

Wolfgang Teubert: Two Lectures in Prague

Building onto the corpus-driven approach: a wider look on meaning

Monday, November 24th 2014, 3:50 pm

Faculty of Arts, Charles University (room 104), Jana Palacha 2

What makes the corpus-driven approach stand out in language studies is its appeal as a 'scientific' methodology. Using computational tools to identify, count and measure real language data, we obtain dependable findings. Scientific practice, however, is no different from any other social practice: it is discursively constructed. In the absence of a 'real' fundament, there cannot be a 'true' bottom-up approach. All corpus research presupposes a consensus on the arbitrary decisions underlying our research question, and the findings obtained have to be interpreted to make sense. Meaning is found only in discourse. In my investigation of the discourse object 'human rights,' I will move from ambiguous collocation profiles to what texts actually say about this object by assigning a meaning to this lexical item. The meaning of *human rights* is, as I see it, the entirety of what is said about this lexical item, i.e. of all the paraphrases we find in discourse. Yet what counts a paraphrase is a matter of interpretation. The corpus-driven approach offers candidates we can accept or reject. The study of paraphrastic content is thus a necessary extension of traditional corpus linguistics. It combines a methodological approach with an interpretive endeavour that is free from methodical constraints.

In order to make sense of *human rights* in a specific text, or text segment, we have to uncover its intertextual links, thus revealing how it differs from what has been said before. We will not understand what *human rights* means in a specific context unless we have analysed those links. Texts thus can be seen as the nodes of dynamic, diachronically evolving networks held together by intertextual links. Therefore corpus linguistics has to concern itself with the diachronic dimension of discourse if it is to pave the way for interpreting what a given text (segment) or a lexical item means. Again, there is no method to capture intertextuality – it is up to the arbitrary decisions of an interpretive community.

Language is not a natural phenomenon; it is a cultural artefact. Linguistics, including the corpus-driven approach, belongs to the human sciences.

Corpus linguistics and the meaning of lexical items: how to distinguish *grief* from *mourning*

Tuesday, November 25th 2014, 1 pm

Institute of the Czech National Corpus (room 5), Panská 7

The meaning of a lexical item is not so much what we find in monolingual or bilingual dictionaries, for meaning is only in discourse. Traditional lexicography can only provide a first approach. It is in discourse that people negotiate what words mean, including, for instance, what distinguishes *grief* from *mourning*. For while words in isolation can mean almost anything, once they are embedded in a context it becomes clear what they actually mean there. This is because whenever people speak they tend to re-use patterns that have been used recurrently in discourse, thus ensuring some stability in meaning. But as discourse speaks in many voices, there will never be a common denominator for meaning. People often disagree. Corpus linguistics helps us to come to terms with this problem: it identifies the relevant context words that form a collocation with the node word. In a second step, we have to analyse the paraphrases people are using when negotiating meaning. What we find there often differs from what we find in dictionary entries.