

Semasiologie versus Onomasiologie. Semantische Rollen in der Konstruktionsgrammatik

The aim of the essay is to show that there is an alternative to onomasiological versus semasiological theories of semantic roles and that this alternative is of fundamental importance both within construction grammar and in the paradigm conflict between empiristically-oriented construction grammar and rationalistically-oriented generative projection grammar.

A semasiological and prototype-theoretical interpretation of semantic roles is the foundation of the most influential direction of construction grammar, the Lakoff-Goldberg school (Berkeley Cognitive Construction Grammar). Basic postulates of construction grammar, such as the principles of unity of form and meaning and of no-synonymy, are based on a semasiological and prototype-theoretical approach where no-synonymy means that formally identical constructions have the same meaning and formally different constructions have different meanings; here (as in the lexical domain), polysemy is the rule and homonymy the exception.

Theories of semantic roles in modern syntax and semantics are onomasiological theories. They identify roles of the proponents of events and situations in the world, consider the roles obtained as semantic and then relate them to linguistic forms (usually in the form of syntactic relations such as subject and object). A prerequisite is – in contrast to an otherwise made separation – the identification of linguistic meaning and general conceptual content, of linguistic knowledge and world knowledge. In connection with this identification, the theories of semantic roles follow the comprehensive postulates of modern syntax and semantics, the invariance postulate and the extensionality postulate. According to the invariance postulate, classifications and syntactic-semantic rules are invariant. According to the extensionality postulate, sentences with the same truth value are semantically identical. From these premises it follows that there can only be very mediated correlations between semantic and syntactic structure.

On the other hand, language is a very efficient means of understanding with sentences not hiding that which is to be said behind surface structures. Consequently, form and meaning should essentially be assigned to each other 1 : 1, i. e. isomorphically. This point of view is held in semasiological role theories, which look from the form at the meaning while also assuming that form and meaning are typically (exceptions included) assigned 1 : 1. Under the condition of invariance, semasiological role theories had to fail. Fillmore (1968) therefore replaced the traditional semasiological case theory with an onomasiological one. This onomasiological approach was followed by all others except Lakoff (1977, 1987) and Goldberg (1995).

I plead for a return to a semasiological viewpoint that differs from the traditional one in two respects: First, it is a prototype-theoretical method of role classification instead of an invariance-theoretical method. The prototype-theoretical role classification results in intensional (significant-semantic) roles, the invariance-theoretical role classification yields extensional (denotative-semantic) roles. The prototype-theoretical interpretation of

roles is connected with an elementary sequence (perspectivation) of the arguments of an argument construction as 1st, 2nd, 3rd argument.

References

- Fillmore, Charles J. (1968): The case for case. In: Bach, Emmon/Harms, Robert T. (Hg.): Universals in linguistic theory. New York u. a.: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, pp. 1–88.
- Goldberg, Adele E. (1995): A construction grammar approach to argument Structure. (= Cognitive theory of language and culture). Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, George (1977): Linguistic gestalts. In: Papers from the 13th regional meeting Chicago Linguistic Society 13, pp. 236–287.
- Lakoff, George (1987): Women, fire, and dangerous things. What categories reveal about the mind. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.