

Languages turn out more similar if one looks out for similarities

Donnerstag,
05.03.2020
11:15–11:45
ESA1 HG HS M

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In this talk, I want to reflect, on the basis of three case studies relating to my own work, on how deductive universalist reasoning in linguistics helps to speed up in-depth research. Often this comes out as generalizing to the worst case across languages. This research heuristic is similar to that of fine-grained semantic maps. As a general background, I assume a far-reaching similarity across languages, leaving open for the moment the exact nature of this similarity.

1. Sentential proforms: This case study concerns sentential proforms in German and Jula. Jula is an understudied Manding koiné of West Africa. Studies on better-studied languages like German have caused a disagreement among researchers about the uniformity of the sentential proform *es* as in (1) and (2) (Pütz 1986; Müller 1995; Sudhoff 2003).

(1) *Lea bereut es, abgereist zu sein.* (2) *Abgereist zu sein, Lea bereut es.*

Translational equivalents in Jula lead to a clearer picture. Jula proforms as in (1) come out as a, the non-stressable third person pronoun, whereas proforms as in (2) are rendered by the propositional anaphoric proform *o* (Hole & Kiemtoré 2018). The dividing line between the distributions of *a* and *o* in sentential proform constructions coincides with the dividing line between *es* as in (1) as opposed to *es* as in (2) that is known from the literature. This result may now be used to inform the case of German. Hole and Kiemtoré conclude that *es* in (1) and (2) is a grammatically polysemous item whose two sub-entries can fruitfully be studied separately.

2. Focus particles: The second case study concerns the focus particle systems of German on the one hand, and Chinese and Vietnamese, on the other. A lavishly rich lexically and syntactically diverse system in the Asian languages (Hole 2004; 2013) contrasts with a seemingly much simpler system in German (Büring & Hartmann 2000). Upon closer inspection it turns out, though, that German is syntactically and lexically much more similar to Chinese and Vietnamese than it first seemed to be the case (Hole 2015; 2017). Quite similar to the previous case, German resorts to polysemy and zero expressions where Chinese and Vietnamese feature clearer syntactic and lexical contrasts. As a consequence of the in-depth comparison, the structures in German appear in a much clearer light and may largely be assimilated to the rich Asian systems.