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THREE FALLACIES THAT RECUR IN LINGUISTIC ARGUMENTATION

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Motto: “Lovejoy (1936: 57) notes that in the history of Western philosophy Aristotle has “encouraged two diametrically opposite sorts of conscious or unconscious logic”, namely “the habit of thinking in discrete, well-defined class-concepts and that of thinking in terms of continuity, of infinitely delicate shadings-off of everything into something else”. In linguistic writings of cognitivist and/or functionalist orientation, it has become customary to picture Aristotle as the arch-foe of ‘family resemblances’ and ‘prototypes’. Now we see that this picture is false. It is a curious fact that those who most vociferously claim to have renounced any type of black-and-white thinking apply precisely this type of thinking to how they write history (and to much else, besides)” (Itkonen 2005: 226–227).

For years, I have been puzzled by the following types of claims, advocated by prominent representatives of **Cognitive Linguistics** and/or **Construction Grammar**: ‘all meanings are metaphorical’ and ‘all constructions are idiomatic’. Why should anyone assert something that is so self-evidently false? In what follows, I try to reconstruct or **abduce** those (fallacious) thought processes that have led to the emitting of claims like these (for a discussion of abduction, cf. Itkonen 2005a: 1,5). Thus, my endeavor should be seen as part of the tradition, upheld e.g. by Kahneman and Tversky, that explores the roots of fallacies that occur in both everyday and scientific thinking.

Let us assume the existence of proponent X and opponent Y. X asserts that there is A, i.e. a set of **clear cases** (or cases known with certainty), and there is B, i.e. a set of **less-than-clear cases**. Y objects by pointing out that there is not only A but also B. Based on my experience of more than 30 years, I know that this ‘objection’ is made invariably. Nonetheless, it is fallacious because the existence of B was part of the original claim. The fallacy may be **explained** by assuming that Y (mis)interprets X as making a **contradictory** claim, in the following sense. Since B is, clearly, not A, it is taken to be not-A. Now X seems to be asserting either ‘there is something which is both A and not-A’ or ‘(there is A) and not-(there is A)’. This is the first fallacy, or **F1**. The steps that lead to F1 may be summarized as follows: $A \text{ vs. } B > A \ \& \ \text{not-A} > \text{either } \exists x(Ax \ \& \ \sim Ax) \text{ or } p \ \& \ \sim p$. (It may be added that — as could be expected — F1 has a

long pedigree; see e.g. the criticism of Max Stirner in Marx & Engels [1846/1973: 259–262]).

In committing F1, the thrust of Y's 'objection' is to emphasize the importance of B, which means that B is promoted into the status of 'Figure' while A is demoted into the status of 'Ground'. This prepares the way for the second fallacy, or **F2**. Maximally, F2 contains two steps, which means that F2 has a weaker version (= only the first step), or F2a, and a stronger version (= both the first step and the second one), or F2b.

F2 consists in **misunderstanding** the nature of a **continuum**, in the sense of not heeding Pap's (1958: 401) admonition that "to deny a distinction because of its vagueness is, of course, a semantic naiveté of the first order". Because A and B are situated on a continuum, it is impossible to state with precision where A ends and B begins. This is now taken to mean that there is no real distinction between A and B. Here we have the origin of the following misguided opinions: "there is no difference between clear cases and less-than-clear cases", "there is no difference between the grammar (or grammatical meanings) and the lexicon (or lexical meanings)", "there is no difference between rules and exceptions", "there is no difference between regular (= non-idiomatic) constructions and idiomatic constructions", "there is no difference between context-independent meanings (= semantics) and context-dependent meanings (= pragmatics)", "there is no difference between non-metaphorical (or literal) meanings and metaphorical meanings", "there is no difference between non-ironic and ironic speech". This is the first step of the second fallacy, or **F2a**. To show that it is indeed a fallacy, one only needs to replace the (difficult) linguistic terms by (simple) colour terms: "Since there is no clear-cut difference between black and white, there is no difference between black and white." — Are you willing to accept this conclusion?

Having started from **asserting** the difference between A and B, we have now arrived at **denying** the existence of this difference. But remember that, as was (fallaciously) established by F1, B has by now become the 'Figure' whereas A only qualifies as the 'Ground'. Therefore it is further inferred that 'in reality' there is just B and **no A at all**. This is the second step of the second fallacy, or **F2b**. F2b underlies the following misguided opinions: "there are no clear cases but only less-than-clear cases", "there are no rules, only exceptions", "all constructions are idiomatic", "all meanings are context-dependent (i.e. there is no semantics but only pragmatics)", "all meanings are metaphorical", "all speech is ironic (or non-genuine)". That F2b is indeed a fallacy, becomes evident when it is translated into simpler terms: "Since there is no difference between black and white, there is no black but only white." — Are you willing to accept this conclusion?

