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From cognitive-functional linguistics to dialogic syntax

Abstract: Dialogic syntax investigates the linguistic, cognitive, and interactional processes involved when language users reproduce selected aspects of a prior utterance, and when recipients respond to the parallelisms and resonances that result, drawing inferences for situated meaning. The phenomenon typically arises when a language user constructs an utterance modeled in part on the utterance of a prior speaker or author. The result is resonance, defined as the catalytic activation of affinities across utterances. This paper presents the concept of dialogic syntax and outlines some directions of current research on dialogic resonance, as represented in this Special Issue.

Keywords: dialogic syntax, resonance, affinities, parallelism, priming, dialogicality, cognitive-functional linguistics

DOI 10.1515/cog-2014-0023

Received January 1, 2014; revised May 19, 2014; accepted May 20, 2014.

The idea of cognitive linguistics has long stood as an ideal of inquiry, guiding a diverse array of studies carried out in its name. United with its intellectual companion in functionalism, the banner of a cognitive-functional linguistics now inspires a still broader range of efforts to understand how language works, and what role human cognition plays in its workings. Like any ideal, there is a lot to live up to. One could say that the enterprise of cognitive-functional linguistics is on track to fulfill its promise, as more and more studies enrich the scope of the field. The goal is nothing less than to build on, and renew, the intellectual foundations for a new understanding of language. At the same time, the empirical basis for cognitive-functional linguistics is deepening as well, with a convergence of corpus and experimental evidence (Gries et al. 2005) becoming increasingly recognized as critical for effective inquiry.

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Dialogic syntax (Du Bois 2007, this issue) can be seen as pursuing one line within this theoretical and methodological trajectory. Though young as a theory, it fits firmly in the framework of a broader cognitive-functional linguistics. Dialogic syntax investigates the linguistic, cognitive, and interactional processes involved when language users reproduce selected aspects of a prior utterance, and when recipients respond to the parallelisms and resonances that result, drawing inferences for situated meaning. From a structural perspective, dialogic syntax looks at how the linguistic structure of engagement is articulated through the structural coupling of otherwise independent syntactic configurations of signs. From a functional perspective, it looks at how the induced resonances serve the communicative, cognitive, and collaborative goals of language users. As an observable phenomenon, dialogic syntax typically arises when a language user constructs an utterance modeled in part on the utterance of a prior speaker or author. Aspects of the prior speaker's words, structures, and other linguistic resources are selectively reproduced by the current speaker. For example:

(1) (*Risk* SBC024: 301.235–304.400)

- 1 DAN; I'm not smart?
- 2 (0.3)
- 3 JENNIFER; You're stupid.

Although not a single word or morpheme is reproduced verbatim here, there is strong parallelism nonetheless, based on affinities between pronouns (*I* : *you*), copula (*'m* : *'re*), copular clausal structure, and even the antonyms *smart* and *stupid*. As is evident here, parallelism in structure need not imply equivalence in meaning or function. The rhetorical goals of interlocutors may be shared or opposed, or even simply orthogonal. The linkage induced by parallelism nevertheless tends to invite the perception of affinity, understood to include both similarities and differences. Affinities are easy to perceive when the paired utterances are immediately adjacent in conversation, but they are by no means ruled out when distances are greater, as the phenomena of literary allusion and prior text attest. By the same token, dialogic syntax is implicated whether the parallel utterances come from two speakers or one. Dialogic syntax is not about syntax used in dialogue, but engagement with the words of those who have spoken before.

A fundamental concept of dialogic syntax is resonance; this is the central focus of this special issue. Resonance can be defined as “the catalytic activation of affinities across utterances” uttered within and between speakers (Du Bois, this issue), appearing in both prior and future context (Giora 2007). Resonance is not intrinsic to any element alone, but is always a property of the relation between two or more elements in discourse. The affinities activated may be based on

similarity, but also on difference. Any aspect of language can give rise to resonance, if there is suitable structural parallelism to support the perception of affinity. Resonance can arise across pairs of signs, morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, constructions, or speech acts, and indeed across all of these levels at once within a single utterance. (This is in fact evident in example 1.) The perception of resonance is enhanced when linguistic elements are placed in parallel structural configurations. Resonance may be systemic, based on stable properties of the language that are available to all members of the community; or it may be dynamic, constructed on the fly in ways that may be comprehensible only to those who were present in the dialogic moment. Resonance, while not obligatory, is nevertheless pervasive in language use. It is versatile enough to serve as the basic currency of dialogic engagement.

