Speech, cognition and grammar: Toward a dual-process model of language

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Given that almost all everyday conversational business is performed and coordinated by means of turns, turn-taking is the main "ecosystem" to which spoken forms of language have to adapt. Under this view, it seems plausible to assume that the ways in which speakers structure language in real-time speech production—the abstract result of which is what we could call a "grammar" of speech—derives from and continuously adapts to the affordances of a turn-at-talk. However, this view is not congruent with the dogma of most (written-biased) grammatical models, which is that linguistic structure is based on a relatively static, monolithic system of categories and abstract descriptive rules.

The alternative to this 'fixed-code' view on grammar pursued in this talk is that 'grammar' is a dynamic phenomenon, based on routinized patterns that are adapted to concrete interactional tasks, and that the need for rapid, instantaneous cognitive processing leaves a significant imprint on the structure of (spoken forms) of language. I will argue that the structure of language cannot be approached from a monolithic view, under which cognition—and speech processing as one aspect of human cognition—and linguistic discourse are reduced to one single system that operates on the basis of principles for sentence structure. Drawing on recent findings from the neurocognition of language and based on corpus data from spontaneous spoken English, I propose a dualistic organization of linguistic cognition, distinguishing two domains called "microgrammar" and "macrogrammar". The first refers to linguistic processing based on emergent, hierarchically organized structures and propositionality, the latter encompasses processing based on mere linearity, usually involving discourse-organizational and interaction-related phenomena. The strength of the dual-process model is that, as I will show, it allows us to link abstract syntactic description to a description of the syntactic structures that communicative units need to fulfil in sequentially organized, turn-based interaction. Syntax does not function as a self-contained semiotic system, but always in relation to the context in which a speaker acts, and is thus a resource that is continuously adapted to individual contexts, the principles of which have not yet been fully understood.