

Who does the analysis in reanalysis?

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This paper challenges ‘reanalysis’ as a claim about a speaker’s cognitive process. ‘Reanalysis’ is contingent on distinctions extracted from a corpus of data – hence reflecting an aggregate observation of many individuals – and rests on an observer’s abstraction of that aggregate. Although both being necessary heuristic steps, the subsequent transfer onto an individual speaker’s cognition (‘a speaker reanalyses X as Y’) will be disputed here.

In what way do individual speakers then make sense of the structuredness of the linguistic input? The answer requires a hypothesis which is independent both of the collective aggregate of the observed data and of the observer’s heuristic access to that aggregate.

My proposal takes the linguistic sign as inherently embedded in a complex array of contextual clues in each act of communication. Other than linguistic description, each utterance relies – in addition to its codifiable form and meaning – on shared assumptions among the interlocutors uniquely specific to a given instance of communication.

(1) a *Let her go in*
b *Let us go in.* ‘I want you to let her and me in.’ / ‘I want you to let you and me in.’
c *Lets go in.* ‘I want you to let you and me in.’ / ‘I want us to go in’.
d *Lets fight it out.* ‘You and me fight it out’ / ‘You and you fight it out’.
e *Lets you go first.*

Comparing the most distant lines in (1) reveals completely different markers for ‘imperative’ – verb-first position of *let* requesting ‘allow’ (1a) vs. *lets* as a marker for requesting ‘go’ (1e). For a speaker each neighbouring pair of lines contains sufficient sameness both in structure and in meaning such that they never need to re-analyse anything when transferring (1a) to (1b), (1b) to (1c), etc. The underspecified nature of the utterances creates a flexibility to transfer the same construction to closely similar, albeit non-identical communicative applications. This context-embeddedness makes it impossible to hypothesize at which point exactly a speaker carries out a reanalysis.

Rather than (re-)analysing the linguistic material, I claim that speakers constantly recontextualize (i.e., flexibly transfer from one communicative task to the next) structured, but underspecified expressions – without resorting to linguists’ categorizations. The shorthand ‘X is reanalysed as Y’ is a (plausible) observer’s generalization, but, if reified as a speaker’s cognitive reality, ignores the flexibility of speakers when applying linguistic material to similar communicative tasks.

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