One variant of F2b, due to Jacques Derrida, is as follows: “Rules are primary and exceptions are secondary; but if there were no exceptions, there would be no rules; therefore exceptions are primary and rules are secondary (and, perhaps, ultimately non-existent)” (for discussion, cf. Itkonen 1988). A related variant of F2b, intended to emphasize the importance of **idioms**, has been expressed in the context of Construction Grammar: “The center is the periphery, and the periphery is the center.”

Itkonen (2006) explains in more detail how and why Cognitive Linguistics and/or Construction Grammar have in general misunderstood the central notion of **continuum**. One of the many misunderstandings consists in assuming that continuum-based thinking is a radical novelty that originated with Construction Grammar. This is false, of course, as shown e.g. by the following quotation from Itkonen (1978: 109):

“In this context two opposite mistakes are often made. Let us take as an example the ‘correct – incorrect’ distinction. On the one hand, from the fact that **some** cases are unclear, it is inferred that **all** cases are unclear; this is the standpoint of the current empiricist trend in socio- and psycholinguistics (cf. 5.4 and 7.4 below). On the other hand, presumably because of their untidiness, the factually existing unclear cases are taken to be purely apparent, so that clear cases are what exists in ‘reality’; this is the ‘classical’ standpoint of Transformational Grammar: [Quotation from Katz & Bever 1974]

The fallaciousness of both of these lines of thought should be evident. Take the distinction between young and old: It would be equally absurd to claim that since **some** people are neither young nor old, **all** people are neither young nor old, and that in reality there are only young people and old people. I hope to avoid both of these fallacies. All distinctions concerned are **relative**, but at the same time they have huge numbers of **absolutely clear cases** in their favor.”

Let us add a third fallacy or **F3**, which might be called the ‘knowledge-of-X, instead of X’ fallacy. Committed by generativism, F3 was denounced in the mid-70s by Dretske, Hutchinson, Itkonen, Kac, Ringen, Saunders, and others (for an overview, cf. Itkonen 2003: Appendix 1). The more recent, cognitivist version of F3 is formulated as follows: “our goal is to properly characterize a speaker’s knowledge of linguistic convention” (Langacker 1991: 268); “constructions form a structured inventory of a speaker’s knowledge of the conventions of their language” (Croft 2001: 25). What is wrong here can be made clear by means of an analogy. Suppose I have to describe the rules (or ‘conventions’) of chess. To do this, I have to know them, of course; but this does not mean that what I am doing is describe my knowledge of the rules of chess, rather than the rules of chess *tout court*. Rules, in the sense of **conventions** or **norms**, are necessarily **intersubjective** or **social**, as shown e.g. by Wittgenstein’s private-

language argument (cf. Itkonen 1978: 94–96, 109–113, 117–121), whereas my knowledge of conventions/norms (of language, for instance) is **subjective** or **individual-psychological** (even if, to be sure, it is **by means of** this subjective and — in principle — fallible knowledge that I have ‘access’ to social conventions/norms).

F3 becomes explicit in Lakoff’s (1987: 446–453) and Langacker’s (1991: 12–13, 23, 61) notion of ‘conventional mental image’. This notion is **self-contradictory** just like e.g. the notion of a ‘round square’: there can be no conventional mental images because ‘conventional’ is social while ‘mental’ is individual-psychological. As pointed out in Itkonen (1997: 68–71), this confusion results from an inability to decide whether sentences refer to situations or to mental images of situations. It should be clear that the former case is the primary one. (To be sure, the same mistake has often been made during the history of Western philosophy; cf. Itkonen 1991: 176, 220, 260–262, 274). The confusion at issue has been highlighted in Wittgenstein’s (1958: §§ 398–402) discussion of the (putative) distinction between ‘material room’ and ‘visual room’.

How is F3 to be remedied? — by treating language at **two** distinct and interacting levels, roughly corresponding to Popper’s (social) ‘world-3’ and (psychological) ‘world-2’. This duality is expressed in Itkonen (1983) by distinguishing between ‘(social) norms’ and ‘(individual-psychological) internalizations-of-norms’. It was evident in 1983 that, if cognitive linguistics was to emerge one day, then in order not to repeat the mistakes of generativism, it needed a **social grounding**.

Finally, let us add that while conventions are **normative** entities, this fact is ignored by generativists and cognitivists alike (with very few — and laudable — exceptions; cf. Zlatev 2007). Conventions without normativity ‘deconstruct’ themselves. So it is hard to tell what cognitivists may have in mind when they speak of ‘conventions’ (as they very often do). — The normativity of linguistic data, and what this entails, is the topic of Itkonen (1978). A recent résumé is given in Itkonen (2003).

Note: A preliminary version of this paper was distributed as a handout at the conference on ‘New Directions in Cognitive Linguistics’ (University of Sussex, 23–25 October 2005).

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