The study of dialogic syntax draws on a broad range of analytical tools, including parallelism, priming, analogy, and dialogicality. Parallelism articulates mappings between pairs of utterances, based in part on their internal structure (Harris 1952; Jakobson 1966). Priming creates cognitive conditions of enhanced activation for recently used linguistic forms and structures, facilitating their reuse in subsequent utterances (Bock 1986; Cutler 2012; Gries 2005; Pickering and Ferreira 2008). Analogy builds on parallelism and priming but develops further their consequences for inference, interpretation, and grammaticization (Anttila 2003; Gentner and Christie 2010; Gentner and Markman 1997). Dialogicality situates the use and interpretation of language within a discursive field already inhabited by the utterances of predecessors, generating affordances for the creative elaboration of new meanings (Bakhtin 1981 [1934]; Voloshinov 1973 [1929]).

But the goals dialogic syntax sets for itself go still further. Dialogic syntax proposes to identify a new level of structural organization of language, which crosses the boundary between interlocutors to link their parallel forms, meanings, and actions. The result is a dynamic structure, the *diagraph* (Du Bois, this issue), imbued with local significance for what interlocutors can jointly accomplish, and with the potential to create global impacts on the process of grammaticization. By attending to dynamic coupling in the diagraph, and its consequences both immediate and enduring, dialogic syntax seeks to articulate new questions about the relation between cognition, interaction, and the emergence of language.

These themes are developed at length in the first paper in this volume, “Towards a dialogic syntax.” John Du Bois argues for the need to recognize a new form of syntax, dialogic syntax, which “encompasses the linguistic, cognitive, and interactional processes involved when speakers selectively reproduce aspects of prior utterances, and when recipients recognize the resulting parallelisms and draw inferences from them” (Du Bois, this issue). This paper introduces

the fundamental theoretical and methodological tools of dialogic syntax, including parallelism, resonance, reproduction, and the diagraph. The diagraph (from *dia-* ‘across’ plus *graph* ‘mapping’, or ‘mapping across’) is recognized as “a higher-order, supra-sentential syntactic structure that emerges from the structural coupling of two or more utterances (or utterance portions), through the mapping of a structured array of resonance relations between them.” Du Bois explores the conditions which give rise to resonance (defined as “the catalytic activation of affinities across utterances”), as well as the reciprocal role of resonance in constructing the diagraph. He situates the theory of dialogic syntax with respect to related theories, past and present, and outlines some directions for future research.

In “Dialogic resonance and intersubjective engagement in autism,” John Du Bois, Peter Hobson, and Jessica Hobson explore the role of language in realizing the human capacity for intersubjective engagement, as exhibited in the discourse of children and adolescents with autism. Methodologically, this study provides the first experimental evidence of inter-rater reliability for ratings of dialogic resonance (for example, for typically and atypically developed frame grabs). Results show that the experimental group’s conversations exhibited unusual forms of dialogic resonance. Importantly, however, they were rated as *similar* to control participants in manifesting typically developed frame grabs, in which dialogic resonance occurred with coherent expansion of the conversational partner’s utterance. The study of dialogic resonance is sufficiently nuanced to reveal a mix of capacities and limitations in children with autism, as children with autism are shown to be sensitive to dialogic resonance.

In “Resonating with contextually inappropriate interpretations in production: The case of irony”, Rachel Giora, Moshe Raphaely, Ofer Fein, and Elad Livnat explore the question of how speakers resonate with utterances that have more than one interpretation. Which of the interpretations will speakers tend to echo? Will it be the more contextually appropriate one, or the more salient? According to the graded salience hypothesis (Giora 2003 and Giora et al., this issue), speakers are expected to resonate with accessible rather than appropriate interpretations. Thus, it is not only the appropriate interpretation, such as the sarcastic interpretation of an ironic utterance, that may be resonated with. In fact, given that this interpretation is nonsalient/noncoded and thus low in accessibility, it should be hard to relate to. In contrast, salience-based interpretations, which are constructed on the basis of the salient/coded meanings of the utterance components, are high on accessibility (Giora 2011). They should therefore be easier to resonate with, despite their contextual incompatibility. Indeed, Giora et al.’s (this issue) corpus-based results show that speakers resonate significantly more often with the salience-based albeit contextually inappropriate interpretations

of their own utterances rather than with their intended sarcastic/ironic interpretation.

