Deixis as a Type of Nomination: English-Armenian Cross-Linguistic Study

Keywords: deixis, contrastive analysis, cognitive-oriented approach, semantic equivalence, pragmatic equivalence

The continued interest in deixis as a linguistic and cognitive phenomenon shows that it remains an underexplored field of research and is still in the mainstream of linguistic thought. This presentation aims to provide a cognitively oriented analysis of deictic systems in English and Armenian. It will be shown that the differences between the two languages reside in the level of pragmasemantic specification of the deictic conceptualization of speech events.

The paper addresses the following research questions: (1) What language-specific tendencies can be identified in the semantics of deictics? (2) Which semantic and pragmatic constraints can be observed in each language? (3) How do these factors intersect across the languages under study?

Deixis is regarded here as a semantic-pragmatic category which plays a significant role in the process of verbal communication. As a type of nomination constituted by the meaning of a linguistic sign being relativized to the situational context, deixis is based on the conceptualisation of the speech event, the cognitive categorisation of which is systematically reflected in the grammatical and lexical systems of a language.

Proceeding from the assumption that deictics are complex linguistic units with a number of distinguishable, but related features constituting a specific class of words, we argue for a broader understanding of deixis as "a marking off point" in relation to which actions and events of the real world are characterized and nominated, thus considering Bühler's concept of deixis as too narrowly associated with the actual speech act and the speaker (Bühler, 1934, p. 202). There is much in language that goes beyond this framework.

The paper undertakes a cross-linguistic analysis of temporal deixis in Armenian and English with special reference to such an understudied language as Armenian where there is little systematic research on this topic. Drawing on extensive lexicographic and corpus data the paper particularises the range of forms and functions of the two deictic systems, reveals the level of equivalence across these typologically unrelated languages, explores some theoretical issues that arise from the empirical observations, including the ongoing debate on the deictic type of meaning.

We believe that one of the fundamental specific features of deictic meaning is its multilayered character: it includes a semantic layer proper with its designative component, or 'value', a specific pragmatic layer that points to the speech-situational factor this value is relative to and presupposes its reference point, and a more general layer – that of part of speech belonging which is also indicative of some degree of deicticity (Author, 2013).

The research methodology is based on contrastive, distributional and componential methods of analysis and focuses on the referential usages of closed paradigmatic sets of deictic expressions belonging to different parts of speech (nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs).

The results obtained from the current study show systematic interlinguistic tendencies. The languages vary considerably with regard to the number of deictic grammatical categories, the number of contrastive deictic terms in each category and the pragmatic uses of deictic expressions. The structural, semantic and pragmatic characteristics of the two deictic systems predetermine the differentiation of the interlingual correlation of Armenian and English deictics into full equivalents and partial deictic correspondences, rarely – non-equivalent units. The differences are mainly determined by the typological features of the languages which drive the choice between the synthetic and analytic alternatives, favour different deictic patterns that correlate with cognitive processing differences.

References

Anderson, Stephen and Edward Keenan. 1985. “Deixis.” In Language Typology & Syntactic Description, Vol 3: Grammatical Categories and the Lexicon, edited by Timothy Shopen, 259-308. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bühler, Karl. 1934. Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache. Jena: Fischer.

Bühler, Karl. 1982. “The deictic field of language and deictic words.” In Speech, place and action, edited by Robert J. Jarvella and Wolfgang Klein, 9-30. New York: Wiley.

Comrie, Bernard. 1985. Tense. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levinson, Stephen C. 2004. “Deixis.” In The handbook of pragmatics, edited by Lawrence R. Horn and Gregory Ward, 97-121. Oxford: Blackwell.

Levinson, Stephen C. and David Wilkins, eds. 2006. Grammars of space: Explorations in cognitive diversity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weissenborn, Jürgen and Wolfgang Klein, eds. 1982. Here and There: Cross-linguistic Studies on Deixis and Demonstration. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Author, 2013.