

The Semantics of FATTO

Abstract

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The language under investigation is Italian Sign Language (LIS), the language spoken by the Italian Deaf community. In LIS, temporal information can be conveyed in at least four ways: (a) by means of suprasegmental features (non manual markings) co-occurring with the verb, (b) by means of time adverbs, (c) by means of markers like FATTO and DEVE, (d) by means of context. In this talk, I'll investigate the semantics of FATTO, a typical occurrence of which is given in (1):

- (1) GIANNI HOUSE BUY FATTO
“Gianni bought a house”

In (1), FATTO occurs after the verb with the grammatical function of indicating that the action performed by the verb was completed before the time of utterance of (1). The same sign also occurs as a main verb with the meaning of “finish”, as in (2)-(3):

- (2) FATTO?
“Did you finish’?”
- (3) GIANNI CAKE FATTO EAT
“Gianni finished eating the cake”

I'll concentrate on occurrences of FATTO of the kind in (1). The use of lexically contentful elements like FATTO in (1) to perform grammatical functions not only is attested in LIS, but is also common in other sign languages and in spoken languages like pidgins and Creoles (Fischer (1978), Fischer and Gough (1999)). In LIS, FATTO exhibits puzzling interpretive and distributional properties. It cannot co-occur with non-manual markers for tense:

- (4) *GIANNI HOUSE ^{past}BUY FATTO\DEVE

It cannot co-occur with ‘ordinary’ negation:

- (5) a. *GIANNI HOUSE BUY FATTO NOT
- b. *GIANNI HOUSE BUY NOT FATTO

For some signers, but not for others, it can co-occur with time adverbs to indicate that the event takes place within the time indicated by the adverb:

- (6) YESTERDAY GIANNI HOUSE BUY
 “Yesterday Gianni bought a house”

Finally, it can be used to indicate that the event takes place before a specified point in the past:

- (7) YESTERDAY AT-3 GIANNI EAT DONE
 “Gianni had already eaten yesterday at 3”

I propose an account of the semantics of FATTO that builds on my 2001 analysis of tenses in Italian Sign Language. This analysis is based on the semantics for English tenses proposed in Heim (1997). I argue that (a) both (6) and (7) are present tense sentences and that (b) in (6) FATTO is a completion marker, while in (7) it is a marker of temporal precedence. The behavior of FATTO with negation is explained by a blocking effect caused by the presuppositions of FATTO and negation.

References

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