The semantics and pragmatics of mirativity: a constructional account

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Abstract

Surprise is most likely a universal human emotion; it thus comes as no surprise that many languages have specific tools, either lexical or grammatical, to convey this emotion. This leads DeLancey (1991, 2012) to suggest that mirativity (the linguistic expression of surprise) is a linguistic universal, a view that has been contested, however (see, for example, Hill 2012). Whether or not mirativity is indeed a linguistic universal, is very much still an empirical question requiring more typological research.

Focussing on the grammatical expressions of mirativity, a distinction is to be made, as T. Peterson (2015) observes, between non-parasitic expressions of mirativity (expressions whose sole purpose is to express surprise) and parasitic expressions of mirativity, where the surprise reading is a derived reading (usually via pragmatic inferencing) of expressions that initially serve a different purpose (hence 'parasitic'). A good example is the English *What is X doing Y* construction which strictly speaking is a WH-question asking for information but which has become, via 'pragmatic contamination' so to speak, a (parasitic) expression of the speaker's (typically negative) surprise. A variety of linguistic expressions with such pragmatically induced mirative readings have been discussed in the literature, such as (i) markers of evidentiality (see, e.g., Aksu-Koç & Slobin 1989 on Turkish evidential marker *-miş* or J. Peterson (2000) on Nepali evidential marker *-e*), (ii) markers of perfectivity or agentivity (see, e.g., Montaut 2006 on the aorist in Hindi, Dickinson 2000 on Tsafiki, Peterson 2015 on Gitksan), (iii) copula (see, e.g., Napiorkowska 2016 on the deictic copula *dule* in Neo-Aramaic), or (iv) complex predicates (see, e.g., Wiklund 2009 on Swedish *gå och V* 'go and V').

In this talk, we will present some important theoretical and descriptive insights with respect to mirativity, drawing on our corpus-based analysis aspectuo-mirative light verb constructions in Odia, an Indo-Aryan language (see Sahoo 2001; Lemmens & Sahoo 2017, subm.; Sahoo & Lemmens, forthc.). In addition to bringing an important descriptive contribution to the study of (non parasitic) expressions of mirativity, our study reveals that mirativity is a more complex conceptual category than is generally assumed in the literature. Our constructional account of the aspectuo-mirative light verbs in Odia offers a theoretically and descriptively more accurate view of different constructions that in the literature often erroneously have been lumped together under the heading "light verbs" (see also Butt 2010 for some discussion). Given the contextual variability of the mirative value of these light verb constructions, the discussion also considers the theoretical challenge of the semantics/pragmatics interface which, even in a constructional framework, remains to be addressed. In fact, the Odia aspectuo-mirative light verbs are a good illustration of the "constructionalisation" of speaker attitude and/or of cultural presuppositions and norms.

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