The uni- or polyfunctionality of so in German

Hagen Hirschmann
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
hirschh@hu-berlin.de

In this talk, the syntactic and semantic features of the German lexical form so in different syntactic positions will be discussed in order to analyze obvious or subtle differences and similarities between the different occurrences. More precisely, I will focus on the prenominal position of so (as in so ein Tier-‘such an animal’ and so Menschen-‘such humans’, cf. (1) and (2)), comparing it with the occurrences of so that are described more detailed in the research literature.

The German form so belongs to the most heterogeneously distributed forms in the German language. In the literature, the following parts of speech are discussed most commonly: adverb, intensifying particle, sentence adverb, subjunction, discourse particle, focus marker. An essential aim of the paper is to analyze in how far these syntactic functions are compatible with the same lexical meaning.

An often neglected function of the form so is its occurrence in the determining position:

(1) So ein Tier habe ich noch nie gesehen.
Such an animal have I yet never seen
(I have never seen such an animal yet.)

(2) So Menschen kann ich nicht leiden.
Such people can I not stand
(I cannot stand such people.)

Due to the fact that these occurrences are analyzed relatively rarely, the talk will focus on the grammatical description of so in (1) and (2). Particularly, the following questions are discussed:

• Have occurrences of so like in (1) and (2) to be analyzed as variants of German solch ‘such’ or as “original” cases of so as an adverb, particle, etc.?
• Should so in (1) and (2) be considered the same part of speech category?
• Which category is it?

I will provide linguistic evidence that so in (1) and (2) can equally be described as a predeterminer that is not only restricted to contexts of oral speech. I will also argue that the occurrences of so in (1)–(2) are semantically and from a usage-based perspective equivalent to occurrences of so in particular other syntactic contexts named above.

Methodologically, this talk combines self-conducted corpus analyses with semantic analyses of so by Hole & Klumpp (2000), Umbach & Ebert (2009), Umbach & Gust (2014), and more general classifications of so in German grammar books such as Zifonun et al. (1997).