Marcuschian narrow roads through the Brazilian cognitive forest

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Homage-in-life” paper to Professor Luiz Antônio Marcuschi, who, after having set the milestones for the development of cognitive science/linguistics in Brazil, has suffered two apoplexies, finding himself in difficulty to go on producing academically. Since we have had the honor to learn from him personally, electronically, and vicariously, we decided to pay him this tribute by taking his scholarly work as a motivation – mainly Marcuschi (2004, 2008) – and responding to the provocation by a stubborn formalist, Borges Neto (2004), while using the conceptualization of Route Directions or Wayfinding Instructions in German and in Brazilian Portuguese to illustrate the argument. We make the case for Function in the ‘Form vs. Function: which originates the other?’ dilemma. We maintain a sociocognitivist perspective: referenciation, categorization, and the semantic-pragmatic meaning triggered by the words we use to make sense of the world itself is negotiated between interlocutors to arrive at a consensus as far as the mental map that instructor and instructee conceive goes when A tells B how to get somewhere. Writer and reader must cooperate from a distance in order to handle the verbal semiosis of this text-genre-like discourse-level construction or pattern and construe meaning locally, online, as partners in absentia.

1. Introduction

This paper intends to be a quite modest, rather humble but still significant and sincere paying respect for the contribution by Prof. Luiz Antônio Marcuschi to the emergence of a still incipient, though, already promising cognitive science / linguistics in my home country. Having had the privilege to meet him and learn a great deal from his talks, from our personal communication live or per e-mail, through the reading of his many papers, book chapters, volumes and unpublished manuscripts, I decided it was my duty to acknowledge his pivotal figure for the discipline publicly, since, after suffering from two strokes, it is practically unrealistic to count on a comeback to fruition by the scholar.

The paper will have the following outline: First I briefly summarize the provocation the article is a response to: the text by Borges Neto (2004). Then I counter-argue his stance mainly based on Marcuschi (2004, 2008), explaining why I have chosen these two references to be the foundation of my rationale. Next I exemplify the stance we take, which falls under the ‘sociocognition’ paradigm – as opposed to the perspective Borges Neto (2003, 2004) takes – which represents a ‘biocognition’-oriented perspective, with Route Directions in German and in Brazilian Portuguese. Rather than dissecting the two corpus sample tokens given just for the sake of illustration according to the three-faceted model Mendes (2008/2005) puts forth, I follow Mendes (in press a, b, work in progress) and simply highlight the discourse-level character of this text-genre-like unit, to suggest that the conceptualization of written Route Directions (RD), aka Path Descriptions (PD) or Wayfinding Instructions (WI) does constitute an entry in the macrolinguistic inventory of Constructions the Grammar of German and Brazilian Portuguese consist in [Östman, (2005)]. After all, they turn out to be a form-meaning potential pairing that is negotiated between writer and reader and immediately recognized as a template-like structure that will involve certain constraints on the linguistic expressions one may use to give or interpret them, as well as expectations concerning the script one will abide by while doing so, in an Austinian sense. In a word, RD or WI are a recognizable unit in the inventory of phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic-pragmatic and discourse/text-like continuum of Constructions in both natural languages our current investigation attempts to scope over and attest how speech acts and verbal semiosis emerge online in language use. The paper ends with some closing remarks on what is yet to be done in order to prove or disprove the hypothesis we start from and give the references mentioned throughout the article.

2. The provocation

The text that served as an outset for this paper was Borges Neto (2004), whose content in this section I sum up. Borges Neto’s (2004, pp. 83-93) essay maintains that the ‘Functionalism versus Formalism” debate in linguistics is a version of the “Chick or Egg: Which came first?” problem that cannot be solved within the science of language per se. Is it Form that motivates Function or the other way around? We will never be able to linguistically decide on this issue, he argues. He thus proposes that one has to resort to other sciences to disentangle the conundrum, and recurs to genetics and to anthropology in order to do that.
According to him, since genetics proves that language is a mental organ – no one would deny nowadays that the language capacity exists in the brain or mind of the language speakers – genetics would make Form score a first goal against Function in the “Form vs. Function match”.

