

## PhR 2019 Philological Readings

### THE INTERPRETIVE DOMINANT IN THE COGNITIVE THEORY OF LANGUAGE

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#### *Abstract*

The aim of the article is to propose a cognitive theory of language as a unity of three aspects: representative, communicative, and interpretive that, on the one hand, respectively corresponds to the three main functions of language: cognitive, communicative, and interpretive, and, on the other, to the three systems of categorization realizing these functions: lexical, grammatical, and interpretive. It traditionally been held that language performs two basic functions (cognitive and communicative) and a number of complementary ones: aesthetical, emotional, meta-linguistic, orientating, manipulative, etc. In contrast with the traditional view we argue that all complementary functions are in fact nothing else but various specifications of the third basic function – the interpreting one. It grounds in the interpretive nature of cognition and language themselves, in their obvious integrity and is substantiated at the categorical level of language evincing special interpretive (modus) categories and tools of meaning construction. This assumption constitutes the Interpretive Commitment of any cognitive theory of language and the nature of that commitment is also substantiated in the article as well the types of linguistic interpretation and the cognitive models and schemas underlying it. Specifically, the article distinguishes between primary and secondary linguistic interpretation as its basic types, models of interpretation of the physical world and society, and those of interpretation of knowledge about the world and society. Some specific functions and types of linguistic interpretation are also outlined, among them selective interpretation, classification, and evaluation.

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of *language and the knowledge it represents* is in the mainstream of current theoretical and empirical research oriented towards the study of cognitive processes and how they are instantiated in language (Brandt, 2016; Chilton, 2014; Givón, 2005; Kövecses, 2015; McCune, 2016; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2015; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez & Masegosa, 2014; Taylor, 2014). Various approaches, within which the problem has been addressed, have revealed numerous theoretical frameworks for understanding the crucial role of language as a tool for both collective and individual thinking. These theoretical frameworks based on linguistic, behavioral and psychological evidence, however, need to be modified in accordance with the *Interpretive Commitment*.

## 2. Problem Statement

The Interpretive Commitment places linguistic issues in the broader perspective of human cognition and conceptual organization by analyzing linguistic interpretation as a cognitive process. This provides deeper insights into the structure of the mind and conformity of linguistic and cognitive structures. Various studies of language use, of language structure and its categories within the framework of cognitive semantics give much evidence that language as a cognitive ability can have great impact on the content and functioning of the mind (Boldyrev, 2016, 2017, 2018). Our claim is that the exploration of problems of language-and-mind interplay needs to be accounted for not only from a cognitive but also from an interpretive perspective. This approach to language as an important interpretive factor in the structure of mind is what is referred to in the article as the Interpretive Commitment of Cognitive Linguistics.

The claimed approach is based on the Theory of Linguistic Interpretation, for details see also (Boldyrev, 2011, 2014) as part and further development of the Theory of Cognitive Semantics. Its main assumptions are: 1) that cognition and language-use are highly interpretive processes; 2) therefore language performs the three main functions: cognitive, communicative, and interpretive; 3) linguistic structures, categories, and forms play a significant role as cognitive schemas mediating processes of perception, structuring the mind, and communicating knowledge.

The problem is that there is a very large body of data demonstrating that knowledge representation involves three functions of language, rather than two as has traditionally been held before: that of cognitive, communicative and *interpretive*, the latter being no less significant than the former two. These functions respectively correspond to the three main aspects of language: representative, communicative, and interpretive, and the three types of language categories: lexical, grammatical, and modus, or interpretive.

