometimes, it may be minimal (a case of “full sanction”) and its use will contribute to the further entrenchment of the unit. The greater the strain, the more the coding (which reduces to a form of categorization) will be non-obvious; repeated use of this modified structure may lead to storage of a new conventional unit. The gist of the usage-based view is that what is stored (as a meaning) and what is inferred (contextually modulated) is a matter of degree

⁹ Cf. also (Tuggy 1993 : 280): “Many linguists seem to operate on the assumption that once [...] a schema is found, the subcases it subsumes may be safely ignored, regardless of their degree of entrenchment or salience. [...] however [...] to the degree that they are salient they must not be ignored.”

¹⁰ A full characterization of this construction would also consider additional formal and semantic constraints: for example, the choice of body part is quite constrained (**I worked my nose off*), the possessive should be co-referential with the subject NP (**The teacher worked the students' heads off*), the particle is (typically) *off* or *out* (**I worked my head about/down*), etc. We will not consider these here, as they are not immediately relevant.

and highly dependent on usage (frequency) but also other features such as semantic proximity or (more general) semantic principles, such as regular metonymy or metaphor.¹¹

At the same time, coding a given situation is something that speakers do, not grammars; every symbolic expression for a target structure entails coding decisions in which all kinds of factors play a role. These can be linguistic, cognitive or pragmatic. For example, in neutral contexts, speakers will, for reasons of cognitive economy and communicative efficiency, most likely choose the (basic-level) word *dog* when seeing a dog, rather than the more specific *poodle* or *spaniel*. Given a particular contextual focus, speakers may use the word *milk* to metonymically refer to “container with drinkable milk” (metonymy is a general cognitive process used for reference), without this necessarily giving rise to a separately stored sense.¹² In addition, every usage event triggers inferences (à la Grice) about the coding decisions the speaker has made, which may even explain where grammaticality judgments come from (via statistical pre-emption).¹³

In a usage-based approach, the view is that particular contextual features which are often considered as pragmatic, such as the speaker’s attitude, will be stored with the expression if there is repeated occurrence of the same contextual features with that expression. The hyperbolic value of the *VERB one’s BODY PART off* construction discussed above already illustrates that. Or consider the oft-cited example of the *What is X doing Y* construction (as initially described by Kay and Fillmore 1999). On face value, this is a straightforward WH-question asking for information on X’s activities (in a large sense). However, almost invariably this is used to express the speaker’s surprise or disapproval of X’s activities, e.g. *What’s this fly doing in my soup?* or *What’s this dog doing in my class?* or *What’s this child doing with a knife?* In a usage-based approach, this aspect of their meaning is taken to be stored in the grammar as part of the *What is X doing Y* construction.

While above we have been talking about emergent grammar in terms of language acquisition, it should be clear that usage also feeds diachronic changes. Repeated use of a given expression in a particular context will lead to those contextual elements to become ‘semanticised’ (or lexicalised, in the case of lexical items). This can actually be illustrated by one of Hall’s own examples of contextual modulation *Syria must not become the new Bosnia* (ex. 2c, p. 1); the contextual modulation resides, she says, in *Bosnia* being used not to refer to the country, or even to the Bosnian war, but something like “conflicts where earlier foreign intervention might have averted descent into all-out war” (her paraphrase). A first comment is that this is a more systematic kind of extension than Hall’s ad hoc paraphrase suggests; it

¹¹ The objection that may be levelled here is that we ignore the polysemy – monosemy debate. For reasons of space, we cannot go into this issue here; but see, among others, Geeraerts 1993, Tuggy 1993, Sandra & Rice 1996 for an excellent discussion.

¹² I may point out in passing that in Dutch, this particular metonymy (LIQUID/SUBSTANCE for LIQUID/SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER) will give rise to a different choice of verb: *Er staat melk in de koelkast* (‘there stands milk in the fridge’) will be used to refer metonymically to the container with milk, whereas the location of liquids or substances as such, are coded with *liggen* ‘lie’. See Lemmens (2002) or Lemmens & Perrez (2010, 2012).

