

The Grammar of Interactional Language

Traditional grammar and current theoretical approaches toward modeling grammatical knowledge ignore language in interaction: that is, words such as *huh*, *eh*, *yup* or *yesssss*. This groundbreaking book addresses this gap by providing the first in-depth overview of approaches toward interactional language across different frameworks and linguistic sub-disciplines. Based on the insights that emerge, a formal framework is developed to discover and compare language in interaction across different languages: the Interactional Spine Hypothesis. Two case-studies are presented: confirmational (such as *eh* and *huh*) and response markers (such as *yes* and *no*), both of which show evidence for systematic grammatical knowledge. Assuming that language in interaction is regulated by grammatical knowledge sheds new light on old questions concerning the relation between language and thought and the relation between language and communication. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the relation between language, cognition, and social interaction.

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To all the warriors!

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Conversation Boards

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Acknowledgments

Everything I did until now was in preparation for now. My research over the past 25 years has led me exactly to this stage which allowed me to write this monograph. I started out as a syntactician. Already in my dissertation I was curious about the syntax–discourse interface. And moving to Vancouver was motivated in part by the desire to look at the discourse-orientation of Salish languages. But I realized very quickly that I first had to understand their syntax. I didn't even know how to begin thinking about the syntax–discourse interface.

I now have a different understanding of syntax and the field has changed. So I felt ready to embark on this quest. My empirical entry point was the observation that you can say *I have a new dog, eh?* but not *I have a new dog, huh?* This cast doubt on the common assumption that *eh* is just the Canadian equivalent of *huh*. It is not. The desire to understand the difference between *eh* and *huh* has led me to several funded research projects, the *eh*-lab, and ultimately to this monograph. In a way everyone who was ever with me on my path, has contributed something to this monograph. And I am grateful to all of you.

I started writing the manuscript on my sabbatical from The University of British Columbia in 2017. I had planned to complete it within a year, but then life slowed me down and led me to finish it in my new personal and academic home in Barcelona. I finally finished it amidst the pandemic that forced everyone to slow down, that forced us to stop interacting in person, and that forced us to reflect on the world and the human condition that led to its state. During this time I wasn't sure whether this monograph would ever see the light of day, as it felt like the end of the world. I am grateful to everyone who was and continues to be part of this apocalyptic experience and who motivated me to persevere. Having been able to interact in isolation with old friends and with new ones has taught me the importance of human connections in profound ways. Life depends on interaction. And language shapes its expression.

Abbreviations

CA	conversation analysis
DRT	Discourse Representation Theory
D-S	Deep Structure
FDG	functional discourse grammar
ISH	Interactional Spine Hypothesis
IS	Information Structure
P&P	Principles and Parameters
POV	point of view
QUD	question under discussion
SFL	systemic functional linguistics
S-S	Surface Structure
TCU	turn-constructional unit
UoL	unit of language
USH	Universal Spine Hypothesis

Prologue

Much of what I have learned about language (and life) I learned during fieldwork. I got to know languages vastly different from those I was familiar with. And I got to do this through the experience of native speakers – the elders, the wise women. This opened up a new world, a new perspective, and a new quest. It forced me to let go of many assumptions and hence made way for new discoveries.

Often what I learned came through their comments. And often I did not understand, but I had learned enough that I understood that they always knew what I needed to know.

Two particular comments stuck with me. The first one from my Halkomelem consultant. She kept saying it, so it was clearly important.

This is for when you are just saying it.

This is for when you are telling someone.

The second one came from my Blackfoot consultant. On several occasions she corrected a sentence I offered and, again, I didn't know what to make of it.

You have to put yourself into the sentence.

I realize now that these comments were driving the questions that led to this monograph. And years later, I finally think I understand what they tried to teach me. The answers I found are nothing beyond what they already said.

I have learned that when we use language to communicate, the language we use reflects this interactive mode. Hence there is a difference between just saying something and telling someone. When we “tell someone,” the language of interaction emerges. It is very personal; we do so much more than just exchange our knowledge about the world. We typically have attitudes and feelings about what we think is going on in the world and we might even have some ideas about how they might affect the person we are talking to. The language of interaction allows us to express and convey our attitudes toward what we are saying. It allows us to put ourselves into the sentence.

In trying to understand the comments of my consultants, I was led on a path to pursue the language of interaction; it opened a new world of data, a new way of collecting data, a body of research on interaction I didn't know. It taught me a new way of thinking about the essence of language, thought, and the human condition.