## 3. Research Questions

Following from the problem stated the research questions to be dealt in the article are: to identify and explore representational, semiotic and interpretive aspects of language as correlating to its cognitive, communicative, and the interpretive functions; to complement and enhance existing theoretical frameworks with relevant methods, procedures and analytical techniques sufficient for analyzing

language as a threefold integral unity with special interest on its inalienable interpretive aspect as one of the dominants which cannot be neglected in any sound cognitive theory of language.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The **aim** of the article is to propose a universal theory of how knowledge operates in language as a threefold unity in its static and dynamic aspects, i.e. how the functions of language correspond to its main aspects, including linguistic conceptualization and categorization. In fact, the three functions (cognitive, communicative and interpretive) correlate with cognitive processes of conceptualization and categorization and account for the three types of representations of knowledge about the world in language: lexical representation, grammatical representation and modus representation. Correspondingly, language as a system of knowledge representation manifests itself in representational (proper), semiotic and interpretive aspects that reveal its cognitive, communicative and interpretive functions.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Obviously, the methodology to the theory of knowledge representation in language including its interpretive aspect at most comprises methods applied in Cognitive Semantics. Depending on knowledge formats the methodologies can be grouped into standard and non-standard. The first group (standard) of methods encompasses well-known techniques that are employed to analyze conceptually simple formats of knowledge, such as conceptual analysis proper, prototype-based analysis, frame semantics analysis, etc. Methods of the second type (non-standard) are mostly innovative and are specially devised to analyze conceptually complex (multi-component, integrative, multi-aspect, matrix) formats, such as categorical analysis, concept-based linguistic taxonomy analysis, cognitive-matrix analysis, the analysis of the cognitive-discursive interpretante and some other techniques, see for more details (Boldyrev, 2018).

#### **6. Findings**

The representational aspect of language provides linguistic formats of knowledge that reveal how speakers conceptualize and categorize the world in language and through it. There are two types of linguistic formats of knowledge: conceptually simple formats and conceptually complex formats. Conceptually simple formats include outline-schemas, notions, prototypes, and other types of concepts and are characterized by sets of elementary or predictable attributes. For example, to identify a bird a speaker needs to know that birds have two wings, two feet, one beak, feathers, lays eggs.

Conceptually complex formats are defined by sets of components and their obligatory and optional characteristics, as well as by sets of conceptual domains. For example, the word *culture*, depending upon the situation, activates either TRADITIONS, NORMS, VALUES, or MENTAL HEALTH as different cognitive contexts. As well as propositions, frames and other multi-component formats, conceptually complex formats encompass categories as integral knowledge formats and cognitive matrices as multi-aspectual knowledge formats. They all are structurally different in principles of their organization, based either on prototypes, or family resemblances, logical constraints, matrices, etc.

All concepts as knowledge structures are functionally subdivided into static (thematic) and dynamic (situational, or operational). Thematic concepts represent overall knowledge of the world gained during the years and shared by the communities. They ground all sorts of categories and particular linguistic meanings constructed in discourse. Thematic concepts obviously can differ in content and configuration in individual human minds. Operational concepts are always situated and highly depended upon contexts. They are the meanings the speakers construe and exchange in communication. The thematic and operational concepts are related to one another as background and situational knowledge. The latter emerge in the processes of configuration of the former by means of various cognitive or linguistic mechanisms (construal operations), such as: profiling, focus shifting, double focusing, orientation, implication, inference, conceptual or linguistic derivation (Langacker, 1991).

The three-level conceptualization and categorization of natural objects (Rosch, 1978) give rise to **basic, super-ordinate, and subordinate categories**. As a rule, they are lexically accessed within logically constrained systems of organization as variants or invariants. Their reference points involve names of categories proper. Abstracted from the particular properties of objects, actions, and states names of categories thus function as **intro-linguistic points of reference**, or **prototype-based means of knowledge representation in language**: *a sparrow is a small brownish-grey **bird**; palm is a **tree** growing in warm climates, with no branches and a mass of large wide leaves at the top; salmon – large **fish**, valued for food.*

In language, all **lexical categories** as logically organized groups of words naming natural objects build on the invariant-variant principle. They represent knowledge of the world proper (as human beings perceive it) and therefore they are analogous to natural categories in structure and content: **bird** (*robin, sparrow, swallow, parrot, nightingale, etc.*); **tree** (*oak, birch-tree, fir-tree, pine-tree, maple, etc.*). Besides lexical categories, the linguistic categorical system also encompasses grammatical and modus categories. **Grammatical categories** as groups of grammatical forms govern the principles of language organization and verbal communication. Hence, they are natural categories in language (unlike lexical categories, which represent the structure of the world and the knowledge of objects, actions, and states, rather than the knowledge of language) that build on the prototype principle inherent in natural categories at the basic level. **Modus**, or interpretive, categories are specifically human-oriented categories which serve to interpret and re-interpret knowledge (once verbalized) of the world: negation, evaluation, definiteness, evidentiality, norm, style, intonation, etc. Their specific quality resides in their inalienable relation to other categories as objects of interpretation on which they derive their particular meaning: *good mother, good teacher, good swimmer, good student, good liar*, etc. Structurally, they can appear as logic-based or prototype-based categories, or both, inheriting the structure of the category which is under interpretation.

