

LANGUAGE AS HUMAN BEHAVIOR: THE LEGACY OF WILLIAM DIVER AND ÉRICA GARCÍA

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The functionally-oriented linguistic framework initiated by William Diver, Érica García and their students at Columbia University in the 1960s has come to be known as Columbia School (CS) linguistics. It is based on two fundamental understandings:

- that language is an instance of human behavior, so it can be “expected to share characteristics that are found in other aspects of human activity and cognition” (Stern 2019, p. 3);
- that language is an instrument inherently designed for communication, so “it must be the case that its fundamental structural components be signals and meanings; that is, that language share in the characteristic that is common to all instruments of communication” (Diver 2012, p. 47).

Originally born as a reaction to the empirical failure of formalist approaches, the aim of CS is to discover how language is structured based on facts of actual usage. It adopts an inductive approach with the objective of accounting for the way language is effectively exploited by human beings.

CS research has the following distinctive features:

- an “aposterioristic” (Huffman 2006, p. 44) approach to linguistic analysis: no categories are assumed, but rather hypotheses are proposed and tested based on empirical data;
- an understanding that linguistic structure is not autonomous, but invariably motivated by the communicative needs and the physical, cognitive, and cultural traits of human beings;
- an instrumental view of meaning: it is recognized that language is not compositional; rather, linguistic inputs serve as mere hints from which messages can be contextually inferred;
- a fundamental interest in explanation: the ultimate goal is to understand the non-random patterns of sound/writing/signing produced for human communication;
- a reliance on naturally occurring discourse as a basis for linguistic analysis;
- a qualitative-quantitative methodology: close textual analysis is combined with testing of predictions regarding the “relative frequency of use” (Martínez 2009, p. 268) of the item(s) under study in specific contexts.

Over half a century after Diver and García first envisaged the CS framework, second, third and fourth generation CS scholars are contributing to a variety of fields including grammar, lexical semantics, phonology, pragmatics, variation, dialectal studies, language contact, teaching, and endangered languages. The purpose of this session is to offer a forum for the dissemination of some of the latest findings in CS research, and foster discussion and debate within and outside the framework.

The proposed session currently consists of an introductory slot plus nine papers. Additional contributions are invited.