Besides, he goes on, if we let anthropology solve the problem, namely to account for the ethnography of marriage practices among the Arara and the Tupinambá Brazilian native Indians as discussed in Teixeira Pinto (1997), neither Form nor Function is intrinsically barred; so, in principle, they would be at this time even. However, Borges Neto claims that even here Form takes the lead provided that only Form would be able to reach explanatory adequacy, while Function would go at most up to descriptive adequacy, taking into consideration the observational, descriptive and explanatory adequacy criteria a theory should be judged by. [Radford (1992)]. Hence, for Borges Neto (2004) both genetics and anthropology demonstrate that Form fares better than Function.

3. Why we disagree with this provocative argument

To begin with, because the rationale already starts from a formalist stance, thus dispreferring or looking down upon the functionalist counterproposal as a predisposition. At least as far as this insight goes, we must still agree with the founder of the Science of Language, Saussure, and acknowledge that the viewpoint, to a considerable extent, makes the object.

Second, because Borges Neto is too radical in posing the Form versus Function dichotomy. We believe a conciliatory, complementary view is much more arguable for: the language faculty as a mental organ all right, but not only that. Instead, this i-language must co-exist with an e-language: conceiving language as a social institution, in an inseparable way, thus making the case for a distributed cognition bottom line.

Last but not least, because the ‘formal invariant’ that allegedly permeates the Arara and the Tupinambá Brazilian native Indians’ marriage practices needs not, as Borges Neto defends, be accounted for by appealing to a ritual form that precedes functional distinctions. Instead, we had better see that these indigenous peoples have their marriage practices and institute them in behavior and in language in a socio-cultural specific manner. The force of the rites is not in the form they have, but precisely in the function they serve slightly differently in these two aboriginal communities. Society, language and minds are woven as close-knit fabrics. They are intricately interconnected, forming a single whole.

3.1 Marcuschian influences on our response to Borges Neto

Although Marcuschi (2001, 2002, 2003, or elsewhere) could be explored here, for the sake of brevity, and for two other very particular reasons, I will focus this sub-section of the paper on Marcuschi (2004), namely: 1. The article is in a book that is a Festschrift to Rodolfo Ilari, who is as much of a brilliant formalist as Borges Neto himself. 2. The article mentions one point of agreement with Borges Neto (2003) and disagrees with him in all other respects, happening to be contemporary to the text we chose as a provocation for the present paper.

Marcuschi (2008) will eventually be en passent quoted, due to its “posthumous in life” character, which is the very nature of our paper itself.


Of course it goes without saying that we will not here write a critical review of Marcuschi (2004), but rather stick to the fundamentals of this text and apply them to our enterprise, namely the writing of the current paper. In general, the article in question stresses a discussion towards the discourse/text level of analysis and proposes a socio-cognitive perspective for the issue of reference, a much cherished object of inquiry by Rodolfo Ilari, to whom the volume is dedicated. Marcuschi changes the prism into that of referenciation, by instituting it as an unstable, social, historical relationship negotiated between language and the world. This goes well with our claim in the present article when we propose Wayfinding Instructions as a Discourse Construction or Text-Genre-like unit. After all, referenciation is a crucial part of the construal of any verbal semiosis by the interlocutors engaged in this dynamics, including that of Route Directions / Wayfinding Instructions. Let us now then try to sum up the parts of Marcuschi’s (2004) essay most relevant to our purposes.

The mentor agrees with Borges Neto (2003: 9-10) only regarding the nature of meaning, and we here also endorse this position: Meaning is NOT an entity but rather a relationship. And not a relationship between a word and an entity in the world out there, but rather one between a linguistic expression and something non-linguistic. This something goes from a concrete thing in the world to a discourse object (such as an anaphor identified by bridging), or yet a mythological creature or still yet anything abstract one may conceive of. [Marcuschi (2004: 263-264)].

Besides, the mentor on this very same page goes on, we are NOT dealing with something that is extra-mental or with any representation of whatever sort. We are simply dealing with something non-linguistic. But the agreement with Borges Neto (2003), I repeat, ends right there. From now onwards, a sharp divergence between their views crops up, and we follow Marcuschi in his disagreeing with Borges Neto on the mark.