The **semiotic aspect of language** corresponds to the semiotic function and meaning-construction process in discourse. It reveals the interplay of thematic and situational concepts that are activated by speakers and provide for their communicative needs. Each dynamic meaning is a construct that is activated in the process of language use by virtue of a particular construal operation. In this respect, the difference between the conventionalized meaning of a word and its dynamic construal reveals the interplay of collective and individual knowledge of the world. If the former (conventionalized word-

meaning) is oriented towards collective world knowledge, the latter (dynamic construal) involves individual cognitive schemata that are activated within individual conceptual systems.

Meaning-construction is highly dependent on contexts of knowledge that speakers possess as representatives of particular societies and cultures. The conceptual systems of individuals reflect patterns of behavior, ways of living and are influenced by social status, age, gender, level of education, occupation, etc. Cognitive contexts are specified within thematically-structured conceptual domains: HUMANS, ANIMALS, PLANTS, NATURE, ARTEFACTS, TIME, SPACE, etc., static by nature. The outcomes of verbal communication depend upon mutual “*conceptual cooperation*” or mutual adaption of conceptual systems of all participants. This cooperation is largely dependent upon the conformity of 1) structure and content of their individual conceptual systems (world image), 2) their language-usage experience, 3) the adequate estimation of the interlocutor's scope of knowledge, and 4) the choice of meaning-construction mechanisms (construal operations) and relative contexts, both cognitive and linguistic.

Particular-meaning construction in discourse aligns with object-of-speech categorization as well as *functional categorization* of the linguistic units chosen to express this meaning. The analytical procedure related to the process of functional meaning construction is referred to in the article as the **functional semiotic approach**. It reveals three main principles: *actualization* of the systemic meaning of the word (*She counted the audience*), *word re-categorization* (referring it to some other category which entails change of its meaning: *Your opinion counts*), and *poly-categorization* (associating the word with two different categories which allow to convey two meanings simultaneously: *She counted down the expenses* – 'counted' + 'reduced', or as in the "sneezing napkin" case: *She sneezed the napkin off the table* – 'action + causing').

The *interpretive aspect of language* refers to linguistic interpretation of collective knowledge of the world within individual conceptual systems. From this perspective, there are **two main types of linguistic interpretation**: primary and secondary. The first (primary) deals with interpretation of the world as a variety of events or objects and results in lexical concepts, categories and lexical units as names of species, types, and sorts. Secondary interpretation involves secondary conceptualization and secondary categorization of conventionalized knowledge as it is verbalized in language. It results in grammatical (different grammatical representations of subject – predicate, theme – rheme, topic – comment relations, choice of syntactic structures, etc.), and evaluative (modus) conceptualization and categorization, often metaphorical when names of objects from one domain are applied to characterize elements of other cognitive domains.

These types are represented by **three general models (patterns) of linguistic interpretation**: a linguistic model of interpretation of the physical world, a linguistic model of interpretation of the human society, and a linguistic model of interpretation of the acquired knowledge of the physical world and society. Each model employs its own schemas of linguistic interpretation: propositional, spatial, temporal, metaphoric, or metonymic. All three models call upon corresponding contexts of knowledge and values of overall and socio-cultural nature in which the interpretive power of linguistic units and categories comes to light.

All functions and aspects of language can only be separated and examined apart for research reasons. In real communication, they are inseparable and align in conformity. The relationship of the first (representational aspect of language) with the second (semiotic) and the third (interpretive) reveals itself in a diversity of language units that are relevant for particular verbal communication (various parts and patterns of speech, sentence structures). These language units activate verbally constrained knowledge shared by the majority of the speakers of a language.

