Forschungsprojekt

Crosslinguistic Semantics and Semantic Interfaces

Fragstellung des Projektes
Semantics is a proper subdiscipline of linguistics with its own field or research, its own questions and methods. Semantic research is well established and we have a good (and continuously increasing) knowledge of semantic categories and semantic structures of natural language and languages. The project will extend current semantic analyses according to two aspects: (i) crosslinguistic semantics and (ii) the interface between semantics and other grammatical subsystems. The project assumes that crosslinguistic work in semantics and the analyses of different interfaces will not only provide more and new data, but it will also produce new and unexpected questions and open up a new field of research.

(i) Crosslinguistic Semantics
Semantic categories have different morpho-syntactic implementations in the languages of the world. Crosslinguistic or comparative research into the realization of semantic categories in related and unrelated languages is an interesting and expanding field of research. Research on referential categories (definiteness, specificity, genericity) has shown that such categories are differently encoded in particular languages. It is still an open question if such categories can be further analyzed into more basic semantic features or not.

(ii) Semantic Interfaces
Semantic structure closely interacts with other grammatical subsystems such as phonology, morphology, syntax and pragmatics. The project intends to investigate the links between these subsystems and intends to carefully model the dependency between semantic structure and properties, on the one hand, and those of other subsystems, on the other. This will give new insights into the architecture of grammar in general, but also into the interaction between the different subsystems in particular.

(iii) Particular fields of investigations
The project comprises three particular areas of research in which crosslinguistic investigations into interface problems is expected to yield new and interesting results that will contribute to a general understanding of semantic processes and the positioning of semantics in grammatical theory (or in “general semantics”):

A: Referential categories and grammatical structure
B: The semantics of derivational processes
C: Intonation and information structure
Stand der Forschung

A: Referential categories and grammatical structure

Referential categories, such as animacy, definiteness, and specificity, determine or restrict the way we refer to objects, i.e. they are semantic (and pragmatic) by nature, but they are also reflected in numerous morphosyntactic phenomena. Thus, referential categories pose a challenge to semantic theory and to the interface between semantics and the grammar system of languages. Definiteness is the best investigated referential category (e.g. Hawkins 1974, Heim 1982, 1991, Kamp 1981, Lyons 1999); while Carlson & Pelletier (1995) have collected work on genericity. Specificity, on the other hand, is a quite recent concept that was coined by Baker (1966) for the first time. Since then there have been different approaches towards the analysis of specificity (Fodor & Sag 1982, Givón 1978 among others, and more recently Farkas 2002). However, there is no uniform semantic analysis of specificity – it is still controversial whether or not specificity is a semantic concept at all. More functional approaches discuss specificity as one parameter of differentiated object marking in various languages (Bossong 1985, Aissen 2003). However, the mapping between such a category and certain morphosyntactic phenomena is very difficult to draw for at least three reasons: First, the referential categories are often only described in informal terms, second, the morphosyntactic phenomena are seldom described in sufficient detail, and third there are only few investigations into the interaction between these categories.

B: The semantics of derivational processes

Derivational processes form new words from existing words - the new words have new meanings that should be compositionally built up from their bases and the meaning of the derivational process and/or the meaning of the affix (if one is involved). If, however, one process and/or one suffix exhibits different patterns, a simple compositional process is not possible. One can either propose homonymous forms with different functions or a more complex semantics of the derivational process. The project proposes an analysis in a two level semantics (Bierwisch 1983, Mayo et al. 1992, Stiebels 1997, Wunderlich 1997) that allows a uniform semantics for the derivational process. The different patterns of one process are explained by the interaction of the lexical semantics with the conceptual structure of the base (see also Plag 1998). An additional source of ambiguity can be traced back to referential shifts between different kinds of meanings of normalizations. A normalization can refer to an event, a situation, a result or even an object. The project intends to investigate the different conditions under which such shifts are possible. Furthermore, the different parameters, such as verb class, situation type etc, must be investigated (see Alexiadou 2001, Ehrich & Rapp 2000 among others).