¹³ See, for instance, Chouinard & Clark (2003) or Tomasello (2000) on this.

is a metonymical relationship where the name of the place stands for the event that took place there. In an encyclopaedic characterisation of meaning, the paraphrase is part of the conceptual structure of the Bosnian war. But more important to the present discussion is that the structure itself *X is the new Y* is a recurrent pattern that recently has become widely used (in no small measure due to the popularity of the TV-series *Orange is the new black*). One particular aspect of its meaning is that it relates two (possibly unrelated) concepts in a comparative frame of supposed or constructed identity (“X is the newer version of Y”). The semantic effect of the *X is the new Y* construction is thus precisely that it invites the reader to figure out (via inferencing) what the comparable features are in the two knowledge frames associated with these two seemingly unrelated concepts.¹⁴ Notice further that part of its meaning is also attitudinal, as typically, this construction is used with a negative connotation to refer to (passing) hypes where “old stuff” is presented as “new stuff” but is basically “same old, same old”.

These examples illustrate how the demarcation between what is pragmatically inferred or contextually modulated and what is “stored” as part of an expression’s semantic value (be this a lexical item, a morpheme or a larger (semi-filled) construction) is not always easy to draw. The reason is that repeated usage over time in similar contexts leads to entrenchment (storage) of that usage, including its contextual values. In Bybee’s terms, “[u]sage feeds into the creation of grammar just as much as grammar determines the shape of usage” (2006: 730).¹⁵ Invariably, the use of a stored linguistic expression will have to be adjusted to fit the specific context to which it is applied. However, this does not mean that it is an all-or-nothing affair, i.e. that it is either stored or it is contextually modulated; it mostly is both.

Conclusion

The usage-based model, which sees grammar as learned from, and (re)shaped by, repeated usage events in which processes of abstraction and entrenchment play a major role, aspires to offer an account that not only resolves many of the issues inherent to a strict modular approach to language but one that is also cognitively real. In addition, the examples above show that the semantic modulation often occurs in specific semi-open constructions and is thus much more regular than is often assumed. These linguistic units offer conventionalised schematic patterns that are stored in the grammar, often alongside their more specific instantiations.

Surely, a model that adopts an encyclopaedic view on meaning and that posits that rules (schemas) and their instantiations may both be stored in the grammar can be criticised for

¹⁴ A similar effect is found with a construction like *X is the Y of Z*, e.g. *Wembley is the ‘Rolls Royce of boxing experiences* (internet example) or *The Keleti station in Budapest is the ground zero of the European asylum crisis* (translated example from Belgian Newspaper *De Morgen*, 01/09/2015).

¹⁵ Cf. Traugott and Dasher (2002) who talk about specific semantic characteristics of certain structures as resulting from the entrenchment of contextual features. Similarly, in the domain of new meanings for syntactic structures, Croft (2000:126ff) talks about *hypoanalysis*, where “a contextual semantic/functional property [is reanalysed] as an inherent property of the syntactic unit”.

being less neat, but the ultimate question is whether the neatness aspired by the defenders of a modular approach is of the correct type. As a usage-based linguist, I argue that it is not. As I have hopefully shown here, it is not all chaos either, quite the contrary. The grammar is structured according to general cognitive principles (such as analogy, among others) which make it learnable in the first place. Grammar is built from specific usage events in which stored meaning and context-specific conceptualisations are in constant interplay. The usage-based approach thus provides a viable compromise between the two extreme positions with regard to the semantic/pragmatic interface (maximal polysemy vs. maximal monosemy). The view of grammar as a structured inventory of symbolic structures allows for the storage of rich contextualised meanings as well as schematic meanings that generalise over these, and this without losing sight of more general (cognitive or semantic) operations, such as metaphor or metonymy, that may be at work in cases of semantic and/or contextual variation.

The larger take-home message is that “linguistic creativity is best examined not within the confines of a restricted, self-contained grammar, but rather in the overall context of human knowledge, judgment, and problem-solving ability” (Langacker 1987:73). It is our task as linguists to unravel the processes that drive this creativity and as I see it, the usage-based model provides a coherent architecture for doing just that.

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