Schemas of emergent speech genres in teaching and learning interaction

The theoretical background

In my PhD-project I have analysed speech genres used in teaching and learning interaction, in two settings in Cameroon. The theoretical frameworks used are Cognitive Linguistics (CL) and Communities of Practice theory (Wenger 1998). The main analytical concept of speech genre is taken from (Baahlid 1986 [1979]).

Baahlid postulated a rigid distinction between language as a formal system and speech communication as always growing chains of communication. Speech genres are typical forms utterances are cast in, but not part of the language system. From the CL point of view, however, the language system is usage-based and emergent (Langacker 1987) (Hopper 1998). CL thus alleviates the dichotomy of language and speech communication. The category of speech genres can in CL be seen as schematic linguistic units alongside other such units, all shaped by language usage (Langacker 2001). The advantage of introducing speech genres as a category of linguistic units is the opportunity this offers for handling interaction in a principled way within a CL framework.

Working on actual discourse data: The CDS construct

Importantly, in CL all linguistic units are seen as abstracted from usage events. Linguistic units are schematized patterns of action imminent in their usage events. This view makes the study of actual utterances imperative.

Langacker (2001) introduces the notion of the Current Discourse Space (CDS) to show discourse as a continuous flow of language use through time, each CDS updating the discourse. Fig. 1 thus captures a given moment of an unfolding discourse as a bounded utterance or usage event. The CDS is grounded in its participants (minimally Speaker and Hearer) and their location and circumstances. The utterance may focus on any aspect of the world, it indexes the Ground by using pronouns and deictics, and other linguistic devices relating to the actual situation, together with intonation, gaze, gestures and body positions.

Through the usage event the participants pay joint attention to some aspect of the world, as if looking through a viewing frame. This viewing frame contains both conceptualization and vocalization channels, see Fig. 2. Any aspect of a usage event can in principle be abstracted as a linguistic unit, emerging by way of being a recurrent commonality over many usage events. This applies to both verbal and nonverbal means of communication. The CDS schema shown in figs. 1 and 2 is a way or reflecting the elements taking part in the process.

Analyzing teaching interaction in Cameroon – data and research question

I videotaped teaching interaction in Cameroonian villages and classrooms in order to look for the speech genres of these communication situations. Speech genres would be “recurrent commonalities of discourse”, schemas creating discourse expectations as interaction proceeds.

My main question was: How are speech genres used as social and cognitive resources by the participants in teaching and learning interaction? It is mainly the school interaction which is presented in this paper.

Applying the CDS construct to teaching and learning interaction

A teacher is normally more knowledgeable than a learner, and both parties are aware of this. The CDS will thus contain the Teacher’s additional knowledge besides the shared knowledge, and the utterances will focus on T’s knowledge in his turns of the interaction, striving to make this knowledge available to the Learner, see Fig. 4 for a depiction of this discourse situation.

Schemas of emergent speech genres in teaching and learning interaction

The target text and side text are clear to the teacher, but not to his students. In time, most of the class will probably come to learn this distinction. In the meanwhile they struggle along as the schemas slowly emerge from the repetitions in the unfolding discourse.

My research results

The microanalyses of interaction in schoolclasses show that speech genres are important orientation frameworks in interaction. They are emergent and become entrenched over many usage events, just as other linguistic units. Groups and individuals with different experiences will have differing conceptualisations of such frameworks for interaction. The Current Discourse Space schema can be used to capture schemas of these units, retaining both their base in actual discourse and their schematic quality.

References