Linguistic creatures in an institutional world[1]

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What kind of creatures are we? In trying to answer this ancient question, scientists aim at identifying properties of our modern selves that distinguish us from other animals in the world. Language arguably is one such property (Chomsky 2016). This core aspect of human nature allows us to produce and understand an infinite array of hierarchically structured expressions that have a meaning ("a language of thought") and an externalized form (sound or sign). The unboundedness of the set of linguistic expressions, and also their hierarchical nature —the embedding of a linguistic unit X in a larger linguistic unit Y—, can easily be shown on the basis of the following range of increasingly complex patterns:

(1) a. John saw [Mary]
     b. John saw [a statue [of Mary]]
     c. John saw [a picture [of a statue [of Mary]]]
         et cetera

Our language capacity makes it possible to share our individual inner thoughts and feelings with others. Being social creatures, we use language to communicate with each other. This social aspect of our human nature brings us to another core property of ours, namely our ability to organize our social lives in terms of institutions. Hindriks and Guala (2015:459) phrase it as follows:

"Institutions are peculiar products of human activities, to begin with, and may hold the key to understand our special place in the natural world. Why are humans the only animals who can build social organizations and who constantly invent new ways of living together? The other social animals do not seem to have institutions […]."

It does not seem implausible that our linguistic capacity (linguistic competence) and our ability to use it in communication (linguistic performance) closely relate to our "institutional capacity". Being able to generate an infinite number of "linguistic thoughts" that can be shared with others through communication seems to provide a good basis for (jointly) establishing and codifying structures —systems of social rules—that shape our social lives, in short: institutions (North 1990, Hodgson 2006). The quintessential role of language in our institutionalized world is well worded in Searle's (1995:60) statement that "language is the basic social institution in the sense that all others [e.g., family, businesses, law, education, military, religion, peer groups; N.C.] presuppose language, but language does not presuppose the others."

What's in an institutional term?

Words are central building blocks of human language. Our knowledge of words allows us to think and talk about aspects of the world, including the social institutions in our everyday lives. A rich variety of institutional concepts find their way into our institutional vocabularies. These terms can stand for various things, including individuals, objects, properties, activities, and time. In legal contexts, for example, we find institution-specific terms such as *verzoeker* 'applicant' (individual), *akte* 'brief' (i.e. document of process; object), *niet-ontvankelijk* 'inadmissible' (property), *betekenen* 'to serve' (activity), and the Latin loan expression *ex nunc* ('from now on'; time), a legal term to signify that something (e.g. a legal contract) is valid only for the future and not the past. Zooming in a little further on legal terms that denote individuals, we notice that they can designate certain roles within the institutional context. The inner word structure of the legal term tells us something about this role. For example, composite nouns with the internal structure 'verbal root + *-er*', as in *eis-er* 'claimant', *verweerd-er* 'defendant', and *verzoek-er* 'applicant', typically denote an 'agent', that is, the doer or instigator of the action denoted by the verbal root. Thus, *eiser* is 'the one who claims', where the element *-er* contributes the agentive meaning. Legal terms such as *gelaedeerd-e* 'injured/aggrieved party', *gedaagd-e* 'defendant', and *geïntimeerd-e* 'respondent', which have the inner structure 'passive participle' + *-e*, denote a so-called 'theme', that is, the individual that undergoes the effect of some action. Thus, *gelaedeerde* is 'the one who has been injured or aggrieved'.

What these examples show, is that institutional (e.g. legal) terms tell us something about meaningful dimensions in social systems. Other dimensions that play a role in person-related institutional terminology regard, among others, spatial relationships (hierarchy within a system), temporal relationships (seniority within a system), (non)-biological relationships, and *ex-situ* or *in situ* relationships (being inside or outside the system). Some illustrations are given in (2).

(2)   a.   vader; grootvader; overgrootvader; betovergrootvader
            father; grandfather; great-grandfather; great-great-grandfather
      b.   kind; kleinkind; achterkleinkind; achter-achterkleinkind
            child; grandchild; great-grand-child; great-great-grandchild
      c.   (onder-)officier; (hoofd-)docent; (vice-)burgemeester
            (non-commissioned) officer; (senior) lecturer; (vice) major
      d.   moeder; schoonmoeder; stiefmoeder
            mother; mother-in-law; step-mother
      e.   ex; hoogleraar emeritus; generaal-majoor buiten dienst
            ex(wife/husband); professor emeritus; retired Major General

Notice also here that the combinatorial power of language —our ability to combine smaller units into bigger ones, as, for example, in *[over [groot [vader]]]*— allows us to characterize these different roles of individuals in institutional contexts. And also here, we can keep on building linguistic structures, as in *een [achter [achter [achter <etc.> [kleinkind]]]]*.

What's in a relation?

