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Whether Luther or Gorbachev: “Quotation careers” as an example for reproducibility and entrenchment

Many sentences arise and vanish in the flow of communication. Other become a part of the vocabulary of a language for a long time – as common quotations, proverbs or sayings. Such expressions make a ‘quotation career’. Their survival depends on several conditions like the social status of the creator or the potential of the sentence to summarize a message in a very expressive manner. In some cases, the original context falls into oblivion. In many other cases one can find vestiges in the texts. This double life as a quotation and as a common expression is a very frequent phenomenon in corpora. Quotation references should not be evaluated as true or false statements about authorship, but as indicators for original contexts which are still present in the minds of the speakers. An interesting phenomenon is the tendency of speakers to create their own ‘quotations’ and to accredit them to an important person, regardless whether this person really has said it or not.

In my talk, I discuss the transition zones from “Somebody has said” to “It is said” (cf. Lüger 1999:121) against the background of new pattern-based approaches. On the basis of well-known quotation examples, I argue that the circumstances of the original context (time, author or creator, the original word-by-word version etc.), the question “Did someone really say that?” are not relevant to explain how such an expression is used in current language. I show that quotation geneses always follow the same cognitive procedures based on pattern or construction memory.