From comparative to temporal; from temporal to concessive: come and dopo che in contemporary spoken Italian

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This study takes as its framework Prandi's (2004) attempt to overcome the opposition between functional and structural perspectives on language. Prandi argues that within the nucleus of the clause, grammatical relations are dominant, so that linguistic structure imposes a form on extralinguistic materials whatever their content, while in peripheral areas such as interclausal links, the formal order reflects our pre-existent experience of extralinguistic reality, independently of language, and the conceptual relations established between contents exist independently of the selected linguistic form. There are thus two sets of constraints: those which already exist in an ordered fashion independently of language (and which language simply allows to be expressed), and those which language constructs (and which could not exist without the intervention of linguistic structure).

In the area of interclausal links, concepts which are independent of linguistic expression include causation (Mazzoleni, 2007), which forms part of our conceptual universe and does not need to be explicitly formulated linguistically, insomuch as the addressee is able to infer this relationship on the basis of prior knowledge (Prandi's "undercoding"). Consequence, on the other hand, is an example of "overcoding": it is not a pre-existent relation, but a semantic one constructed through precise linguistic structures.

Logical connectors have a stable systematic meaning which can be imposed on inappropriate propositional contents. Conventional implicatures and grammaticalisation, with the stabilizing of meanings, are due to a process of inferential enrichment linked to shared conceptual structures, as opposed to conversational implicatures which depend on the specific context.

This process of inferential enrichment can be observed diachronically. Thus poi che, which has a temporal value in Dante (Prandi, 2004), subsequently became enriched with a causal value: the propositional contents linked by the connector came to have the causal reading which now dominates. Inferential enrichment can lead to a polysemic phase, which can in turn lead to a transformation of the original meaning of the connector, as with causal poiché in contemporary Italian.

Recent work on the diachronic evolution of various connectors (Mazzoleni, 2007; De Santis, 2008; Patota, 2005) has provided further evidence of this process, based predominantly on written texts. In this paper we have instead used spoken Italian corpora (BADIP) to investigate the changing use (or better, inferential enrichment) of two connectors in speech. Come has clearly acquired the temporal meaning of "as soon as" in addition to its comparative meaning, both in literary Italian and in speech:

> *Come la Longa se ne tornava in casa colla Lia in collo, le comari si affacciavano (Verga)*

> *Claudia come finisce questo <laugh> esperimento ti do un cazzotto in testa (CLIPS DGmtB03C)*

and a similar process seems under way for dopo che, with a concessive meaning of "even though" as well as its temporal one:

> *io spero che non ci prenderà nessuno per cretini dopo che abbiamo fatto questa cosa, comunque (CLIPS DGtdB03P)*

References

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