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Researching form and action:

Some experiences and reflections from comparative interactional linguistic work

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It has been established in programmatic interactional linguistic accounts that the discovery of procedures, when identifying research topics in the data, can take either the linguistic form or the social action as the point of departure (e.g. Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2001, 2018; Lindström 2009). Starting with the linguistic form, the normal case in much of the traditional linguistic work, can lead us to an understanding of the different (interactional) actions that a form, e.g. a certain discourse particle, appears in, while we cannot see whether the action could be realized also through other forms. Starting with the action we can reach an appreciation of different linguistic resources that can implement that action, but we may lose sight of other possible contexts and actions that a certain linguistic form is recruited to. Both approaches have thus both merits and blind spots in their descriptive force. It also seems that these two kinds of approaches to data provide us with different degrees of analytic availability. For a linguist, to be sure, it may be more convenient to start with the form and expression: it is usually something that can be defined lexically, morphologically and syntactically. In other words, it looks like a “form” was easily delimitable, searchable and commentable, as there often exist earlier, although not so “interactional” descriptions of linguistic forms. With “actions” it is like with semantic categories; they are more slippery, not so easy to define and delimit, and not either so easy to mechanically search in a corpus. However, this is the perspective advocated by conversation analysis, and it has yielded some interesting new insights into the workings of grammar, for example, how it is dependent on whether we are dealing with initiating or responding actions (e.g. Thompson et al. 2015).

I will in my talk address these questions, what it means and what it gives if we start either with the form or action, when it comes to comparative interactional linguistic work. The discussion is based on some examples and experiences from earlier research in which I have participated. From the perspective of form, these include studies of verb-first conditionals German and Swedish; free-standing conditionals in Swedish and Finnish; and pseudoclefts in Swedish, French, Hebrew and Estonian. The (more) action-based approach is represented by a study of greetings in varieties of Swedish; other-repetition sequences in a number of European languages; and a study of second assessments in German and Swedish. Experiences from these studies show, among other things, that a category that is a “form” is not necessarily so neatly describable or findable, and that an “action” may easily transform into some kind of a form in the end. Of course, it is also relevant what kind of data we are looking at, and this question becomes even more essential when we embark on a cross-linguistic research agenda.

References

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