

“Near” present, “distal” past, and ‘future of fate’: Temporal distance and its perspectival effects on the textual surface

Sonja Zeman (LMU München)

“All the metaphors of distance [...] follow the same mental space configuration” (Dancygier / Vandelanotte 2009: 326)

“Distance” is, first of all, a metaphorical concept taking as its source concept the spatial relation between (at least) two different points which are locally separated from each other, one of them (mostly) serving as a reference point / origo. With regard to the central question of the conference what is the common denominator of the various uses of the concept of distance, it is argued that this “space in-between” (Dancygier / Vandelanotte 2009: 326) sets the prerequisite for grammatical perspectivization in general as perspectivization necessarily presupposes the potential of two different viewpoints. In this respect, the concept of “distance” is not so much seen as a linguistic category by itself but as a fundamental as well as a ubiquitous relation which lies at the bottom of every linguistic conceptualization.

Against this background, the paper argues for two main claims: First, it is claimed that all grammatical categories are based on the same basic principle of distance. As the different categories aspect, tense, mood, and modality equally code the origo’s localization, the basic opposition of all grammatical categories can be reduced to a binary opposition (i.e. “near” vs. “not near” / “origo-inclusive” vs. “origo-exclusive”). According to the “proximal” vs. “distal” axis (cf. Langacker 1991: ch. 6), it is thus possible to capture the empirical fact that tense markers due to their “grounding” presuppositions always inherently imply epistemic meanings (cf. e.g. Portner 2003; Jaszczolt 2009; Langacker 2011; Patard 2011).

Second, it is argued that the basic principle of distance is also crucial for explaining the perspectival effects of tense usage on the textual level where the grammatical distinction between “speaker” vs. “evaluator” is reflected within the narratological differentiation between “narrator” vs. “character”. As an example for an “effect of epistemicity” on the textual surface, the use of German *sollen* + Inf. as “praeteritum pro futuro”, also termed “future of fate”, (e.g. *Er sollte sie nie wieder sehen.*) is discussed which, due to its combining of temporal and modal meanings, reveals the relationship between temporal and modal distance and its metalinguistic effects on the textual surface. Against this background, the descriptive potential of “distance” can thus be seen in its capability to capture the recursive principle of perspectivation on the different levels of linguistic structure.

References

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