Institutions include sets of relations between individuals or entities (Hodgson 2006). As shown in (3), these (social) relations can be expressed through language, again in a principally unbounded way: you can keep on adding *van*-phrases. At the (sound) surface, these patterns look like strings of words, in which one word precedes the other: *Jan + van + Mia + van + Kees*. At a more abstract (hidden) level, these patterns turn out to have a hierarchical structure, with one structural layer being embedded in a larger structural layer. The linear string *Jan van Mia van Kees*, for example, has the more abstract hierarchical structure *[Jan [van [Mia [van [Kees]]]]]*, where *Kees* is structurally part of the unit *van Kees*, *van Kees*, in turn, of the unit *Mia van Kees*, *et cetera*.

(3) a. Jan van Mia van Kees
         'Jan, who is Mia's son, who in turn is the daughter of Kees'
     b. de broer van een neef van een tante van mij
         'the brother of a nephew of an aunt of mine'
     c. het secretariaat van het hoofdkantoor van de RABO-bank
         'the secretariat of the head office of the RABO bank'

The patterns in (3) are interesting not only from a linguistic perspective but also from an institutional perspective. The pattern in (3a), for example, is typically used in small dialect-speaking communities, whose members are familiar with other people's kinship relations.

The code-switching language user in an institutional world

As individuals we participate in manifold institutions throughout our lives. It is quite remarkable that we manage to switch so easily between different institutional contexts. This switching behavior is also manifest in our language. We smoothly switch from one "institutional language" to another, often without being aware that the linguistic properties of one institutional code, sometimes referred to as a 'register' (Ferguson 1982), may differ from those of another institutional code. Interestingly, these differences often regard so-called function words, such as definite articles (*de* 'the'), copular verbs (*zijn* 'to be'), pronouns (*hij* 'he'), and prepositions (*van* 'of'). These "small" words have abstract

meanings, form a closed class, display a high frequency in language use, and signal structural relationships that words have to one another. They differ in these respects from so-called content words such as nouns (*moeder* 'mother'), verbs (*eten* 'to eat'), and adjectives (*aardig* 'kind'). Interestingly, as exemplified in (4) and (5), function words can be absent in certain institutional codes.

(4) *Eiseres* heeft *verweerder* verzocht om kentekenplaten zonder duplicaatcode te verkrijgen.
'The plaintiff has requested the defendant to obtain license plates without a duplicate code.'

(5) Minister afwezig bij opening academisch jaar.
'The minister was/will be absent at the opening of the academic year.'

Example (4) is an instance of so-called 'legalese' (institution: law): it shows that the definite article *de* 'the' (also *het*) can be left out when it precedes nouns denoting legal parties in a lawsuit (*eiseres*, *verweerder*). Example (5) illustrates the phenomenon of 'headlinese' (institution: media). In this example, not only the definite articles (*de/het*) are absent, but also the copular verb (*is*) and the preposition *van*. Language users acting within these institutional contexts have knowledge of the grammatical rules of these different "institutional codes". According to Roeper (1999: 184), these "islands of grammar variation which [..] allow a nuanced array of communicative powers to the speaker" should be analyzed as a kind of language-internal bilingualism.

Economy of representation

As noted by Hindriks and Guala (2015:475), "an important function of institutions is to promote economy of thought." For example, legal terms such as *subpoena*, *heirs*, and *to litigate* are convenient terms within the institution of law; they compactly summarize institutional information (events, roles, actions, *et cetera*) and this way reduce the cognitive costs for the institutional participants during interaction. A further illustration of this tendency towards economic (symbolic) representation of institutional concepts comes from the use of abbrevations, which are ubiquitous within institutions. Some examples from the institution 'Military Forces' are given in (6):

(6) a. GVT (**ge**v**echtt**enue), BT (**b**attle **t**ank), KVV (**K**ort **V**erband **V**rijwilliger), PRAT (**P**antser **R**ups **A**nti **T**ank), KMA (**K**oninklijke **M**ilitaire **A**cademie)
     b. lupa (**lu**nch**pa**kket), vupo (**vuu**r**po**sitie), laro (**la**nd**ro**ver), hiba (**hi**ndernis**baa**n), pluba (**pl**unje**baa**l)

The formation of such abbrevations follows certain rules of language. The patterns in (6a), for example, are formed by taking the first sound of each word or syllable in a composite word or phrase. Those in (6b) are formed by taking the first two sounds of a sequence of syllables —technically, the onset and the nucleus— and forming a single pronounceable unit from them.

Conclusion

Language is a multi-faceted phenomenon worth of study. It constitutes a core property of our human nature and provides us with a mirror reflecting the creativity of our mind (Chomsky 1968). This creativity is manifest in our use of language in institutional contexts, for example in the expression of institutional terms, conceptual relations, abbreviations, and the presence *versus* absence of function words. The study of institutions at the interface with language opens up an interesting research program, both from a cognitive perspective and a social perspective.

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