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“Grammatical Metonymy and Metaphor: A Case Study of Italian Morphology”

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Cognitive linguistics studies on metaphor and metonymy have traditionally focused on the conceptual basis of these two phenomena. Nevertheless, the grammatical impact of these conceptual mappings has been largely neglected, the few works devoted to this issue having been mainly concerned with the influence of metaphor and metonymy on syntax (c.f. Lakoff, 1995; Heine, 1997; Ruiz de Mendoza & Pérez, 2001). We contend, however, that metaphor and metonymy may also impose constraints on grammatical phenomena at the morphological level. In this paper, we analyse the formation of some plural nouns in Italian. This is an area of linguistic structure where the close connection between morphology, on the one hand, and metaphor and metonymy, on the other hand, is easily attested. Many Italian singular masculine nouns (e.g. *braccio* ‘arm’) show a double possibility for their plural counterpart: a regular plural, which is also masculine (e.g. *bracci* ‘arms’), and an irregular one, which is feminine in genre (e.g. *braccia* ‘arms’). It is often the case that each plural has a different meaning, referring to different senses of the singular noun (*bracci* = “arms of a chair” -metaphoric extension- vs. *braccia* = “arms of a person” -non-figurative meaning). On the basis of our analysis, we have observed that the morphological marking serves as a cue to activate metonymic or metaphoric meanings. We further explore the kind of metaphoric and metonymic meanings which are associated to them in order to ascertain some generalisations. Finally, we develop the network of semantic relations that can be established between them.

References

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