Expressions of mistaken belief: a functional and typological approach

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Abstract

It seems likely that all languages provide some means of expressing the notion that a belief held by someone in some situation, normally other than the present speech interaction, is in fact mistaken, that it is false. For instance, this notion can be expressed explicitly in English by means of complement constructions involving a framing clause with the verb *believe* or *think*, modified by the adverbial element *mistakenly* or *falsely*, as in e.g. *the boy mistakenly/falsely believed/believes/thought/thinks that the turtle is dead (whereas in fact it is alive)*. This meaning can be implicated (in English) by the same thought complement without the adverbial. Surprisingly little has been written about such expressions, which figure marginally in the published grammars of most languages, as well as in the theoretical literature concerning reported thoughts – even though false beliefs have figured significantly in the psycholinguistics of language learning and language evolution. Little also has been written about the typology of such expressions.

In this presentation I focus on the latter lacuna, overviewing an ongoing typological investigation of mistaken belief expressions in Australian languages and extending it to Asian languages. The Australian investigation, based on a corpus of some 149 language varieties, reveals a range of modes of expression of mistaken beliefs, including by means of more or less dedicated particles and/or enclitics and various types of complement construction involving general verbs of thought. Expression by particles and enclitics is the dominant modality. The Asian investigation, based on a much smaller sample of about a score of languages, reveals expression by some type of complement construction to be the norm. In a smallish number of languages from both regions, however, the meaning is attested only as a pragmatic implicature of a general statement of thought or belief. (Various languages admit this implicature of general thought/belief complements while also showing a dedicated construction.)

Aside from the typological investigation, I discuss the grammar of these modes of expression, raising two main questions. First, is there evidence in particular languages of a separate construction type for coding the 'mistaken belief' meaning? An affirmative answer is provided for some languages, though for the majority of languages descriptions are not sufficiently deep to permit an answer. Second, what grammatical structures and/or relations characterise the modes of expression or constructions coding mistaken belief? I argue that what is involved in the complement constructions are grammatical relations distinct from both usual suspects, embedding and dependency. Rather, it is framing and/or scope, which relations I attempt to characterise and motivate.