Indexicality

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Proposal

The concept of indexicality – originating in the semiotics of C.S. Peirce and his triad symbol, icon and index – has been applied in the description of a broad range of linguistic phenomena, from the internal workings of phonology and morphology via relations within syntactic constructions and lexical and grammatical elements designed to hook on to features outside the clause, to the choice of linguistic variants in social interaction.

In morphology, indexicality has been employed to describe the semiotic function of bound allomorphs (Anttila 1975, Andersen 2008: 29, see also Andersen 2010, Carstairs-McCarthy 2001, Enger 2019).

Case in languages such as Modern German have been analysed as having indexical meaning, as in (1), where the nominative, accusative and dative case index the ditransitive predicate *empfehlen* ‘recommend’ that assigns argument status and semantic roles to the case-marked DPs (Heltoft 2019: 154-155).

(1) der Rechtsanwalt hat dem Klient-en den Börsenmakler empfohlen

the.NOM attorney has the.DAT client-OBL the.ACC stockbroker recommended

‘the attorney recommended the client the stockbroker’

Deictic elements, e.g. personal pronouns and deictic temporal adverbs such as now, are a classic example of linguistic indexicality (shifters, cf. Jakobson 1957) as the encoded meaning of the deictic element points beyond the internal structure of the utterance for interpretation.

The term indexicality is also well established in sociolinguistics in analyses of how linguistic choices may index aspects of speaker or addressee identity, such as in-group identification, gender etc. An example is ‘G-dropping’ (alveolar [n] instead of velar [ŋ]) in e.g. waiting by young men in US college fraternities to index social attributes such as ‘hardworking’ or ‘casual’ (Coupland 2007: 23).

The recent decades have seen a growing interest in the concept of indexicality as a tool for analysis and explanation and as an important semiotic aspect of the organization of linguistic structures. A number of phenomena that have (typically) not been approached as instances of indexicality present themselves as cases that would benefit from an index analysis, including the following:

- **Insubordination and dependency relations**; on the case of Spanish que in insubordinate constructions as different types of internal and external (situational) indexical function, see Sansiñena (2015) (cf. Nielsen 2016: 91-92); on insubordination vis-à-vis extension of dependency beyond the sentence (Mithun 2008), see Sansiñena (2015), D’Hertefelt (2018), Beijering et al. (2019); on the indexicality of dependency in general, see Nielsen (2016: 113-115).
- **Disambiguation of polysemous lexemes by inflectional allomorph** (e.g. the plural forms of Eng. mouse: mice vs. mouses as indexes of ‘small rodent of the genus Mus’ vs. ‘hand-held pointing device for computers’)

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• **Semiotic shifts from indexical to symbolic function** (e.g. the case of the Germanic i-Umlaut, originally an index of an ending containing /i/, then an index of plural endings (cf. Wurzel 1980: 448–451), and finally, with the loss of the original Umlaut-causing ending in e.g. Eng. foot–feet, a symbolic expression of plural meaning)

• **The creation of domain-straddling indexicality**; on the case of the indirect object (IO) in Danish and its development into an index of either clause-internal IO-governing elements (ditransitive verbs) or clause-external, situational features of regulative speech acts, see Nielsen & Heltoft (forthc.).

The aim of the workshop is bringing together linguists working with different linguistic phenomena to discuss how distinct phenomena from different domains of language and linguistic analysis can be brought together under the heading of indexicality, and how linguistic description/analysis may benefit from interpreting them as instances of indexicality as a uniting property and a general semiotic phenomenon.

**Topics and questions**

The theme of the workshop will encompass the following four aspects of investigations into indexicality:

• Empirical cases of linguistic indexicality that further our understanding of what an index may be

• Analysis of different types of indexical function (e.g. indexing of a morphosyntactic feature, of a semantic property, of speaker attitude etc.), of what they have in common, how they differ and what the full range of possible types of linguistic indexing may be

• Examinations of the role of indexes and indexicality in synchronic accounts of (a) language and in diachronic processes of linguistic change

• Theoretical discussions of how indexical function fits into the larger picture of linguistic meaning and the semiotics of linguistic phenomena.

Of particular interest are the following topics and questions:

• **Indexical functions that straddle different linguistic domains**
  • What types of domain-straddling indexical functions are found in languages, and what domains may be straddled (e.g. morphology/syntax, utterance-internal/extra-linguistic)?
  • Are different types of domain-straddling indexical functions essentially similar or different, and are they motivated and shaped by the same factors or different ones?

• **Changes in indexical functions whereby the domain of the indexical relation is changed** (e.g. extension of what is indexed to include extra-linguistic situational features, or replacement of that which is indexed)
  • How do changes in the domain of indexical relations occur, what motivates the changes, and are they unidirectional?
  • How do these indexicality changes fit into mechanisms of grammaticalisation?

• **Semiotic shifts whereby elements change from having indexical to symbolic function, or vice versa**:
  • What role do semiotic shifts play in diachronic changes, and are the shifts unidirectional?
  • What factors motivate or trigger a shift from indexical to symbolic function (or vice versa)?

Other topics within the overall theme – linguistic indexicality – are also welcome.
Important dates

- November 10, 2020: deadline for submission of short abstracts to the convenors of the workshop (300 words without references) – please submit abstracts to mariasol.sansinena@kuleuven.be
- November 20, 2020: deadline for submission of workshop proposals by the convenors
- December 15, 2020: notification of acceptance/rejection of the workshop proposal
- January 15, 2021: deadline for submission of individual “long” abstracts by the participants (500 words without references)
- March 31, 2021: notification of acceptance/rejection of individual “long” abstracts.

References


