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Exaptation

In evolutionary biology, the term ‘exaptation’ is used for the co-option of a certain structure for a new function, a typical example being the use of feathers, originally a thermo-regulatory device, for flight. The term was borrowed into linguistics by Roger Lass, who (1990: 80) defines it as ‘the opportunistic co-optation of a feature whose origin is unrelated or only marginally related to its later use.’ Lass originally understood exaptation in a narrow sense, as changes affecting functionless (‘junk’) morphology, resulting in a ‘novel’ function, but both functionlessness and novelty have been challenged (e.g. Vincent 1995, Smith 2006), to the effect that the definition of exaptation has been broadened to ‘[t]he re-use of morphological markers’ (Booij (2010: 211). This definition, in turn, has raised the question of whether exaptation can still be said to be a meaningful concept (De Cuypere 2005).

In this workshop, we aim to explore a number of issues that have been raised in relation to exaptation, including the following questions: (i) is exaptation a separate type of change or does it reduce to more traditional mechanisms such as reanalysis and analogy? How does exaptation relate to such concepts as ‘regrammaticalization’ or ‘hypoanalysis’?; (ii) is exaptation indeed irregular and unpredictable, and hence infrequent and language-specific?; (iii) is ‘novelty’ a useful criterion for a change to be qualified as exaptation? And if it is, does it refer to (a) an entirely new category in the grammar, (b) a function unrelated to the morpheme’s old function, or (c) a different though perhaps not totally unrelated function from the old function?; (iv) what is the relation between exaptation and (de)grammaticalization? Does exaptation always result in degrammaticalization, or is it, on the contrary, the final stage in grammaticalization? These questions will be addressed in both empirically oriented and theoretically oriented papers.