While Borges Neto (2004) had placed linguistics in between genetics and anthropology, Marcuschi (2004) does it between psychology and philosophy, which proves by itself a more humanistic – as opposed to Borges Neto’s “biologizing” tendency, following Chomsky and his entourage – thinkers such as Smith, Newmeyer, Higginbotham, Davidson, Barwise, Perry, Montague, Seuren, and so on. Marcuschi does not deny that meaning has a biological aspect.
to it. He acknowledges we have an inherited capacity to cognitively organize the world we live in and to talk about our experiences in this world. Notwithstanding, he maintains that verbal cognition is an essentially social phenomenon (language is not a disembodied system). Nor, he goes on, is it an ontological system that carries over the world in itself. Moreover, it is not either determined by external circumstances or historical settings only. Verbal cognition is, after all, an epistemological modus, a clue/hint to meaning negotiation construction among interlocutors, as defend, for instance Fauconnier & Turner (2002), and scholars such as Dirven, Verspoor, Panther, Talmy, Del Hymes... In a word: verbal cognition is biology instantiated in society.

The scholar challenges the Fregean Rodolfo Ilari to change the stance on the classical referential question, as we have above alluded to: From an a priori to represent a world that is given from the outset into an on-going referenciation process: an activity contextually situated and history-culture-society sensitive. The issue of meaning is NOT a one-to-one linear correspondence between a word and a world referent. Frege’s distinction Sinn vs. Bedeutung already undermined such a point of view. Hence, this is not the main theme of Marcuschi’s (2004) paper. Rather, it deals with the issue of pondering over the existence of a relationship between language and the world at all or not, arguing for this matter being much more a socio-cognitive enterprise, a distributed cognition topic. To sum up: the question is not anymore “what kind of relationship is cognition all about?” but rather “how is cognition verbally and otherwise behaviorally instantiated in social interaction?”

The categories we operate with in our everyday communicative activities are not natural, nor is the lexicon an apparatus to say the world as if it were discreet and waiting for being labeled. The highlight must hence turn to the general activities and processes linguistic cognition encompasses. This is because our mentor quotes both Plato’s Cratylus’s semantic naturalism – the view that there is an ideal world in which to each thing there would correspond a particular word, in a naturally adequate one-to-one link – and Hermogenes’s semantic conventionalism – the view that there is no name that is, by nature, appropriate to a thing. Giving names to things has to do with tradition, convention, habit, usage, with those who use these names to name these things getting used to this practice. Marcuschi however does not adopt either of these two extreme stances, but rather comes up with a 3rd conciliatory path: socio-cognitivism. Put it differently, Marcuschi (2004: 265) maintains that the link between names and things is neither natural nor conventional. The link is rather an unstable relationship, socially, historically and contextually negotiated between language and the world: a relationship qua ACTION.

Plato’s mistake, the Master remarks, is just turning Cratylus’s a priori into Hermogenes’s a posteriori. Plato changes the thesis but keeps the stable relationship established between word and thing. It remains a fixed link for everybody, a necessary bond so that the being must mirror the name. It is only that, instead of a natural character, this link turned into a conventional one. But this is not satisfactory either. Marcuschi does justice to Plato, though, who in the Sophist concludes that the true analysis of language takes place in the realm of the utterance (logos) and not in the word. He then cites Aristotle for whom the correspondence relationship between language and the word had also a stable categorical reference.

3.1.2. How the role of the lexicon in discourse fits into the picture

Marcuschi (2004) mentions a host of scholars to back up his case for a distributed cognition, Mondada, Dubois, Giora, Ariel, the late Wittgenstein, Putnam, Fauconnier, Possenti, Fiorin, Dummet, Fillietatz, among others. But perhaps we can in a nutshell best paraphrase his argument by remembering Tomasello’s (2001) sociogenesis weaving together ontogenesis and phylogenesis in everyday cultural routines and practices and producing a ‘hatchet effect’, pushing mankind as a whole and each of us at the same time forwards, towards development and consolidation of our legacy to our offspring.

We simply cannot dissociate lexicon from discourse. Or thinking and speaking/writing from using language to symbolize the world around us, and hence make sense of reality, while we constantly and unsteadily negotiate meaning with our co-specifists by deploying the semiotic tips linguistic forms serve as in order to arrive, most of the times, at lest, at a consensus as for categorization, referenciation, inferences computation and other highly uniquely human cognitive abilities.

