Semantic maps and action formation: the case of response tokens

In Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics, a lot of knowledge about social actions and their formation across a variety of languages has accumulated. The structure and status of action in relation to e.g. linguistic form is a current topic of interest (Deppermann & Haugh, 2022), while another growing concern is the comparability of interactional descriptions based on different languages, discussed within and relevant for pragmatic typology (Rossi et al., 2020).

This paper considers the question whether semantic maps may be useful for action description, and how it can inform interactional and contrastive linguistics. A semantic map (Haspelmath, 2003) is a way to visualize or formulate relations between functions or meanings, and can be used to convey implicational hierarchies and relations between functions of certains forms, such as how they overlap or are distinctive. Given the amount of interactional descriptions of different actions, it may be possible to structure this knowledge through semantic maps to gain systematic overview.

The paper is based on a combination of descriptions from existing literature and conversational collections from corpora, and focuses on response tokens in Danish. Response tokens are particular words whose primary function is to perform responsive actions, such as confirmation, compliance, continuation and receipt. They are well-studied as examples of responsive action (Stivers, 2022). The main basis for the paper are cases from Danish everyday conversations and comparisons between specific words such as *ja* 'yes', *nej* 'no', *nå* approx. 'oh' and *okay* and potentially more. The resulting description shows that these words vary a lot, but that some of the variation can be conveyed through a semantic map of action. The paper will discuss this as a proof-of-concept while also considering interactional research into comparable words and phenomena in other languages.

By combining the conversation analytic focus on detailed description of the understanding of linguistic elements with contrastive description, the method may be able to empirically ground functional concepts in participants' understanding and offer perspectives on unifying action terminology for contrastive purposes. These observations can also inform linguistic description and future interactional studies.

The potential of this method must also be understood in relation to its limits. Creating a semantic map of action builds on conversation analytic description, but also involves a fair amount of interpretation and calibration of studies of varied material, where some precision may be lost. The results also open the question of granularity, how distinctive contrasts in a map may be to participants under which circumstances, and how to account for the role of context when comparing. It may also be considered if such maps are still "semantic" rather than pragmatic, which plays into discussions of the relation between semantics and pragmatics and the status of such notions.

References:
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