

Between formal semantics and cultural semantics in descriptive linguistics

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1 Introduction

Linguists interested in the core function of human language, the expression of meaning, have come to divide their research goals into three domains: formal semantics, cognitive semantics, and cultural semantics. Whereas formal semantics provides accounts of what linguistic expressions mean, and how their meanings are derived from the meanings of their parts by using formal tools from logic, cognitive semantics focuses on meaning as it arises from language use, and more specifically from interactive and communicative intent. Less well studied, and therefore less well understood, is the domain of cultural semantics, the branch of linguistics which investigates the relationship between meaning and culture in discourse. These three approaches are briefly compared below, in order to show that they complement – rather than contradict – each other in insightful ways. The basis for this discussion is the completion of a reference grammar of Tima, a language spoken in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan, to be published as Dimmendaal & Schneider-Blum (to appear).

2 Stating the issues

When going through the rich set of themes discussed in the three volumes of *Semantics* edited by Claudia Maienborn, Klaus von Heusinger, and Paul Portner between 2011 and 2013, one comes across contributions addressing a range of formal-semantic topics that are also of immediate relevance for the production of reference grammars, for example on tense, aspect, modality, and (the scope of) negation. In addition, cognitive-semantic issues such as presupposition or conversational implicatures are discussed in these handbooks. This latter cognitive-semantic domain has also been elaborated upon over the past few years in the *Collaborative Research Centre 1252 PROMINENCE ON LANGUAGE*, directed by Klaus von Heusinger at the University of Cologne. The latter belongs to the domain of “construal”, as this property is referred to in cognitive linguistics, along with themes such as specificity, scope, and background.

The investigation of prominence relations in Tima also plays a role in the collaborative research project mentioned above.¹ Different features of this endangered language, which has been the subject of a documentation project initiated in 2006, have been analyzed in a range of publications by various authors. Apart from practical spin-offs such as primers for schools in the Tima area, as well as a Tima-English dictionary, prominence relations and syntactic alignment in Tima are analyzed in Schneider-Blum & Hellwig (2018), while Becker & Schneider-Blum (2020) address focus marking and selective marking in this language.

Tima turns out to be particularly interesting with respect to the formal expression of prominence relations and the focus of attention in a range of syntactic domains, as further discussed in Chapter 11 of the grammar by Dimmendaal & Schneider-Blum (to appear). Prominence in Tima may be accorded to different substructures of an utterance by conceiving situations in alternative ways. One important strategy involves ellipsis, i.e. the omission of morphemes or words expressing tense, aspect, or deictic information, whose properties are assumed to be known to the hearer. The inversion of main predications and secondary

¹ <https://sfb1252.uni-koeln.de/forschungsprojekte/b02-split-case-marking-and-constituent-order-in-east-africa>.

predications is another strategy resulting in slightly different meanings, as illustrated in the following alternative construals of a verb and adjective:

- (1) *díyλη mètén*
 come close
 ‘come close!’
- (2) (*pínλ*) *à-mètén díyλη*
 3SG PRED-close come
 ‘(s)he is about to come (lit. she is close in coming)’

But apart from formal-semantic and cognitive-semantic phenomena in Tima, there are issues belonging to the realm of cultural semantics, for example the important construal of the egocentric perspective. Compare the following two examples:

- (3) *án-còò lóó*
 3:PFV2-arrive:HT LOC-family
 ‘(s)he has/they have arrived at home (speaker is not at home)’
- (4) *àn-cóóη lóò*
 3:PFV2-arrive:HT.VENT LOC-family
 ‘(s)he has/they have arrived at home (where the speaker is)’

The presence of ventive marking (i.e. direction towards the speaker or deictic center) in (4) implies that the speaker was present, i.e. did witness the event. Leaving the egocentric marking out (on a verb or in a prepositional construction, depending on the syntactic structure), as in (3), hence triggers the conversational implicature “what isn’t said, isn’t”, thereby implying that the speaker did not witness the event himself/herself. Tima speakers are very “picky” about marking (exact) location (which is also reflected in the nominal morphology of their language), but also about information sources (and therefore evidentiality). In this respect, marking the egocentric perspective may be interpreted as an instance of the co-evolution of grammar and culture.

Cultural semantics has probably received the least attention within semantics over the past decades, with the exception of studies on politeness and impoliteness and intercultural communication. When being socialized in a particular language, we acquire the grammatical rules of that language, but we also learn about the culture-specific conversational implicatures of what is being said. There is ample empirical evidence from language acquisition studies, but also from the creation of new varieties of former colonial languages like the “New Englishes” in different parts of the world, that this tacit knowledge is acquired through a “frames-and-scenarios” model, as it is called in Dimmendaal (2022). This model, inspired by contributions in cognitive linguistics, in particular by the late Charles J. Fillmore, takes speakers’ knowledge of situations or contexts (as frames) and corresponding act sequences (scenarios) as its basis.

Let us take an example from an exotic language like German in order to make this model and its relevance for cultural semantics more concrete. Speakers of German may say to you *schönen Tag noch!* ‘have a nice day!’ as a leave-taking strategy. But depending on the context and the intonation used, they may indeed have your well-being in mind, or, alternatively, exactly the opposite (‘go to h*ll!’).

3 Conclusion

Truth-conditional semantics attempts to explain the meaning of an utterance by providing the conditions under which it would be true. But in order to be able to account for diverging conversational implicatures it is important to view “truth” and “felicity” as two independent dimensions. The latter concept relates utterances to situations in which they are assumed to be appropriate or felicitous. This is where culture comes in, and from an analytical point of view, cultural semantics. When socializing in a particular speech community, we learn about preferred politeness as well as impoliteness strategies. In the case of German, this involves learning about deliberately inverting the truth value of a statement or command (thereby flouting Grice’s conversational maxims). Obviously, this is the most intricate part of analyzing and describing hitherto poorly documented languages.

Hamm, Kamp & van Lambbergen (2006) convincingly argue that there is no opposition between formal and cognitive semantics. By extension, it may be argued that these approaches complement the third branch of semantic studies, that of cultural semantics, which requires the additional investigation of culture-specific conversational implicatures, ideally by immersion fieldwork.²

Abbreviations

HT	= high transitivity	PFV	= perfective
LOC	= locative marker	PRED	= predicative marker

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² In a way these authors hint at this in footnote 20 (p. 29), where they make reference to what they call “usage-based” approaches.