

Project title: *Language emerging from human sociality: the case of speech representation*

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Abstract

As first explicitly pointed out by Vološinov (1973), reported speech constructions, the grammatical forms used for talking about conversation, are an area of language where core grammar and social interaction intersect: when using a sentence such as “John said: ‘it is raining’” important aspects the social situation in which the utterance ‘it is raining’ was allegedly said, the social relation between the current speaker and the reported speaker John, and the current speaker and the reported message (the fact whether it rains or not) are expressed *structurally* (Spronck, 2019; 2017). Languages have many different types of constructions, particles, verbal inflections and prosodic cues to indicate whether the current speaker agrees with the reported message, casts the reported speaker as an unreliable source, or is merely describing an objective speech event (Spronck, 2012). In this sense, reported speech is a prime example of a linguistic structure in which the social relation between two speakers is reflected in the grammatical form of the utterance, in its syntax.

In recent years, however, the study of Indigenous languages has found evidence for overlap between grammar and social meaning in reported speech to an even greater extent than earlier accounts of the phenomenon could possibly have predicted: in a wide range of unrelated languages reported speech constructions *are the main way of expressing meanings such as ‘to be about to do’, ‘unfortunately’ and others*. These meanings correspond to grammatical categories such as aspect, tense and modality. In other words, while most familiar languages use verbal constructions, inflections or particles to express meanings of time, perspective, epistemic attitudes etc., these newly described languages use a (type of) reported speech to express these meanings. Consider the examples in (1).

- (1) a. Ungarinyin (Worrorran language family; Australia)
ngurrba nyunguminda amayali jirri
hit.repeatedly I.will.take.her he.says.indeed he
 ‘He really wants to hit her’ (lit.: ‘he really says he will hit her’) (Spronck, 2015: 2)
- b. Aguaruna (Jivaroan language family; Peru)
nenatia kagati tusa
one.hangs.it.up let.it.get.dry he.saying
 ‘He hangs it up in order that it will get dry’ (lit.: ‘while he says “let it dry”’) (Larson, 1978: 88)
- c. Usan (Trans-New Guinea language family; Papua New Guinea)

Mi qei-qei mani umer-iner qamb gitab ig-oun
thing some-some yam it.might.wilt we.say we.abstain we.are

‘We abstain from various things lest the yam wilts’ (lit.: ‘we abstain, we say the yam might wilt’) Reesink (1993: 222)

- d. Wan (Niger-Congo language family; Ivory Coast)

yī ē gé bhā kó
water they say it boil

‘The water started to boil.’ (lit., ‘the water said: “let me boil”’) (Spronck and Nikitina, 2019)

As the literal translations of each of the sentences in (1) indicate, they each have the form of reported speech, but receive a non-speech related interpretation. These expressions of ‘non-literal’ or semantically extended reported speech constructions (henceforth: eRSCs) can have a wide range of functions within a particular language and across languages. For example, in the Australian Aboriginal language Ungarinyin, a sentence with a meaning roughly translatable as (2), has as possible interpretations the sentences in (3a-3b) (Rumsey, 1990; Spronck, 2015).

- (2) He said to me: “You will go”
 (3) a. He wanted me to go
 b. He caused me to go

Common core grammatical meanings reminiscent of the meaning of grammatical aspect (the temporal organisation of an event, cf. (1d), mood/modality (1c), and valency-changing constructions, such as causation (3b) can be expressed in a range of languages through eRSCs. Thereby, studying the structures and the meanings involved in eRSCs presents a unique opportunity to examine linguistic meaning at the ‘highest’, unambiguously socially embedded level (reported speech), in relation to ‘core’ grammar.

Examples of eRSCs are remarkably common in the languages of the world (cf. Aaron, 1992; Chappel, 2012; Everett, 2008; Güldemann, 2008; Larson, 1978; Loughnane, 2005; Matić and Pakendorf, 2013; Reesink, 1993; Rumsey, 1990; Saxena, 1988; van der Voort, 2002), yet their forms and functions have mostly been studied for isolated languages or specific linguistic regions. Therefore, while there are many descriptions available of eRSCs, no comprehensive study has charted the semantic range and types of structures involved in eRSCs across a global cross-linguistic sample. This leads to the research question in (4).

- (4) What are the structures and functions of eRSCs attested in the languages of the world? What cross-linguistic patterns can be indicated?

Furthermore, the focus in the eRSC literature on specific languages and areas obscures a remarkable observation: impressionistically, the semantic extensions of eRSCs are rather regular, dealing with speaker attitudes such as ‘wanting’ and ‘intending’ (cf. 1a, 1b), (not) knowing or warning (1c), and temporal perspectives on an event (1d), in addition to more traditional grammatical functions, such as linking clauses (Güldemann, 2008) and causation (3b) (Spronck and Nikitina, 2019). For most languages with eRSCs it has been claimed that eRSCs are the only way to express these meanings in the respective languages. This leads to the research questions in (5).

- (5) For many of the languages with eRSCs it has been claimed that these constructions are the only way to express meanings such as ‘to be about to do *p*’, ‘to want’, ‘*x* should not occur’. Is this indeed the case? If a language has alternative constructions available to express these meanings, what is their status in the grammatical system of the language and how do they relate to eRSCs?

As (5) states, it is presently unclear whether the languages eRSCs have alternative (morphological) ways of expressing their functions and how these differ in use and meaning from the expressed by reported speech utterances. Uncovering these similarities and differences goes to the heart of bringing together grammatical accounts at the ‘low’ and ‘high’ levels of analysis.

Finally, while the literal translation of eRSCs classifies them as reported speech, few studies have further explored the differences between common RSCs and their semantically extended uses. In other words, are eRSCs ‘regular’ reported speech constructions or do they have different properties, in addition to their semantic extensions? One feature that has been indicated as a primary candidate distinguishing eRSCs from RSCs is the discourse status of eRSCs: while reported speech constructions commonly occur at narrative ‘peaks’ in a discourse and have high information status (Verstraete, 2011), eRSCs seem to have a reduced discourse/information status (Spronck, 2016). Interestingly, reduced discourse/information status has been described in the literature as the main characteristic of a *grammatical* meaning (Boye and Harder, 2012). If it can, therefore, be demonstrated that eRSCs have a reduced discourse status cross-linguistically, this further supports the idea that eRSCs are on a cline from more interactional (reported speech constructions) to more grammatical structures. Analysing how eRSCs are used in discourse/text further develops our understanding of how eRSCs bridge interaction and grammar by examining the research question in (6).

- (6) How are eRSCs used in naturalistic discourse? What textual functions do they serve?

Each of the research questions above build up to an answer to the central research question motivating the project, as formulated in (7).

- (7) What do eRSCs demonstrate about the nature of grammar?

In attempting to formulate an answer to the research question in (7) the proposed project intends to contribute to a new understanding of the grammatical meanings involved in eRSCs, and thereby illustrate and develop an alternative approach to understanding the role of social meaning in grammatical analysis.

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