C: Intonation and information structure

There are several distinct research traditions for intonation and information structure and their interaction with other areas of grammar. In particular, the following interfaces are intensively studied: intonation and phonology, focus and phonological phrasing, intonation (focus) and syntax, information structure and discourse analysis, association with focus and formal semantics. It is not possible to give an exhaustive or even an comprehensive overview of these research traditions. Intonation in phonology: Most recent approaches to intonation goes
back to the analysis of Bruce (1972), Liberman (1975) and Pierrehumbert (1980), who for the first time used abstract tones for representing the intonation contour. A good overview of intonational phonology can be found in Ladd (1996). The relation between intonational phrases and prosodic phrases, on the one hand, and to syntactic constituents on the other hand was investigated by Hayes & Lahiri (1991), Truckenbrodt (1995), among others. Information structure and discourse analysis: One family of approaches (Klein & von Stutterheim 1987, Hobbs 1990, Büring 1997) understands a discourse structure as representing the relations between propositions. Here the structure is represented as a tree of propositions. Such theories focus on the relation between sentences (or clauses), rather than on the relation between parts of sentences (or clauses). Focus and formal semantics: Since the beginnings of the 90s, formal approaches to the semantic effects of focus and association with focus has been widely discussed. Besides two extra editions of journals on this topic, there are several studies which go back to two theories: structured propositions (see Krifka 1992), and alternative semantics (Rooth 1985). These theories have developed in different directions. In a different approach, Steedman (1991) uses flexible constituents in categorial grammar in order to describe the information structure of a sentence.

Eigene Vorarbeiten

A: Referential categories and grammatical structure
Von Heusinger (2002b, eingereicht-b) investigates the difference between definiteness and specificity. Definiteness is analyzed as a discourse-pragmatic notion, while specificity is analyzed as a restriction of possible mappings from such a discourse representation to the actual referents (or objects in a model). Crosslinguistic investigations into the grammatical realization of specificity (von Heusinger 2002e) and studies on differentiated object marking in Spanish (von Heusinger & Kaiser 2003, im Druck), and Turkish (von Heusinger & Kornfilt (im Druck)) show that specificity closely interacts with other referential categories such as definiteness, genericity and animacy.

B: The semantics of derivational processes
Von Heusinger (2002c, 2002d) analyzes different derivational patterns of one nominalization suffix by an underspecified lexical semantics that is enriched by the conceptual information of the base. Von Heusinger & Schwarze (im Druck) uses this semantics for explaining two different types of denominal verbs in Italian that are both derived by the same morphological process.

C: Intonation and information structure
Von Heusinger (1999) accounts for the close interaction between phonological (or intonational) structure, on the one hand, and (discourse) semantic structure, on the other. Information structure is analyzed in terms of discourse semantics (see collection of works in von Heusinger & Schwabe 2001, 2002), von Heusinger (2001a, 2002a, 2004). Von Heusinger (eingereicht-a) shows that information structure in terms of Alternative Semantics gives new insights into the semantics of definite NPs. Von Heusinger (im Druck) argues that certain intonational patterns are the grammatical implementation of subclausal discourse relations.
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List of Publications


von Heusinger, Klaus & Kornfilt, Jaklin (im Druck). The case of the direct object in Turkish: Semantics, Syntax and Morphology. Turkic Languages.


von Heusinger, Klaus & Schwarze, Christoph (im Druck) Underspecification in the Semantics of Word-Formation. The Case of Denominal Verbs of Removal in Italian. Linguisticsics.

Dissertationsthemen

The research program invites dissertation projects on the following areas of research and in one or more languages (the list is not exhaustive; own ideas and connections between the different research areas are most welcome. Please contact me and discuss your project or your ideas with me)

A: Referential categories and grammatical structure
   • What are the properties of referential categories, such as definiteness, specificity, genericity, animacy, and their interaction?
• How can we analyze the determiner system of a particular language?
• What are the morpho-syntactic reflexes of one or more of the referential categories in one particular language?
• What are the morpho-syntactic reflexes of one referential category in different languages?

B: The semantics of derivational processes
• What are the compositional properties of base and derivational affix?
• How much of the argument structure of the base is inherited by the derivation?
• What is the lexical semantic representation of nominalization and its interaction with syntax (thematic roles, argument structure)
• How can we describe/analyze the different processes of meaning shift of nationalized forms?
• How can we describe the historical development of nominalization/other derivations?

C: Intonation and information structure
• What is the relation between information structure and discourse structure?
• What kind of subclausal discourse structures do we find in different languages?
• What is the semantic counterpart to the phonological structure of intonation?

Verknüpfung mit anderen Projekten des Graduiertenkollegs
- Alexiadou (nominalisation, argument structure, derivational processes)
- Bäuerle (discourse structure, discourse relations)
- Kamp (lexical semantics, semantics of derivational processes)
- Möbius (informations structure and intonation)
- Stein (lexical semantics, verb classes, argument structure)

Literatur


Mayo, Bruce; Schepping, Marie-Theres; Schwarze, Christoph; and Zaffanella, Angela (1995). Semantics in the derivational morphology of Italian: Implications for the structure of the lexicon. *Linguistics* 33, 883-983.


