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How to Understand Understanding – a Tribute to Professor Torben Thrane

With this thematic section of *Hermes*, colleagues and friends wish to honour professor Torben Thrane for his important contribution to linguistics. The volume contains written versions of the talks presented at a conference held at the Department of Language and Business Communication, Aarhus University, on January 28, 2011, to celebrate Torben Thrane on the occasion of his retirement as a professor in modern English language and linguistics.

Professor Torben Thrane started his academic career at the University of Copenhagen, where he was first assistant professor and then associate professor in English language and literature at the Department of English between 1972 and 1985, after which he moved to the Institute of Informatics where he held a position as reader between 1985 and 1995. In 1995, Torben Thrane was appointed professor of modern English language and linguistics at the Department of English (which later became part of the Department of Language and Business Communication) at the Aarhus School of Business. After almost 16 highly productive years in Aarhus, Torben Thrane – much to the regret of his colleagues – chose to retire in January 2011 in order to spend more time with his family, play more bridge and, not least, study and write at a more leisurely pace than is usually possible as a university professor.

In 1967, Torben Thrane was awarded a gold medal by the University of Copenhagen for his Master's dissertation on the influence of Latin on Middle English syntax, and in 1976 he was awarded the degree of PhD from the University of Edinburgh for the dissertation *A Study in the Referential Functions of the English Noun Phrase*. The dissertation was published in 1980 under the title *Referential-Semantic Analysis: Aspects of a theory of linguistic reference* (Cambridge University Press). Later followed numerous articles and other publications, as evidenced in the bibliovita following these pages.

Torben Thrane's academic interests as a researcher and teacher are very broad. They include syntax, semantics, morphology, philosophy, cognitive science, theory of science, and historical linguistics. His work ranges from very detailed analyses, e.g. of the structure of nominals, reflexive pronouns, or the Danish intensifying expression *sikke*, to his keen interest in the big picture, the fundamental questions of linguistics, i.e. the things that other linguists are normally more than happy to take for granted, such as:

- What is the role of linguistic meaning?
- What is information?
- Why is language so easy to understand when it is so difficult to understand?
- Can natural language actually be represented symbolically?
- What does it mean to explain something in linguistics?

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- How can we explain the human ability to understand linguistic utterances as vehicles for the expression of thoughts and ideas?
- What is a mental fact?
- What is the difference between the mind and the brain, and would it be better for linguistics if they were kept apart rather than lumped together (as in Chomsky's neologism *mind/brain*)?

Questions such as these are fundamental to Torben Thrane's research project, formed by a coherent series of books, articles and presentations. They all exhibit an interest in the fundamental nature of language, the way it is understood, and a wish to explain what it means to produce and understand linguistic expressions.

An essential preoccupation of Torben Thrane's research is what meaning does, rather than what it is. His interest lies in unravelling the functionality of language that facilitates understanding, rather than unravelling which functions we use language for. The inspiration from Noam Chomsky is very clear here, but just as strong, if not stronger, is the inspiration from the American philosopher Fred Dretske.

In Torben Thrane's framework, language is defined as a representational system. Representational systems carry information about something different from themselves, and in the case of language, such information is an input to an interpretive process. This makes language understanding a higher-order cognitive process, based on information.

Torben Thrane's work is characterized not just by its level of linguistic scholarship but also by its unorthodox and creative theoretical approach. He is a very comprehensive scholar, with a solid knowledge both of the formal and of the functional frameworks, which, combined with his sharp eye for new and not yet discussed data, sets him in a position to be critical of both sides of the formal-functional debate, and allows him to be not just open-minded but also imaginative, something which unfortunately is not all that common among today's linguists.

In his academic career, Torben Thrane has been a source of inspiration and knowledge. Through creative, colourful and dedicated presentations and thorough, entertaining and convincing articles, he has shared with us his understanding of how to understand language, something that we are all very grateful for.

Introduction to the thematic section

Torben Thrane's research constitutes the point of departure of the contributions to this thematic section of *Hermes*, either as the theoretical frame, shared interests or as a starting point for discussion.

The first article by **John Anderson**, *Referentiality and the Noun*, argues that nouns and names do not refer, and whenever they appear to refer, they have, in fact, been converted lexically to determiners. Thus nouns and names participate in reference by virtue of dependency on a determiner, either in the syntax, as part of a determiner phrase, or lexically, by conversion. This is illustrated by examples from English, French and Greek, which employ the lexical and the syntactic strategies to varying extent. The paper goes on to illustrate from the same three languages how predicative nouns are not dependent on a determiner.

In the contribution *If Your Language Was a Car....The Object(s) of Linguistic Research, or: Towards a Shared Geography of Linguistics*, **Peter Harder** suggests how the disagreement between formal and functional linguistics can be the object of fruitful discussion. The heart of the matter is which perspectives of language the two communities aim at capturing. Harder argues that a shared research interest of the two communities is the role of distributional regularities and their possible semantic motivation.

The following article, *Trees and Fields and Negative Polarity*, by **Sten Vikner** compares two kinds of approaches to clause structure, tree analyses such as the generative analysis and field analyses such as the *sætningsskema* analysis of Danish of Paul Diderichsen. It then goes on to discuss a particular difference between the two kinds of analyses, *c-command*, which is a relationship between different constituents in a clause. The article argues that c-command is not just helpful but actually essential in the account of negative polarity items in English, Danish and German.

Helle Dam-Jensen's contribution, *The Meaning of Mood – Embedded Clauses in Spanish as a Case in Point*, discusses how the meaning of the much-debated grammatical category in Spanish, mood, can be used as a starting point for explaining the use of mood. It takes as a starting point that the modal morphemes, like any other grammatical category, have a general meaning which provides the input to an interpretive process. It is argued that the interpretive process can be made explicit in the framework of Mental spaces, developed by Gilles Fauconnier.

The last article in the thematic section, *Semantics and Pragmatics of Bridge Language*, is written by **Henning Nølke**, who shares not only Torben Thrane's passion for linguistics, but also his passion for the card game *bridge*. In his rather unorthodox and entertaining article, Nølke combines the academic with the personal, arguing that bridge has its own language, which may be described in terms of linguistic concepts and linguistic theory. The article first outlines the basic grammar of bridge and then it goes on to describe the language of bidding and playing by means of referential semantics, speech act theory, contextual analysis and interaction pragmatics. It is appropriate that the concluding article should reflect the colorful and unconventional style so characteristic of Torben Thrane's own work – a style which reveals his basic approach to the discipline to which he has devoted his life: linguistics is not only serious business – linguistics is fun!



The theme editors

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