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What is Salience? Cos'è la Salienza?
International PhD Conference, PhD School in Linguistic Sciences
Universities of Bergamo and Pavia

Bergamo, 22-23 September 2022

The PhD School in Linguistic Sciences of the Universities of Bergamo and of Pavia is pleased to announce its **International PhD Conference**, which will be held on 22-23 September 2022 at the University of Bergamo, Italy.

The conference wishes to be an opportunity for international PhD students and young researchers working in diverse linguistic subfields and with different backgrounds to interact, to present their contributions, and to broaden their knowledge as far as the notion of **salience** and its usage in different linguistic subdomains are concerned.

As saliency is a concept used in a variety of studies across different fields, its working definitions may vary greatly across linguistic subdomains, these include Sociolinguistics, Historical Linguistics, Lexicology and Lexicography, Cognitive Linguistics, Pragmatics, Second Language Acquisition among others (cf. Boswijk and Coler 2020).

In **sociolinguistics**, and language variation studies in general, **saliency** is often recognised as one of the major factors involved in the identification of different types of varieties: the fundamental distinction proposed by Labov (2007) between indicator, marker and stereotype variables is, at its core, one of degrees of saliency, positively correlating with explicit social evaluation of the variables and speakers' awareness of them. Salient variables are then those units of a language which are primed for indexicality (Silverstein 2003), i.e., they are available for expressing social meanings, and may become involved in processes of language change such as accommodation and dialect convergence (Scaglione 2021). It is crucial, as Auer (2014) stresses, that this happens because a salient variable is perceived as such by the speakers, and this distinguishes **saliency** from 'markedness'. Sociolinguists as Rácz (2013) and Bardovi-Harlig (1987) propose a relationship between saliency and markedness; this last concept being more system- rather than speaker-oriented (Deumert 2003).

In the field of **historical linguistics**, only in the last decades **saliency** begins to be considered as one of the substantial factors in the linguistic change. For instance, during the 2014 ISLE conference in Zurich, saliency has been recognised as a fundamental concept to be addressed in a diachronic analysis, besides frequency, analogy, ambiguity, acquisition-and-transmission (Hundt, Mollin and Pfenninger 2017). However, the debate on its nature and its operationalization within a language remains open. In a study on Irish English, Hickey (2000: 57) defines **saliency** as "a reference to the degree to which speakers are aware of some linguistic feature", suggesting that saliency derives from language-internal factors, such as the appearance of features with high acoustic prominence, homophonic merger, or grammatical restructuring. More recently, Fanego's (2012) study on motion expressions in the history of English demonstrates that the more lexical items are easily accessible, the more they become salient, consequently attracting and encoding new manner expressions.



When doing **lexical analysis**, a distinction needs to be made, according to Hanks (1990; 2013), between the **cognitive** and **social salience** of a word or word sense. In his view, cognitive salience is linked to ease of recall, while social salience (or statistical salience) to frequency of use. Therefore, while conventional everyday language is seen as unmemorable, but socially salient, unusual but memorable expressions are considered cognitively salient.

Another key phenomenon of lexicographical interest often described as salient are **collocations**, which Sinclair (1991, 170) defined as the “[frequent] occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in text”. The **salience of a collocation**, however, is not entirely based on its frequency (Ježek 2016, 204), but also depends on the proclivity of its components to form other collocations. The measures of word association that can be used to calculate the salience of a collocation include, *i.a.*, Mutual Information (MI, Church and Hanks 1989) and *logDice* (Rychlý 2008), both available on the *Sketch Engine* platform (Kilgarriff et al. 2004).

The notion of salience is also employed in cognitive linguistics with different meanings. **Cognitive salience** refers to the (temporary) activation state of mental concepts into current working memory, while **ontological salience** refers to an (inherent) property of entities in the real world that are better qualified to attract our attention than others (Schmid 2007). In the latter sense, salience provides one of the possible explanations to the formation of prototypes (Taylor 1989): some entities may be considered prototypical for their category because they are perceptually more salient (Rosch 1973) or because their social significance is (Wierzbicka 1985). **Cognitive salience** comes into play not only in the activation of concepts during speech events and in the consequent lexical choices of a speaker, but also during the encoding of expressions profiling relational events and situations. Different degrees of salience, *i.e.* different distributions of attention across the entities involved in a profiled event, are reflected in different grammatical constructions (Talmy 2007; De Mulder 2007). These patterns of **salience distribution** have been described in terms of Trajectory/Landmark alignment (Langacker 2009) or Figure/Ground alignment (Schmid 2007). The terms Figure and Trajectory refer to the most salient entity in a given configuration, while the terms Ground and Landmark refer to the secondary element.

From the **acquisitional perspective**, the study of salience is intimately connected to the wide debate on **the role of input** (Carroll 2001; Valentini 2016 et al.). Indeed, the fact that the elements that are the most attention-grabbing also appear to be the most easily learned (Gass et al. 2018) suggests that salience contributes to the difficulty of a structure being learned (Housen & Simoens 2016), however much it itself represents “a composite, multicomponential, and multidimensional concept in search of a construct definition and valid operationalizations” (Ellis 2016). Glottodidactic approaches based on the manipulation of input draw precisely on the **manipulation of salience** (Della Putta 2016).

Finally, when doing **pragmatic analysis**, the concept of negotiation between speaker and hearer is pivotal (Grice 1975): in these terms, Kecskes (2006) claims that salience plays an important role during the production and mutual-comprehension process. According to Kecskes (2013), in fact, there are a **collective salience** and an **emergent situational**



salience: the former is social and strictly linked to the creation of common ground between speaker and hearer, especially during a dialogue; the latter is perceptual and can be used by the speaker in order to signal a situationally meaningful or new part of a specific utterance, especially during a monologue (González 2014), intending to catch people's attention. Several linguistic devices, such as pragmatic markers, as well as intersubjective strategies (Hámori 2010; González 2014), can be used to realize both types of salience: in this sense, cognitive and pragmatic aspects are intertwined.

Moving from these diverse theoretical backgrounds, we encourage prospective participants to submit proposals involved with the issue of **salience** from the following research perspectives:

- Sociolinguistics
- Historical Linguistics
- Lexicology and Lexicography
- Cognitive Linguistics
- Pragmatics
- Second Language Acquisition
- Other perspectives

The following **keynote speakers** have confirmed their attendance:

- Natalia Levshina, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Nijmegen)
- Kate Beeching, Bristol Centre for Linguistics
- Paolo della Putta, Università degli Studi di Torino

Abstract Submission

Proposals for presentations should be submitted in the form of an abstract (max. 500 words including references). Presentations will last 20 minutes followed by 10 minutes for questions and feedback. Abstracts may report on case studies, theoretical issues or any research topic concerned with the notion of salience and its field-specific use.

Please, send your abstract as both a modifiable file (.docx or .odt) and PDF document to the following email (salienza.convegno@gmail.com).

In the body of the message, please clearly state: title of the proposal, author's name and affiliation

The subject line should read as follows: `abstract_Salience_SUBFIELD_ SURNAME`.

The possible subfields to choose from are: SOCIO; HISTORICAL; LEXICON; COGNITIVE; PRAGMATICS; SLA



Important dates:

- Deadline for submissions: 1st June 2022
- Acceptance of proposals: 15th July 2022
- Deadline for registration: 7th September 2022
- Conference dates: 22nd-23rd September

Scientific Board: Mariateresa Caggiano, Caterina Cancelmo, Lucrezia Carnesale, Serena Coschignano, Stefano Fiori, Costanza Marini, Chiara Mulazzani, Jacopo Saturno, Tanja Trebucchi.

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