In their paper “Towards a dialogic construction grammar: *Ad hoc* routines and resonance activation”, Geert Brône and Elisabeth Zima take a broad theoretical perspective on the central issues of this volume, exploring the theoretical affinities and potential symbiosis between various forms of cognitive-functional linguistics, especially dialogic syntax and construction grammar. Based on their dialogic analysis of contested discourse in Austrian parliamentary debates and political talk-shows, Brône and Zima introduce the idea of “ad hoc constructions.” They propose that “the type of structural mapping relations between juxtaposed utterances as described in dialogic syntax, can acquire the status of ad hoc constructions or locally entrenched form-meaning pairings within the boundaries of an ongoing interaction.” Based on extensive diagraph analyses, they show that these ad hoc constructional routines exhibit local productivity, providing evidence for processes of (micro-)entrenchment operating within the scope of a single interaction. Their paper suggests a number of ways in which the goals and insights of dialogic syntax can be fruitfully integrated with those of construction grammar, with wider implications for cognitive-functional linguistics.

In “Dialogic syntax and complement constructions in toddlers’ peer interactions”, Bahar Köymen and Amy Kyratzis examine young children’s use of language in interaction, identifying a prominent role for dialogic resonance. In particular, they identified 151 tokens of complement constructions (containing matrix verbs like *let*, *want*, *say*, etc.) produced by seven target children, culled from a large videotaped database of the discourse of very young children. Focusing on the complement constructions, Köymen and Kyratzis show that toddlers align with their own prior utterances as well as with those of their interlocutors (peers and caregivers), often as part of taking a stance (Du Bois 2007; Goodwin and Kyratzis 2011). They show that three out of four complements were primed within 20 clauses or less within the prior discourse. The complement constructions regularly realize one of two distinct communicative practices: “self-expansions,” in which the child attempts to secure compliance to a previously issued directive; and “complaints”, in which the child attempts to manipulate a participation framework (e.g., recruiting an adult to intervene on the child’s behalf). The scaffolding of complex syntactic constructions across collaborating co-participants suggests that this represents an instance of dialogic bootstrapping (Du Bois, this issue).

In “Complementation in linear and dialogic syntax: The case of Hebrew divergently aligned discourse”, Yael Maschler and Bracha Nir look at how dialogic co-participants produce complex syntactic structures in the context of dialogic engagement in contested interaction. Specifically, they examine instances of the

syntactic embedding of one construction in another, using the Hebrew complementizer *še* ‘that’, *im* ‘if’, or a question word. The co-existence of dialogic resonance and divergent alignment (Du Bois 2007, this issue) links this paper with the contributions of Brône and Zima (this issue) and Köymen and Kyratzis (this issue). From a theoretical point of view, Maschler and Nir reflect on the respective contributions of traditional (linear) syntax and dialogic syntax, considering how they interact to yield a more complete picture of complex Hebrew syntax from a discourse-functional perspective. Introducing the dialogic syntax perspective affords a new level of understanding of the emergence of grammar, as interlocutors’ practices in conversational interaction shape the grammaticization of discourse markers in tandem with new syntactic constructions.

Each in its own way, the papers of this special issue present observations and ideas which open up new perspectives on the linguistic, cognitive, and interactional dimensions of a prevalent but understudied aspect of language use: dialogic resonance. The simple act of reproducing words, structures, and concepts drawn from the prior discourse of an interlocutor brings utterances together in intimate relationship, articulating a structural coupling in the diagraph. The reactance between corresponding elements triggers the activation of affinities across utterances, yielding a combinatorial explosion of possibilities with rich consequences for meaning, interaction, cognition, and grammar. The studies in this volume offer a first glimpse into some of the possibilities opened up by dialogic syntax, and suggest how many more remain to be discovered.

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