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by Daniela Marzo

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## An onomasiological approach to linguistic approximators in Romance languages

Wiltrud Mihatsch. 2010. „Wird man von hustensaft wie so ne art bekiff?“

*Approximationsmarker in romanischen Sprachen*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.

The main goal of Wiltrud Mihatsch's book (briefly stated in the introduction) is a systematic and comparative synchronic as well as diachronic analysis of the semantics, pragmatics and syntax of linguistic *approximation markers* in French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. *Approximation* is understood as the use of an expression for an entity to which it usually does not apply. In this sense, linguistic *approximators* modify the semantics of a proposition, such as the English *kind of* in (1), which signals that the mastodon is somehow similar to an elephant, but it is not actually an elephant.

(1) *A mastodon is kind of an elephant.* (cf. Mihatsch 2010: 176)

The analysis is based on corpus data of mainly modern spoken language that are complemented by corpus data of written language and of older language stages. As will be shown in the following paragraphs, the appeal of this book goes far beyond its self-evident interest for Romance linguistics, given that its theoretical and empirical results might, in principle, constitute an interesting starting point for further (typological) research in the field.

In chapter 1, the author defines the category of *linguistic approximation marker* or *approximator* and its different subtypes, especially the subcategories *rounder* (e.g. English *around, about*) and *adaptors* (e.g. English *sort of, kind of*), primarily by critically discussing the relevant literature and distinguishing the notion from related phenomena, such as *pragmatic weakening*. By the end of the chapter the reader has a full understanding of the notional and terminological complexity of the field. While all relevant categories are clearly defined and well exemplified in their respective subsections, the definition of *approximator* itself might, however, have deserved a more prominent place in the chapter than just at the beginning of section 1.3 (cf. Mihatsch 2010: 23), where it risks going unnoticed. At the end of the chapter, a brief summary of those notions that play a key role in the following chapters might have been very helpful to the reader and should be considered for future editions of the book.

Chapter 2 presents the data sources (i.e. the text corpora) in more detail and clearly states the object of the analysis, its necessity and the criteria used for the interpretation of the data.

Citing Hopper, the author clarifies that “structure can only be seen as emergent if forms are examined in their naturally occurring contexts” (Hopper 1998: 151, cf. Mihatsch 2010: 59). This is the reason for her looking at corpus data of different language stages. The author convincingly shows the importance of analyzing natural data not only with respect to recurrent constructions, but also – and especially – with respect to the polysemy and the co(n)text of the constructions under inspection. The criteria she uses to determine the (degree of) approximation function of certain constructions therefore are most naturally the following: (i) semantic information from the cotext, (ii) metadiscursive comments in the context, (iii) peculiar syntactic uses of the analyzed constructions, as well as (iv) speech pauses, interruptions and co-occurrence with other approximation markers. If none of these criteria is sufficient on its own, their combination is rightly taken as a strong argument for the approximation function of a given construction. The author concludes that the exact stage of pragmaticalization or grammaticalization of a construction can only be determined by a comparative approach. The criteria and goals stated in this chapter are consistently used and pursued throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter 3 is one of the strongest parts of the book, as it provides insight into the typological relevance of Wiltrud Mihatsch’s work: The author commits herself to an onomasiological perspective – an approach that is, to my understanding, quite original and innovative in the studied field. This perspective most naturally allows for a parallel analysis and comparison of formally quite heterogeneous approximators, such as approximation suffixes and adverbs. Against this background, the author individuates seven types of cognitively grounded approximation techniques that manifest themselves in different linguistic approximation strategies. While the author herself comes up with a considerable number of non-Romance examples (e.g. from German, Dutch and English), these types of approximation techniques constitute in themselves an interesting starting point for further and even more typologically oriented research in the area.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 contain, in turn, an in-depth synchronic and diachronic semasiological analysis of a series of formally diverging linguistic approximation strategies in Romance languages. These case studies corroborate the idea presented in chapter 3: Whereas formally different types of approximators may emerge from formally different sources, such as taxonomic nouns (e.g. French *un(e) espèce de / genre* ‘sort of’, cf. chapter 4), comparison markers (e.g. Spanish *como*, Italian *come* and French *comme* ‘like’, cf. chapter 5), and spatial prepositions (French *autour de / dans les* ‘about’), the underlying cognitively-founded techniques are always the same. Language-specific differences within Romance languages are argued to be (partly) due to diverging language contact situations and normalization