Though Marcuschi himself does not overtly take this step, we think it is not implausible to equate the symbolization in partnership between interlocutors activity, tentative and potentially rich in an immeasurable extent relationship between using language and construing the world as he seems to see the lexicon to be like to the Parallel Architecture stance or the Constructions Framework view Jackendoff (2002) and Goldberg (2006), respectively, put forth, in their own versions of the form-meaning pairings the Lexicon or the Grammar of any natural language in a usage-based model is taken to consist in. [Croft & Cruse (2004), Barlow & Kemmer (2000)].

In other words, we see language – which in this case is synonymous to Lexicon or Grammar – to be an open catalog of linguistic expressions tied up with potential prompts to meaning construction that goes from phonological identifications (including prosodic aspects such as intonation contours and the like), to morphosyntactic strings that scope over mere words, to phrases, to sentences up to proverbs or idioms, to more macro-linguistic semantic-pragmatic discourse/text level symbolic units. Path Descriptions, Route Directions or Wayfinding Instructions would fall under this latter category, taking a step forward from what Östman (2005) defends, or, if you want, following his footsteps.
3.1.3. Text-Genres-like units qua Discourse Constructions

Marcuschi (2008: 229) is worth quoting at this point:

\[\ldots\] We take language to be a set of social and historical activities and not as a mere system. With language we guide meaning [construction] and we constitute worlds, but not for the sake of a virtue immanent to language itself, but rather by the effort of the speakers. Hence, to understand is not to extract meaning from texts. Exactly because of that, not everything is seen the same way by everyone, and likewise there is divergence in text comprehension among different readers. It is also worth stressing that cultural models of a given society are a solid basis for the construal of experiences in the way described above. There are still schemes wider than the conceptual ones themselves, such as text genres, which operate as discourse forms to powerfully frame our meaning construction semiotic operation. (My translation and underlining).

Mendes (2008/2005) proposes a three-faced model to account for how Germans teach someone how to get somewhere in an unfamiliar environment in written text (spontaneously or not): a knowledge model, a discourse model, and a dialogue model. Basically, be it conceived of as a sort of text genre, as Marcuschi (2008) could perhaps permit us to do, or as a discourse construction, as Östman (2005) somehow lets us propose, Path Descriptions, Route Directions or Wayfinding Instructions involve:

- an intentional engagement that writer and reader carry on in order to arrive at a consensus insofar as collaboratively building up a mental map from Source to Goal made up of linear segments of various lengths and beacons or landmarks;
- an agreement on speech bubbles (temporary referenciation domains) to allow them to convert this visuo-spatial mental landscape into a discourse grammar which consists in a network of conceptual worlds that are strung up and activated radially concomitantly with complex encyclopedic information retrieval and inferential operations, and
- a cooperation-at-a-distance kind of dialectics, since writer and reader turn out to be virtual co-workers in a “conversation in absentia” with each other as an interlocutor sort of interaction.

To make our argument a bit more explicit, Mendes (in press a, b, work in progress) hint at an analysis of data tokens that contrast instances of Wayfinding Instructions both in Brazilian Portuguese and in German, and propose them as a Discourse Construction/Pattern. Let us take just two tokens, one in each language of the current work in progress I am undertaking in my home university town nowadays, as an expansion from my Ph.D. dissertation in Hamburg, Germany. Token “Gi” for German. Context: Tina leaves under Vincent’s dorm’s door room a note explaining to him how to get from there to her place, where mutual friends will gather for a pasta dinner. Mendes (2008: 269).


Translation into English: Hi Vicente, if you feel like eating some tasty pasta, stop by my place the day after tomorrow around 8 PM. Don’t worry: it’s not MY turn to cook! Giuseppe is going to cook us Linguine al Salmone. You’ve said you’re writing the dissertation on Path Descriptions, right? This note then kills two birds with one stone (a proverb). Ok, go outside taking the main entrance. Turn left there. Then left at the end of the park, opposite the main entrance to the University Hospital Eppendorf. Now walk down this street always straight ahead. I live in the apartment building # 8, left hand side, on the 4th floor. Hope this can give you a hand to move onwards. See you there. Tina. (03/25/2003)

Token “BP” for Brazilian Portuguese. Context: Vincent, a newcomer in town, asks a friendly guard at the sentry box right next to the main gate of the University Campus to write him down instructions for him to go, on the following Saturday, to the School supermarket (a laboratory-like facility for the Home Economics Department).

