PhD Abstract

A cognitive and systemic functional approach of the use of personal pronouns in legal discourse: life insurance contracts and court hearings as a case study

Ameni Hlioui

Laboratory of Approaches to Discourse,
Sfax,
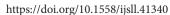*Tunisia*

Contact
email: ammounafed@gmail.com

equinoxonline

This thesis studies personal pronouns from two perspectives: Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth, SFL) and Cognitive Linguistics. The corpus of this study belongs to a discourse that is an 'exercise of power and of power over meaning' (Goodrich, 1987: 2): the legal discourse. This corpus pertains to two genres of legal discourse: Life Insurance Contracts (henceforth, LIC) and Court Hearing Transcripts (henceforth, CHT). An LIC is an agreement between a life insurance company and the insured owning the policy under the terms of which the company commits itself to compensate a named beneficiary when the insured dies, while a CHT is a written record of everything uttered by all participants during the court case proceedings. The chosen genres stand at two ends of the legal continuum scale with LICs on the written frozen end and CHTs on the spoken rehearsed/spontaneous end. These genres are chosen because one of the important goals of this thesis is to discover whether the variable of genre affects the distribution of personal pronouns and their participant roles in legal discourse.

The experiential metafunction of SFL is used to determine whether different speakers assign different participant roles to personal pronouns to serve their different ends. The interpersonal metafunction of SFL is used to check whether the use of personal pronouns can reflect the social status of speakers and detect whether they are credible in their speech. As far as Cognitive Linguistics is concerned, this thesis attempts to apply cognitive models like the Attention Model (Langacker, 1987, 2008) and the Force Dynamics Model (Talmy, 2000) to see whether personal pronouns can be used as a tool of exertion of power in discourse.

In order to achieve the aforementioned aims, a variety of quantitative and qualitative tools are employed in the methodology of this thesis. The UAM CorpusTool is used to annotate all the instances of personal pronouns according to their context in the corpus, the participant roles assigned to them and their sources. After annotation, the statistical tools of frequency distribution and the chi-square test are used to test the hypotheses of this thesis. On the qualitative paradigm, an in-depth study of the use of some personal pronouns using the SFL and Cognitive Linguistics approaches for interpretation is carried out.

It has been concluded that the choice of certain personal pronouns and of certain participant roles assigned to them is genre specific. Indeed, the genre of the corpus dictates certain preferences of reference density and of processes and participant roles. These preferences are also dependent on the aims of each genre. For instance, third person reference is rare in the genre of LICs for fear of reference ambiguity. This is not the case in CHTs, where this type of reference is frequent because of the narrative style of this genre. Another example showing generic differences shows that mental processes and their participants are by far more frequent in CHTs since they can express assumptions, interpretations, lines of

thought and argumentation. Indeed, these functions are present at the heart of the competing narratives participants in the court aim to reconstruct. These same functions are the reason these processes and their participant roles are rare in LICs, a genre which claims precision and clarity.

It has also been found that the power dynamics holding between the different participants of each genre and between the different types of participants in CHTs affect the choice of personal pronouns and the participant roles assigned to them. For instance, the judges represent the highest social power in this genre followed by lawyers. These two groups of participants enjoy free-flowing talk and use more second person reference, which is a marker of high social status. This is the opposite in the case of witnesses who exhibit a meagre use of this reference, since they cannot address other participants in the discourse. They are just restricted to presenting their testimony through answering the questions of lawyers and judges who control their turn-taking. This lower social status is further supported by their high use of first person singular reference, a marker of lower social status. The results have also led to the conclusion that this choice is also influenced by the different objectives these different participants seek to achieve in different legal settings. All these factors affecting these choices can be summarised by the dialogic relationship between text and context, where the frequency of personal pronouns and the participant roles assigned to them in the text of the corpus provide us with an idea about the different probabilities offered in this linguistic system, which in its turn unveils the different contextual features of genres inside this linguistic system.

References

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