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Usage-Based Approaches to Language Change

Most approaches to language (change) have principally in common that they locate the main explanandum of language in the human mind and that they operate with categories. Change is, implicitly or explicitly, seen as a shift of a linguistic form from one category to another – whether across discrete or fuzzy boundaries. A well-known example of this view is the importance of reanalysis in explaining language change in mainstream historical linguistics. Reanalysis is considered to be the underlying mechanism that motivates changing patterns in usage such as contextual extension and increasing generalization / abstraction in meaning.

However, alternative views have also been expressed, in which linguistic structure is seen as subject to constant negotiation in communication. Hopper's (1998) Emergent Grammar or Keller's (1994) Invisible Hand are prominent examples. Without denying the share that cognition has in the production of utterances and the usefulness of categories for linguistic description, structure is seen as epiphenomenal in these approaches. Structure is in a constant flux across time, area and social strata and, therefore, language use or actual communication are the loci of structure formation and hence of change.

In line with this usage-based perspective of language and language change, an alternative for reanalysis has been proposed in which (changing) discourse patterns are directly related to meaning without referring to changes in abstract structures (e.g. Bybee et al. 1994, Haspelmath 1998, De Smet 2009). However, a larger coherent vision of the relation between language usage and language change is still largely missing.

The workshop aims at discussing possibilities for such a usage-based framework on language change. We wish to combine case studies with theoretical contributions that help to set up a comprehensive model on language change, in which language use is in the focus and in which the core properties of language are seen in its dynamics rather than in its states.

References

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