Workplan for STSM to Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca, Milano

Sign action number: IS 1006
Title of the action: Unraveling the grammars of European sign languages:
Pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection
of their linguistic heritage
Action short name: SignGram COST Action

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STSM Title: Division of Labour: The Interaction between Form and Meaning
in Reference Grammars

Introduction and motivation

One of the most innovative features of the blueprint for creating reference grammars
for sign languages is the integration of two independent sections on semantics and
pragmatics. Since basic grammatical categories are used to express semantic and
pragmatic concepts, an independent description of these concepts is crucial for every
reference grammar (and for the grammar builders using the blueprint to develop a
reference grammar for their sign language). Moreover, since the mapping between
semantic and pragmatic categories and morphosyntactic markers is usually not one-to-
one, the grammar builder needs to know the basic semantic and pragmatic concepts in
order to identify the (multiple or zero) realizations of these concepts.
This new feature allows a clear distinction of formal and functional aspects, which is not
found in traditional reference grammars. As a consequence, in the blueprint many
topics will be addressed from two different angles. To avoid replication and confusion,
the design of the blueprint and the sample sections require a clear division of labor and
a clear interaction between formal (phonology, morphology, and syntax) and functional
(semantics and pragmatics) aspects of language description at least in some parts of
the manual. In the sections on semantics and pragmatics, the table of content basically
consists of two different parts: (i) Topics such as reference, discourse structure, or
communicative interaction, which clearly belong to semantics and pragmatics and do
not have a direct counterpart in phonology, morphology, and syntax. (ii) Topics such as
tense, aspect, modality, or plural, which are traditionally discussed in morphology and
syntax because of their formal encoding in grammar. Since the division of labor
between form and function is of especial importance for the latter, this STSM will focus
on semantic concepts that typically are expressed by morphosyntactic markers such as
inflection, reduplication, or functional expressions.
Most sample sections submitted so far do not clearly distinguish between the formal
grammatical encoding of semantic and pragmatic concepts that belongs to phonology,
morphology, and syntax on the one hand and the corresponding underlying concepts
that are defined in semantics and pragmatics. To improve this situation, one aim of this
STSM is to develop a kind of general guidelines for the division of labor between form
and function and to outline the interaction of sections in morphology and syntax with
the corresponding sections in semantics. One sample section (possibly the one on
conditionals) will be revised as an explicit model for other sample sections. In addition,
the STSM aims to develop a comprehensive description of selected semantic concepts
such as tense, aspect, negation, and conditionality (function) and to check the

description of semantic concepts in the already existing sample sections.
The discussion and work of this STSM will deal with the following aspects:

- Semantics and pragmatics in reference grammars and field work
- Division of labor between morphology and syntax on the one hand and semantics and pragmatics on the other
- Interaction between corresponding sample sections on form and function
- Description of basic semantic concepts such as tense, aspect, and modality and the context dependent expression of such concepts
- Definition of general guidelines for sample sections

The work of this STSM will directly contribute to the conception and writing of all sample sections that discuss grammatical concepts from a formal and functional perspective. In addition, the outcome of this STSM is directly relevant for working group 3 on semantics and pragmatics and it aims at proposing a new conceptual contribution to reference grammars in spoken and sign language, which takes semantics in reference grammars more seriously.

Work Plan of the STSM

Pre-STSM work:
- Review of recent literature on semantics and pragmatics in reference grammars
- Review of recent literature on semantics and pragmatics in sign language
- Preparation of checklist for topics such as tense, aspect, or modality that need to be evaluated for the interaction of form and meaning

Work during STSM:
- Description of semantic/pragmatic concepts and corresponding morphosyntactic markers for selected topics
- Description of context-dependent data elicitation for selected semantic/pragmatic concepts
- Review of existing sample sections that discuss formal and functional aspects
- Preparation of general guidelines for the division of labour between form and meaning
- Preparation of a illustrative sample sections to illustrate the interaction of form and function
- Presentation of the results at the core group meeting in Milano, May 10, 2013

Dates of the STSM: May 2-11, 2014

Selected references

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