policies. It is also in these chapters that the contribution of the book to general pragmaticalization and grammaticalization research is most prominently perceptible: The fine-grained analyses of the linguistic approximation strategies under inspection render visible the stages and principles of language change that are well-known from other exhaustively studied pragmaticalization and grammaticalization processes. To give just one example: All studied phenomena undergo *deategorialization*, i.e. the gradual loss of the original (in our cases lexical as well as non-lexical) part of speech membership and the acquisition of a novel (non-lexical) part of speech. Seen this way, apart from pragmaticalization and grammaticalization researchers, the respective data analyses are also interesting for morphologists focusing on word-formation (especially conversion). However, as is generally the case with every detailed qualitative empirical study that openly gives insight into the discussed data, the reader might not agree with the author's interpretation of every single piece of data. The emergent approximation function of Italian *una forma di* 'sort of / a form of', for instance, is not always unambiguously proven, as shown in the following.

(2) *Io vedo il cinema come una forma d'arte*

I see the cinema as a form of art

'I conceive of the cinema as a form of art'

(Mihatsch 2010: 140)

(3) *Non ho mai pensato alle canzoni come una forma di confessione,*

Not have (1<sup>st</sup>. per. sg.) ever thought at the songs as a form of confession

'I have never thought of the songs as a form of confession'

Piuttosto assomigliano a sogni.

Rather resemble (3<sup>rd</sup>. ps. pl.) to dreams.

'they rather resemble dreams'

(Mihatsch 2010: 149)

The Italian *una forma di* in (2) is not characterized as having an approximation function, but the author rightly interprets it in its original taxonomic function (cf. Mihatsch 2010: 138-140). The author herself does not explicitly discuss the cotext in this case, but she could have supported her interpretation by adding that it is triggered by the Italian expression *vedere x come y* ‘to conceive of x as y, to see / perceive x as y’, which is a linguistic instrument to actually categorize x as y. If a speaker classifies x as y, the only reasonable (or at least most natural) interpretation of *una forma di* in *vedere x come una forma di y* is the literal one, i.e. that y is actually identified as one equal form of x among others and therefore a full member of category x. In (3), in contrast, the author explicitly attributes an approximation value to *una forma di*, without, however, going into the details of her choice. In view of the cotext, which in this case contains the Italian expression *pensare a x come y* ‘to think of x as y’ (again a linguistic instrument to actually classify x as y), one might wonder what the difference between (2) and (3) actually is. Of course, the cotext in (3) is negative (cf. Italian *non +mai*), clarifying that the songs the speaker talks about cannot be characterized as confessions. Still, the non-attribution of the songs to this category is a clear one; there is no ambiguity of classification and therefore no approximation whatsoever. The only approximation technique that can be singled out in (2) is the approximative similarity-based attribution of the songs to the category of dreams that is linguistically expressed by Italian *piuttosto* ‘rather’ and *assomigliano* ‘they resemble’. This is far from being a critique of the general line of argumentation and the more than plausible data discussion in the book, but only underlines the importance of the role of the context pointed out by Wiltrud Mihatsch herself. Still, for future editions of the book, the author as well as researchers applying Mihatsch’s approach to other languages might want to take these remarks seriously and help the reader apprehend the intended meaning by providing even larger pieces of cotext or more explicit explanations in cases such as (3).

All in all, this book is nevertheless and foremost an empirically extremely well-founded overview of the most important Romance techniques of linguistic approximation, which are, in addition, carefully defined and distinguished from related phenomena. As its onomasiological and comparative perspective also provides an in-depth insight into cross-linguistic patterns of approximation techniques, the book is also an important contribution to general typological research on approximation markers. Moreover, its synchronic as well as diachronic perspective allows for a fine-grained analysis of language-specific developments in single Romance languages. Last but not least, the thorough diachronic analysis of the above-mentioned case studies represents an indispensable contribution to pragmaticalization and grammaticalization research. In view of the undeniable general interest of this book, it is definitely a pity that the targeted public seems to be restricted to

German-speaking Romance philologists: The book is written in German and the Romance examples are neither accompanied by translations nor by word-by-word glosses – even language tags are missing. This revision would certainly make future editions of the book more reader-friendly and thus ultimately more easily accessible to a larger public.

## References

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**Daniela MARZO**

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