OBJECTIVIZING SUBJECTIVITY: PERSON DEIXIS AND THE CONSTITUTION OF DIALOGIC IDENTITY (WITH AN EXAMPLE OF GERMAN DISCOURSE DATA)

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The simplicity of the grammatical pronominal paradigms belies the complexity of their use. Malone (2005, p. 44)

The term ‘subjectivity’ refers to the way in which natural languages, in their structure and their normal manner of operation, provide for the locutionary agent’s expression of himself and of his attitudes and beliefs. Lyons (1982, p. 102)

1. INTRODUCTION

We suggest that the constitution and management of dialogic identity (in the sense of temporary, potentially persistent discourse roles) is essentially based on the use of person deixis. A method of analysis for describing this process is suggested and illustrated by a segment of German discourse.

The chapter is structured as follows: The first part is devoted to the explication of our basic concept of dialogic identity, the category our analysis is ultimately interested in (Section 2). After an introduction of the notions of subjectivity and objectivity used here (Section 3), the function of the category person is introduced (Section 4) and related to the notion of positioning (Section 5). It is shown that the category of person in discourse is central to the construction of discourse identity, and the procedure of analysing it is laid out. Section 6 is devoted to the analysis of an
exemplary segment of spoken dialogue. The chapter concludes with a summary of the theoretical argumentation and the analysis and with some hypotheses concerning the cross-linguistic validity of the presented concepts (Section 7).

2. Identity – Dialogic Identity

Before analysing the role of person deixis in objectivizing subjectivity, the central underlying concepts of identity, dialogic identity and deictic identity need to be explained.

We define identity as a phenomenon which is flexible with regard to its features and its scope, and which is constructed by interlocutors in communicative processes, i.e., in sign-based interaction (cf. Kresić, 2006, for an extensive treatment). These processes encompass both dialogic and narrative forms of communication. Our conception of identity constitution as a sign-based process is motivated by the following considerations: Personal and social identities are constituted primarily in social interaction with significant others on the basis of the usage of signs. The relevant sign systems include language, images and symbols. These complex sign systems are the elementary starting point for the study of identity (cf. Kresić, 2006). Sign systems therefore are no neutral instruments of information transmission, but they are used by the participants of a communicative situation to construct their currently activated identity.

Our general concept of identity thus refers to a person’s semiotically acknowledged characteristics that are biographically more or less stable and that are based upon linguistic, specifically deictic, processes. The details of the latter will be analysed in detail in the following sections of this paper.

With respect to identity in general, we suggest to distinguish between personal or individual processes on the one hand and social or collective processes of identity construction on the other hand. Collective identities can be constituted on occasions such as the group discussion analysed in Section 6, in which the participants refer to history as a collectively relevant past. Generally speaking, collective identity is salient whenever identity is addressed in the sense of belonging to one or more collectives or groups. The case of multiple membership is particularly interesting because of the possibility of conflicting identity attributions.

However, the focus of our considerations is not on biographically stable identity features, but on temporary, constantly changing roles and potentially persistent positions of participants in ongoing discourse. In this context, the notions of dialogic identity, identity predications and deictic identity are essential. A first sketch of these terms will be presented here, and a more precise definition follows in Sections 3 and 4.

Dialogic identity refers to a current, unstable partial identity in the frame of an interaction, which is constituted by the encoding of the deictic identity in combination with identity predications. An important factor in this process is the specific pragmatic function of the role