International Conference
École Normale Supérieure de Lyon (Lyon, France)
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'Egocentrism and anthropocentrism in language and discourse'

Organized by Laure Gardelle (ENS de Lyon, UMR ICAR) and Sandrine Sorlin (Aix-Marseille University, LERMA, Institut Universitaire de France)

This conference seeks to investigate the linguistic manifestations of egocentrism and anthropocentrism. While the existence of these two related, though distinct, phenomena is well established, the aim is to understand more specifically the extent of their influence on the structuring and interpretation of language and discourse, taking into account a wide range of languages and genres (political speech, computer-mediated communication, press articles, advertising, novels, letters, [auto]biographies, etc).

One well-established universal of language is the asymmetry in the treatment of animates (especially humans) and inanimates. For instance, in English, only those collective nouns that denote groups of humans, and more rarely, of animals, license plural override (e.g. *the committee are...*, *the herd are...* vs. **the forest are...*). But this anthropocentric categorisation is in fact part of a more complex hierarchy of categorisation, which Croft (2003) names the 'Extended Animacy Hierarchy':

> *Extended Animacy Hierarchy*: first/second person pronouns < third person pronoun < proper name < human common noun < nonhuman animate common noun < inanimate common noun
> ['<' means 'outranks']

The Extended Animacy Hierarchy involves three distinct, though related, dimensions (ibid.):

> 1) person (first/second < third)
> 2) referentiality (pronoun < proper name < common noun)
> 3) animacy proper (human < animate < inanimate)

The hierarchy is of course mapped differently onto specific languages, in ways for which theoretical models have been put forward (e.g. semantic map models, Haspelmath 1997). But the universals also appear as constraints on the structure of the conceptual space and on the mapping between external function and grammatical form (Croft 2003).

The aim is therefore to understand first, to what extent the Hierarchy structures language and discourse (does it concern some areas more than others, does it have relatively 'local' effects, or can one propose a human- or self-based analysis of language?), and secondly, whether these constraints can be done away with, for pragmatic or innovative purposes.

In the field of linguistics, the conference will particularly welcome contributions on the following points of interest:

 - what areas of language (e.g. elements of the lexicon, metaphorical orientation, perspectives based on empathy, syntactic structures) are affected by the Hierarchy, and why these? Studies on language acquisition may also provide helpful insights into this issue.

 - what exactly is the relationship between the three dimensions in the Hierarchy: in particular, is anthropocentrism just a broader manifestation of egocentrism (as the speaker is a human being)? Do the dimensions overlap, or have complementary linguistic distributions?

- what is the relationship between the Hierarchy and the closely related notion of embodiment, defined by Lakoff (1987) as the idea that 'the core of our conceptual systems is directly grounded in perception, body movement, and experience of a physical and social character'? The notion of embodiment itself has many different definitions, so that further investigation, specifically in relation to the self and humans, will be welcome.

- do egocentrism and/or anthropocentrism have a more significant structuring influence than other recurring semantic criteria of noun categorisation systems (i.e. gender/classifiers)? In particular, is humanness more prevalent than animacy and sex, the other two 'core semantic characteristics' of such systems (Aikhenvald 2003)?

In the fields of discourse analysis, stylistics and pragmatics, papers investigating the extent to which anthropocentric and egocentric perspectives constrain both encoding / reading processes and interpersonal exchanges will be particularly welcome, as well as papers exploring how these very constraints can be circumvented for creative purposes. The following points offer suggestions and possible fields of investigation:

- novels are traditionally written in the first or third person singular, first-person narratives allegedly fostering in the reader some greater degree of 'empathy' with the narrator-protagonist than third-person narratives can generate with the characters referred to – which would be in line with the order of the Extended Animacy Hierarchy. What place would then 'you narratives' occupy on the empathy continuum? Do they leave more room for the reader, by de-centering speaker-centered narration? In terms of empathy and projection, similar questions could be raised concerning the recent fictional use of the first- and third- person plural narratives ('we' or 'they') (Richardson 2006).

- beyond personal pronouns, talks may investigate the linguistic, pragmatic and stylistic markers of an excessively egocentric narrative or, conversely, an excessively altruistic one (with a narrator/speaker who has failed on his/her way to socialization because of psychological or neurological impairment for instance).

- cognitive stylistics (see Stockwell's 'empathy scale', 2009) has shown that readers naturally tend to focus on 'human attractors' more than on animals or inanimates. What could then be of interest are creative instances that challenge this instinctive anthropocentric way of reading by having a non-human or post-human narrator for instance.

- the notion of 'egocentrism' seems particularly adapted to a contemporary society which evinces what Blatt et al. (2015) term the 'rise of narcissism': how is the 'me, myself and I' staged in diverse social networks? Studies of Computer-Mediated Communication reveal that the new media influence language use and its probable evolution (for instance speakers are led to speak of themselves in the third person: *runs to the kitchen*; see Virtanen 2015). Egocentrism and anthropomorphism are also combined in ads personifying objects with instructions such as 'try me' or 'I open easily' for instance (see Wales 2015): how does this egocentric bias affect the position of the addressee?

- are similar devices used by politicians to create some form of empathy or identification with those they seek to convince while pushing for 'egocentric' ideas? The resort to the first person plural ('we') is one typical instance of declared altruism and concealed egocentrism.

- in the field of pragmatics, 'politeness' as theoreticians see it is a way of practising self-effacement in favour of the other. Although altruism can be fake in politeness (Leech 2014), the question may be asked as to whether 'genuine' altruism is possible. Is a more agonistic version of politeness theories necessary? In other words, is 'communicative altruism' a form of concealed self-centreness? Or is this individualistic aspect an eminently (Western) culture-centered phenomenon?

Keynote speakers:

Greville G. Corbett, Distinguished Professor of Linguistics at the University of Surrey and member of the Surrey Morphology Group
Elena Semino, Professor of Linguistics and Verbal Art at Lancaster University

Deadline for submission: July 10 2016

Notification of acceptance: September 10 2016

Proposals of around 300 words, together with a short bio, should be sent to both Laure Gardelle (laure.gardelle@ens-lyon.fr) and Sandrine Sorlin (sandrine.sorlin@univ-amu.fr), in French or in English. The main language of the conference will be English.

Selected papers will be considered for publication (in English).