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19. Inter-modal constructions

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The study of grammatical constructions has become central to work in cognitive linguistics. Verhagen's work (2005) makes an important contribution to that tradition, but also puts grammatical phenomena in the context of the interaction among multiple subjectivities. The intersubjective coordination is further fleshed out through recent studies of multimodal aspects of interaction, such as gesture or eye gaze. I propose that we should also consider how intersubjectivity in constructions plays out in artifacts relying on both language and image, such as internet memes.

There is a series of memes featuring Good Girl Gina (GGG) – a perfect girlfriend. They all show the familiar picture of a young woman, but they also use linguistic constructions in an interesting way. Every meme has the Top Text (TT) (located at the upper edge of the photo and introducing a type of behavior which GGG might engage in) and the Bottom Text (BT) (located at the lower edge and indicating how GGG's conduct in the TT situation confirms her being a 'Good Girl'). For example, TT might say GETS ANGRY, and then BT might say TELLS YOU WHY.

What characterizes these artifacts is linguistically interesting for several reasons:

1. The construction used, including present tense

It is best described as a conjunctionless variant of a conditional or temporal construction, with a generic meaning, signaled by the habitual present tense ('If/When/Whenever/Every time GGG gets angry, she tells you why'). (See Dancygier and Sweetser (2005) for a broader discussion.)

2. The omission of subject NPs

Perhaps the most interesting formal feature is the suppression of the subject argument. This happens predictably, and so is constructionally determined. David (2016) explains argument suppression through frame-analysis. In this case, the expected frame-structure is that of any grammatical sentence in English, and the subject is not entirely suppressed, but rather expressed via the image, not a linguistic form (in effect, the meme says: ‘When GGG gets angry, she tells you why’). We might talk here about a ‘multimodal construction’ and ‘multimodal grammar’.

3. The visual arrangement

The picture of GGG is the Ground (or Topic). The first (adverbial) clause is also part of the Ground – girlfriends do get angry; it is placed as TT, so it is processed first. The second clause is the Figure, and it is placed as BT, the final punch-line.

4. Intersubjective coordination

How does it make sense that only an ideal girlfriend tells you why she is angry? Clearly, the GGG memes start with male assumptions about women’s behavior that men find annoying (like acting offended and not explaining why; the implicature is that the boyfriend would guess the reason if he tried). The belief about women (held by men, but easily recognized by women) is what the meme works from. In effect, these memes are ‘man-talk’, describing a perfect girlfriend by stereotyping women in terms of undesirable behaviors.

I describe such constructions as inter-modal. They are constructions – form-meaning pairs. They work across modalities (text/image) and so are multimodal. But they

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additionally play intersubjectively on stereotypes, evoking different reactions in men and women viewers.

References

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