Interpretation is deeply ingrained in knowledge representation and verbal communication. There is much linguistic evidence that the cognitive activity of every human being is intentionally biased: the environment, the territory, the social status, the level of education, etc. influence the structure and content of human conceptual systems. Interpretation as a process is based on and deeply embedded in schemata that are represented by language as a tool for collective thinking.

The interrelation of the second (semiotic) and the third (interpretive) aspects of language, argued by researchers in cognitive psychology (Barsalou, 2015), is clearly demonstrated by a variety of language units that represent individual knowledge dependent upon the speaker's background. The interrelation of interpretation, representation and communication is objectified by **selection, classification and evaluation** as basic cognitive processes activated in cognition and discourse construction.

**Selective interpretation** accounts for the choice speakers make when they construe the world, profile an idea or favour some language units over others. Selective interpretation gives reasons for differences in discourse construction due to speakers' occupation, culture, background knowledge: a hockey player, a fan, a reporter, or a first-comer to the match will differently profile and use different constructions and lexical words for the description of one and the same hockey match. We call the speaker's choice as to what to say and how to say it the **subjective principle** of discourse construction. It is constrained by the context of the speaker's overall, socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge, i.e. by his/her conceptual system and linguistic image of the world, see also (Boldyrev & Dubrovskaya, 2016).

**Classification** is linked to secondary representation of events/objects, etc. that, in turn, reveals the results of secondary conceptualization and secondary categorization. It results in abstract notions relative to all sorts of taxonomies, as well as in names of categories and in words describing mental conditions, feelings and emotions. It accounts for the speaker's system of values and norms that are constitutive of their worldview. The interrelation of classification and the semiotic aspect of language is manifested in grammatical interpretation of the knowledge of the world, i.e. in the grammatical system of language. Complex sentences, for example, can classify and present a string of events as a conceptual unity imposing different relations between them so that one event becomes more salient while the rest serve as its conceptual background.

**Evaluative interpretation** is reflected in the inherently human ability to use language for activating appraisal / assessment schemata. Language, in this case, manifests what norms, standards, values speakers have acquired as representatives of societies and cultures and how they adapt their worldviews to contexts of discourse construction. Processes of evaluative conceptualization and evaluative categorization are an integral part of human cognition. **Evaluative concepts and categories** share all modus specific features: they are secondary in knowledge representation, relative to particular contexts, inherit the structure and content of the evaluated entities. Linguistic evaluative categories

include not only typical lexical units meant for the evaluation of objects, but also grammatical constructions and inherently neutral words in their secondary evaluative or metaphoric meanings (*The jewel of a woman. Red heat. Dark thoughts*, etc.).

The interrelation of linguistic and cognitive processes as well as correlation and interplay of verbal and non-verbal knowledge highlights the vital role of language not only in the process of cognition itself, but also in structuring the human system of knowledge and shaping its cognitive dominants or personal constructs, as G. Kelly terms it in Personality Theory (Kelly, 1963) which, in turn, makes the individual conceptual system of a particular speaker unique in many ways.

## 7. Conclusion

The interplay and conformity of the three aspects of language with a dominating role of the interpretive aspect make the core idea of the Theory of Knowledge Representation in Language presented in the article. These aspects correlate with the three functions of language and with the three systems of linguistic conceptualization and linguistic categorization that all merge into the integral whole of the linguistic representation system. Primary representation of knowledge of the world (conceptualization and categorization of events / objects, etc.) is maintained by its selective interpretation. It is shared by the speech community and is oriented towards principles of verbal communication. The latter, in turn, is involved in semiotic processes of meaning-construction, which are also inherently interpretive. Secondary representation (secondary conceptualization and secondary categorization) takes place when speakers classify, evaluate and re-interpret knowledge of the world to construct individual meanings in discourse.

The integrative unity of language as a functional system for operating with knowledge is based upon the inalienable links between conceptualization and categorization and is supported by their interpretative nature, as well as by the causal relation between linguistic and conceptual structures in verbal communication. It also comes from the need for language to simultaneously perform different functions.

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