Carsten Levisen

An Ethnosyntax of Anti-Authoritarianism? The Grammar of Danish Deliberative Discourse

Abstracts:

This paper explores the grammar-culture interface through a study on the language of "anti-authoritarianism". Inspired by Wierzbicka's seminal studies on ethnosyntax (1979), and the subsequent work of Enfield (2002) and Peeters (2015), the paper studies the way in which cultural values can be engendered by local syntax. Surveying first the literature on "anti-authoritarianism" in the study of intercultural pragmatics and drawing on previous work on Danish ethnosyntax (Levisen 2018) the paper turns to a case study on a particular Danish construction hvis det er, literally ‘if it is’, which appears to have taken on a specific meaning in deliberative discourse. Consider the examples in (1-2).

(1) Hvis det er, kan vi også mødes i morgen.
    Hvis det er, we can also meet tomorrow

(2) Jeg kan også stå for det, hvis det er
    I can be in charge of it, hvis det er

Based on such examples, it would seem that this construction can express something like “a desire to not come across as dominant in joint decision-making”. This is explicitly done by signaling openness to alternative plans, but implicitly, evidence suggests that the construction is also in the service of making sure that one does not come across dominant. This theme links with general themes in Danish cultural semantics (Levisen 2012), and with the axiological theme of “anti-authoritarianism”. Testing these hypotheses, the study combines two methods: corpus-assisted analysis, and semantic consultation sessions. The DaTenTen17 (Sketch Engine) is utilized for the corpus-assisted study, and the consultations are based on discussions with speakers of Danish (3 groups of 4-6 speakers). The Natural Semantic Metalanguage will be used a tool for explicating the meaning of hvis det er as it is construed across texts and speakers.

The discourse of values in the Global North often relies on words such as “egalitarianism”, “individualism”, and “anti-authoritarianism”. In the final part of the paper, I will reflect on the problems in using such over-arching terminologies, and based on the NSM-based work on Danish and general ethnosyntax, I will propose a high-resolution metalanguage for the study of the grammar-culture interface, which can better account for the specifics of axiological meaning in grammar, and which at the same time can serve as a more stable cross-linguistic tools for doing comparative cultural semantics.