

Making sense and documenting meaning: semantic fieldwork on seNdebele and isiNdebele

Intersubjectivity lecture series, Axel Fleisch. Friday, 3 Feb 2017 (12-14).

Abstract

Cognitive linguists have long emphasized the close ties between lexicon and grammar. While attempts at giving up on the distinction between both altogether may be somewhat controversial, their close interplay is generally recognized for some domain. Tense and aspect in Bantu languages is one of these.

These languages often have a complex array of grammatical tense-aspect categories. At the same time verbs fall into a number of lexical aspect (or aktionsart) classes. In practice, one needs to understand these interaction mechanisms in order to account for examples as the following:

- (1) a. *ngi-dlal-ile* b. *ngi-kwat-ile*
 1SG-play-PERF 1SG-get.angry-PERF
 ‘I (have) played’ ‘I am angry’

The TA marker *-ile* with yields perfect/recent past meaning with durative activity verbs like *-dlala* ‘play’, but a present state meaning with a change-of-state verb like *-kwata* ‘become angry’. The lexical characterization of verbs (“activity”, “change-of-state”...) is not a simple task.

Meaning is not stable, and pragmatic triggers can override an alleged lexical aspectual class membership. The theoretical implications are significant. Cognitive linguists and construction grammarians have long stories to tell about how these issues matter with regard to the construal of meaning in real-time communication, conventional polysemies and lexical meanings of words (cf. Croft 2012).

The practical implications for descriptive field linguists are significant. We need to tackle lexical semantics systematically for the purpose of grammatical analysis (cf. Bar-el 2015). At the same time, we learn that meaning is malleable, fluid, and construed on the fly (cf. e.g. Lüpke and Storch 2013). How do we deal with this in practice?

The talk illustrates our methodological and technical approach with examples from our field work in South Africa. Relevant aspects are that speakers of very different backgrounds are consulted (some of whom would have been dismissed as consultants in descriptive fieldwork not so long ago, but turned out to contribute highly valuable information). Moreover, data collection procedures move from 1:1 elicitation to richer linguistic-ethnographic interviews, often with more than one interviewer, and more than one interviewee participating in the same session.

Bringing these insights to the bigger picture – how does this relate to an interest in intersubjectivity? There is quite a fundamental impact of linguistic frameworks that pay attention to intersubjectivity, assume meaning as being construed on-the-fly, and deconstruct the idea of “grammar-as-coherent-system”. For descriptive linguists such notions challenge the core subject matter of what they actually try to research. For language contact research, the fact that language emerges intersubjectively in actual communication is a significant challenge, because it typically relies strongly on the assumption of underlying clear grammars, languages as well delineated semiotic systems (“strategic essentialism”, if you will). The tasks change from discovering a language’s grammar as a pre-existing mechanism (highly structured, so close to rule-like that for a long time grammars were actually believed to be a set of rules) to documenting strongly patterned, recurrent linguistic behaviour.

References

- Bar-el, Leora. 2015. Documenting and classifying aspectual classes across languages. In M. Ryan Bochnak and Lisa Matthewson (eds), *Methodologies in Semantic Fieldwork*, 75-109. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Croft, William. 2012. *Verbs: Aspect and causal structure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lüpke, Friederike and Anne Storch. 2013. *Repertoires and Choices in African Languages*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.