Beyond intersubjectivity: some cross-linguistic evidence for the motivation for constructional structure in language

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In a recent monograph, Verhagen (2005) makes a compelling case for analyzing several phenomena that have been central to linguistic theorizing over the past few decades, such as negation, clausal complementation and discourse connectives, as involving an intersubjective dimension—that is, a dimension at which the speaker/writer invites the addressee to coordinate cognitively with her by construing the situation in a certain way. Verhagen associates this dimension with a basic human ability for conceiving of others—and hence of oneself—as intentional agents (Tomasello 1999); once the human infant—around the age of nine months—is able to represent others as separate agents with their own intentional states, it can attempt to manipulate those states in various ways. While meticulously put together based on detailed analyses of empirical data, what this picture lacks is a motivation why humans should have an interest in coordinating cognitively along these lines. This paper takes up this question through an analysis of two constructions, one from English and one from Greek, that leads to the conclusion that in both cases, what interlocutors are managing, more than simply their construal of the situation, is their interactional positioning with respect to each other—or, what has been called in the anthropological literature, their ‘face’.

The English construction discussed is the familiar ‘let alone’ construction. According to standard analyses, including Verhagen’s own (2005: 35-41, 60-69), the function of this construction is to reconcile conflicting Gricean demands for informativeness and relevance, by enabling the speaker to address a proposition that is ‘on the table’ given prior discourse (satisfying Relation) while simultaneously indicating her awareness of the greater informativeness of another proposition (satisfying Quantity). These analyses ignore the second sub-maxim of Quantity (Grice 1989: 26), which places an upper bound on informativeness. In contrast to these standard analyses, it is proposed that the speaker’s reasons for providing the additional information lie with considerations of face: the additional information may function as a ritual gift to the addressee, intended to achieve approaching; or it may signal the speaker’s privileged state of knowledge with respect to the addressee, intended to achieve disassociation and withdrawal. In either case, the motivation is to be found at the level, not of maxim-like injunctions, but of the management of interpersonal relations.

The second construction discussed is the Greek \( o\iota\ na+V \) (NEG SUBJ V) construction which functions to express ‘requests not to X’ in conversational data. When \( o\iota\ na+V \) carries this force, certain further conditions—a particular intonational pattern, informality of the setting, and familiarity between participants—tend to hold. Pragmatically, the import of the construction \( o\iota\ na+V \) may be modeled as a conventional implicature: it introduces into the discourse context the affirmative of the proposition expressed in the negated clause as something the addressee may be tempted or likely to do, and proceeds to warn the addressee against V-ing. By taking the hearer’s perspective on things and proceeding to advise him/her accordingly, \( o\iota\ na+V \) emerges as an interpersonal management device intended to achieve approaching, which also accounts for its situational distribution. In sum, the cross-linguistic evidence discussed in this paper suggests that considerations of face, defined as a basic dimension of approach/withdrawal directed at an Other as distinct from Self (Terkourafi 2007), play a pivotal part in motivating constructions of intersubjectivity in language.

References

