
Recursive embedding and register variation

Mittwoch
08.03.2017
14:15 - 15:15
B4 1, 0.04

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Recursive embedding is a core property of the language faculty. We know a lot about the cognitive limitations in parsing recursive structures (e.g. Roeper & Speas, eds. 2015), but less so about the determinants of their occurrence in naturalistic communication. In this paper we explore the use and limits of recursive embedding in spoken discourse in public vs. non-public speech situations in German. We report results of an ongoing study on the depth of (self-)embedding of C, V, and N projections, i.e. we measured instances of [C [C ...]], [[...V] V], and [N [N ...]]. The analyzed data stem from the Datenbank für gesprochenes Deutsch (DGD) Grundstrukturen: Freiburger Korpus and FOLK (both available at <http://agd.ids-mannheim.de>, IDS Mannheim) from which 22 conversations were selected and classified according to contextual factors forming a public and a non-public subcorpus of 11 conversations of about 1000 tokens each. The public subcorpus features argumentative public conversation with four to nine unacquainted speakers whereas the non-public subcorpus features argumentative talk from social settings with two to three fairly familiar speakers per conversation. The investigated texts contain further properties that cannot be kept invariant in a study of natural data but which may influence the choice of a particular structure (Biber & Conrad 2009). Hence, a set of 10 features relating to the communicative setting (speaker symmetry, communicative role of participant, discourse topic, etc.) have been annotated and integrated in the model as random factors. The findings confirm the hypothesis that speakers use significantly more (self-)embeddings in all three studied projections in public registers compared to non-public registers. In addition, we found evidence that the depth of recursion between different projections is correlated across speakers, which suggests that [α [α ...]] structures are an entity of grammar that is relevant for speaker's reality, i.e., may be selected for particular purposes.

References: • Biber, D. & Conrad, S. (2009): *Register, genre, and style*. Cambridge: CUP. • Roeper, T. & Speas, M. eds. (2015): *Recursion: Complexity and cognition*. Springer.