Pra você ir de lá até o Supermercado Escola no sábado? Eu acho que eles ficam abertos até às 18:00 no fim de semana… Você segue essa reta principal toda vida. Passa pelo Centro de Vivência (um prédio de paredes de vidro que tem um laguinho com peixes na frente) e pelo Prédio Principal (um antigo, amarelo claro, bem grande e comprido) logo depois a direita. Em frente ao Centro de Vivência, do outro lado da reta principal você vai ter visto o RU. Quando você chegar na segunda rotatória você vira à direita. Segue reto passando pelo Banco do Brasil e pelo Departamento de Matemática do lado esquerdo. O Supermercado Escola fica do lado do DEM. Não tem como errar. E logo depois do ponto de ônibus. Boas compras! Você vai encontrar muitos produtos lá que não encontra nos supermercados comuns da cidade. E os preços nem são tão mais caros! (10/08/2009). Mendes (work in progress).

Translation into English: For you to go to the School Supermarket on Saturday? I guess they are open up to 6 PM on weekends. You walk along this main road straight ahead. You walk past the Convivial Center (a building with glass walls and a little pond with fish in front of it) and the Main Building (a good old style fashion one, light yellow, very big and long) right afterwards to the right. Opposite the Convivial Center, on the other side of the main road you will have seen the School Cafeteria. When you reach the second round turn, you turn right. Then you walk straight past the Bank of Brazil and the Maths Department. The School Supermarket lies next to the MD. You can’t miss it: It’s right
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after the bus stop. Good shopping! You’ll find many items there you don’t find in the regular supermarkets in town. And the prices are not even that much more expensive! (08/10/2009).

Out of these two illustration corpus sample tokens, we can already have a clue of what the data analysis in Mendes (work in progress) is hinting at. We basically follow Östman (2005) when we propose Wayfinding Instructions as a Discourse Construction. Without going into details here the Finnish scholar brings in his ‘position paper’, for example the differentiation between ‘text type’ vs. ‘genre’ and what he calls ‘Discourse Pattern’, an umbrella term for what one might call ‘framing constructions’, ‘framing patterns’ or ‘discourse constructions’; or, for that matter, how this distinction would correlate with the various proposals of Construction Grammar available nowadays in the literature (notationally and otherwise), or with the paradigm of Frame Semantics proposed by Fillmore and associates, we will at this point only pay heed to the fundamentals of the paper, which suit best the enterprise of rounding off the current article. A few brief quotes from Östman (2005) come handy for this purpose:

The main argument of this chapter is that certain ‘discourse patterns’ represent conventionalizations of specific linguistic properties, which places them on an equal footing with the conventionalized patterns known as ‘grammar’, at least with respect to capturing speakers’ knowledge of a language as a symbolic system (Östman, 2005, p. 121).

The degree of conventionality and native speaker acceptability between what is ‘grammatical’ as a sentence, and what is ‘grammatical as a paragraph or text/discourse is a gradient phenomenon. There is no ontological, methodological, nor cognitive basis for accepting morphemes and words as having constructions associated with them – as, indeed, being licensed by constructions – but not to accept combinations of sentences, paragraphs and whole texts/discourses. Size does not matter (Östmann, 2005, pp. 126–127).

Discourse patterns pertain to the holistic perception of text/discourse; they are not simply shape, but they function as frames for understanding. And if discourse patterns are directly associated with coherence in terms of understanding, discourse pattern similarity implies similarity in the manner of cognitive understanding, and similarity in how we perceive and process texts. Thus the recipe, the guide book, and direction-giving as interaction have a very similar structure: first a presentation of the ingredients (Recipe), the places worth seeing (Guide book) and the joint establishment of mutually known landmarks and means of transportation (Direction giving); then a step by step account of the process by which one gets from ingredients to finished product, or from point A to point B. (…)

