

Genre, grammar and the context-dependency of time markers' functions

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Genre – a conventional way of performing communicative activities when using language (news reports, business letters, novels, etc.) – is a well-established concept in discourse studies and stylistics. Various studies have proposed and empirically confirmed the general idea that the linguistic form of a text correlates with its intended communicative function(s), and that language users have a cognitive representation of it. Yet, a surprising fact is that we know relatively little about the way this interaction between grammar and communicative functions *operates*.

In linguistics genre has been treated as an epiphenomenon. Ideas regarding its linguistic operation have remained somewhat naive, assuming that interpretation of genre functions results from simply adding up its linguistic 'building blocks'. That reality is more complex, however, is suggested by the fact that the functions of linguistic forms *themselves* may be affected by genre factors. By way of a case study, this paper investigates the interaction between genre and the function of verb tenses and time adverbials – both known to be co-determined by contextual factors (Fleischman 1990; Nikiforidou 2012). It is generally assumed that the basic grammatical function of for example present tense and present time adverbials (*now, yesterday*) is to indicate (viewpoint neutral) co-temporality with the moment of speaking (*Right now I see a woman coming in*). In narrative contexts, however, it may also suggest co-temporality with the story world (*Then yesterday at 4 pm I see a woman coming in*). In the latter case, present tense and present time adverbials function as markers of a subjective viewpoint.

This paper's aim is to investigate the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms underlying genre-specific interpretations of linguistic forms. It reports a corpus analysis investigating how verb tenses' and time adverbials' viewpoint marking functions correlate with (1) linguistic context (presence or absence of other viewpoint markers) and (2) discourse context (novels and newspaper genres evoking resp. 'near' and 'distant viewpoint' text effects). Findings suggest that genre-specific interpretations cannot be reduced to co-presence of specific other viewpoint markers, and that, at the same time, genre-specific functions of verb tenses and time adverbials strongly correlate with the communicative functions of the genres, suggesting that language users draw upon other (non-linguistic) resources as well to construct genre-specific interpretations.

These findings are interpreted as an indication that genre knowledge is manifested at a more fundamental level of the linguistic system than has been assumed so far, in a way that cannot be understood in terms of simply adding up the text's linguistic building blocks, and not even in terms of language-based constructions as suggested in e.g. Nikiforidou (2012). In line with general assumptions in usage-based theories of language regarding the way semantic representations are affected by more general (cultural or social) world knowledge (cf. Verhagen 2000), I propose to view genre-specific functions as separate nodes in a construction network, evoked by genre knowledge as a distinct constraint on interpretation that interacts with constraints resulting from the linguistic elements in the text in a direct way.

References

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