Where do cognitive biases fit into Cognitive Linguistics?
Perspective taking, presuppositions, and the Curse of Knowledge

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The dynamics of perspective taking are crucial to meaning construction in language, and humans have a remarkable ability to take on the viewpoints of other people. But this ability is limited, and riddled with egocentric biases. These kinds of biases are studied extensively in cognitive psychology, social psychology, economics, and cognitive approaches to decision making. Cognitive linguistics, however, despite its longstanding interest in viewpoint and perspective, has given them much less direct or explicit attention.

This paper suggests that some models of meaning construction in cognitive linguistics are already very well suited to addressing the contributions of cognitive bias, and presents one illustrative integrated account. The 'curse of knowledge' is a pervasive cognitive bias that makes it very difficult for us to imagine, once we know something, what it is like not to know it (Camerer, Loewenstein & Weber 1989; Birch and Bloom 2003). From the point of view of cognitive efficiency, this bias is not surprising. We need to make rapid, backstage assessments of what other people think and know, and projecting information from our own perspective is a quick and efficient way of generating good approximations. Recent work on the role that simulated action and perception play in social cognition and language understanding further underlines how central this kind of projection may be for our understanding of others, and even of our previous selves.

I argue that the curse of knowledge is an artifact of a more general cognitive shortcut that is implicated in features of 'correct' sentence interpretation such as presupposition projection, as well as in the phenomena that are traditionally described as curse-of-knowledge errors.

Many accounts of linguistic pragmatics explain meaning construction in terms of mental representations. None of these accounts claims to model cognitive biases such as the curse of knowledge. Mental Spaces Theory (Fauconnier 1985, 1997; Cutrer 1994), however, does have a theoretical apparatus to account for some of the other ways that structure tends to flow from one mental representation to another. This apparatus offers an elegant solution to a number of classic problems in semantics, none of which are normally understood to have anything to do with the egocentric biases involved in inference or our shortcomings in reasoning about other minds. But as I will show, 'cursed' interpretations are indeed manifestations of the same underlying principles.

Discussion will cover classic examples from the study of presupposition, as well as related attributed examples from narrative discourse, including 'shaggy dog stories' and other jokes, in which the same 'correct' but biased interpretive heuristics are used to reliable and entertaining effect.

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