

On the syntax-pragmatics interface: an integrated model for the expression of surprise and surprise/disapproval

Introduction In this work we investigate the expression of surprise and surprise/disapproval in Italian. We consider counter-expectational surprise questions – rhetorical questions not requiring a real answer – and compare them with sentences overtly expressing surprise and with surprise/disapproval questions. We set up experimental plans, videotaping subjects to check individual variations. We found characteristic gestural patterns, combined with specific prosodic features and syntactic structures. We argue that in order to express surprise and surprise/disapproval the three components – syntax, prosody and gesture –work together to ensure a felicitous communication process and conclude proposing a model to account for the results.

Linguistic data

In what follows, we provide examples of the data discussed in our work.

Surprise: Given a scenario where I know that Gianni is on a diet and only eats fruit, when I see him eating a hamburger I am surprised and say:

(1) Ma non mangiavi solo frutta?

But weren't you eating only fruit?

This rhetorical question is compared with (2) overtly expressing surprise:

(2) Mi sorprende che tu stia mangiando un hamburger

I'm surprised you are eating an hamburger

Surprise/disapproval: Given a scenario where I see Gianni wearing his best trousers kneeling in the dirt, I think that he will ruin his trousers and want him to stop kneeling. Hence, I express surprise/disapproval by saying:

(3) Ma che stai facendo!?

But what are you doing!?

15 participants were videotaped to check surprise questions, and 8 for surprise/disapproval. Their production was analyzed with Praat and ELAN.

Conclusions

From a theoretical point of view, we capitalize on Giorgi's (2016, 2018) syntactic analysis, extending her proposal to the prosodic and gestural components as well (see also Hinterhölzl and Munaro 2015, Obenauer, 2006). We observed that most often the gesture culmination corresponds with the pitch realization, even in the absence of a physical addressee. This correspondence shows that these two components go together and are realized at the same point at the sensorimotor interface. We argue that a functional head represented in the syntax provides the relevant instructions, which are read off at the interface as pitch and gesture.

References

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