Should we, for instance, establish an abstract Instruction pattern to be inherited by the more specific patterns Recipe, Guide book and Direction giving? Establishing such an inheritance relation between the patterns would underline their similarity, and would propose similarity in conceptualization (Östman, 2005, p. 134–135). [Emphasis mine]

Although we disagree with the characterization of Direction Giving Östman puts forth, as far as it involving ‘mutually known landmarks and means of transportation’ is concerned, at least the kind of Wayfinding Instructions we chose as our object of inquiry for the Ph.D. dissertation did not necessarily comply with this characterization, as Mendes (2005/2008) reveals, we are in tune with the gist of the argument the Finnish scholar puts forth. Miranda and co-workers from the Graduate Program in Linguistics at Juiz de Fora Federal University, MG, Brazil, seem recently to have been flocking with us and Östman in feathers by investigating, for instance, the inheritance relationships among similar Discourse Patterns or Constructions such as jokes, anecdotes, puns, wisecracks, pranks, etc. See in this regard, Miranda (2006), Carrara et al. (2009), among others.

Mendes (in press a, b, work in progress) suggest an analysis of corpora samples data tokens of written Route Directions in Brazilian Portuguese and in German, contrastively looking at similarities and differences on how native speakers of these two languages jot down on paper or e-mail someone instructions for him or her to get somewhere in an unfamiliar environment. Instead of dissecting the instances according to the 3-faceted model Mendes (2005/2008) puts forth, we follow Marcuschi’s distributed cognition orientation and Östman’s case for Construction Discourse and see in these particular extensive occurrences of language use stabilized, entrenched and macro-linguistic (going way beyond the level of the sentence) form-meaning pairings as discourse patterns. In other words, we investigate the cognitive underpinnings at the text/discourse level of the conventionalized way Germans and Brazilians adhere to in order to tell someone in verbal prose how to get somewhere. The form side of this discourse pattern/construction would be a string of Paths proper, Landmarks, distances and orientational pushes from Source to Goal. The meaning/function side of this discourse pattern/construction would be offering help to someone and thus enable him/her to move around in space and reach a destination he/she would not be able to reach without the aid of the wayfinding instructions at hand.

This enterprise, at least in the stance it takes towards the cooperative- between-interactants activity language use amounts to, aligns with a host of scholarly work of different shades, such as Dillinger (1991); Gumperz & Levinson (1996); Clark & Van Der Wege (2001); Rajagopalan (1996); Salomão (1997, 2002); Moura (2002); Damásio (1995); Yule (2006); Tomasello (2003), or even some investigative work conducted by S. Votre; A. Naro; R.G. Camacho, etc to mention just a few.
4. Concluding remarks

Needless to say, the contrastive research we are currently undertaking must be strengthened in a systematization of our samples tokens as a corpus linguistics requirement procedure, or buttressed by statistical calculations obtainable therefrom, or still converted into a computationally operationable notation such as the one used nowadays in the FrameNet paradigm in Brazil, the US, Germany, Spain, Finland and elsewhere. All these measures will for sure render our incipient ongoing investigation more scientifically robust, psychologically driven and intuitively convincing. Yet, we dare to advance that even at the current stage of our inquiry we may hypothesize Wayfinding Instructions as one specific entry in the form-meaning pairings at the discourse level that Germans and Brazilians conventionally resort to in their everyday, routine community language and thinking operations in order to do certain things with words, namely, helping people to move around successfully, by telling someone the way somewhere.

In retrospect, what we did in this paper was to take Borges Neto (2004) as a “scapegoat”, so to say, for us to agree with him minimally and disagree with him in almost everything else and thus be able to follow our Mentor Marcuschi (2004, 2008) *inter alia*, and exemplify this distributed cognition stance with our Ph.D. dissertation expanded into a book. Saarbrücken: VDM. Hardcopy book version of Marcuschi’s (2008-2005) work represents to us a unpretentious tribute still in life to such a great thinker, illuminating professor, brilliant researcher and role model human being.

We hope this modest homage to the enormous, really gigantic contribution Marcuschi’s scholarly work represents to the development of cognitive science/linguistics in our country may have served the purpose to pay one more unpretentious tribute still in life to such a great thinker, illuminating professor, brilliant researcher and role model human being.

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