Wrap-up and outlook

Language Variation and Change

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Overview

This seminar has been an introduction to variation as a fundamental property of human languages. We have tried to develop a systematic survey of variation, ranging from synchronic variation within and across speech communities to diachronic variation within both a speech community and a single speaker. In this, we have introduced major topics, concepts and methods of sociolinguistics, linguistic typology, historical linguistics and language acquisition research. Throughout the course, we have approached language, change and variation from a usage-based perspective. That is, we have grounded the use of language in social interaction, viewing language as the most important communicative tool to regulate interaction between human beings. This is possible because linguistic signs, from the smallest morphemes to more abstract grammatical constructions, are conventionalised form-meaning pairings. It is natural that such pairings display a certain amount of variation (either in form or in meaning or in both), and it is also perfectly natural that they undergo change, precisely when a certain variant becomes a dominant one in the speech community. As we have seen, such changes involve a host of psychological factors in language use (entrenchment, habituation, pragmatic inferences etc.), and their propagation in turn depends on various social factors. In all cases, however, variation appears to be a crucial prerequisite for language change. Finally, we also observed that the emergence and spread of new grammatical constructions follows quite similar pathways in both types of diachronic change – historical and change and language acquisition, suggesting that similar underlying cognitive-psychological mechanisms are at work.

Check up on your progress

Key terms and concepts

The following list represents a collection of terms that you should now be able to explain and, where appropriate, to illustrate with an example.

Saussure's model of the sign, symbol, arbitrariness, convention, common ground, Organon model, sociolinguistics, variety, standard versus vernacular variety, linguistic repertoire, register, jargon, accent, dialect, dialect continuum, dialect levelling, autonomy versus heteronomy, Ausbau versus Abstand languages, spread versus residual zone, pidgin, creole, regularisation, economy, iconicity, etymology, neologism, borrowing, calque (loan translation), euphemism, central (usual) versus peripheral (occasional) meaning, extension versus restriction of meaning, metaphor, metonymy, amelioration versus pejoration, synonymy, dissociation, folk etymology, polysemy, conceptualisation, grammaticalization, reanalysis, (pragmatic) inference, analogy and analogical extension, semantic shift (or bleaching), morphological and phonological reduction, layering, persistence, unidirectionality, alignment, action-chain model, indefinite versus continuative Perfect, inflectional versus periphrastic construction, irregularity, automation, habituation, chunking, entrenchment, conservatism, Zipf's Law, 'rule', genetic classification of languages, language family, linguistic area or Sprachbund, typological sample, isolating (analytic) versus synthetic language types, tetrachoric table, language universal, analogous features (in evolution), convergent evolution, argument labels (S,A,P), nominative-accusative system, ergative-absolutive system, 'tape-recorder method', independent and dependent variable(s), age grading, 'change from above' versus 'change from below', overt versus covert prestige, 'orderly

heterogeneity', apparent-time change, real-time change, social networks, early adopters, lexical diffusion, S-curve, 'rule generalisation', utterance, normal versus altered replication, propagation and utterance selection, expressivity, Gricean Maxims of Conversation, Invisible-Hand-Theory of language change, emergent grammar, first-order versus second-order versus third-order variation, 'logical problem' of first language acquisition ('argument from the poverty of the stimulus'), Universal Grammar and the LAD, babbling, holophrastic words, telegraphic speech, overgeneralisation, U-shaped development, undergeneralisation, positive evidence, direct and indirect negative evidence, usage-based approach to language.

Methodology

Based on the assignments, the tutorials and our discussion of the readings, you should have gained some basic insights into linguistic research. This has actually been the most important goal of this seminar since you are now supposed to be able to conduct your own linguistic investigations and write them up in an appropriate format. Therefore, make sure that you can tick off the following methodological items.

I know the basic aims of linguistic research (i.e. what linguistics is all about). I know why linguistics is an empirical science and what kinds of primary data are used in linguistic investigations.

I know how to formulate an appropriate topic for an investigation, and I know what a good thesis/hypothesis/argument looks like.

I am familiar with the main branches of linguistic research and I know how to start bibliographical research on them (i.e. I know how the library is organised with respect to these branches, what the most important handbooks or reference guides are (e.g. a comprehensive grammar of English), and how to use the library's online catalogues to search for specific items. I also know where to find some of the important journals in linguistics.

I know how to compile a linguistic bibliography (i.e. a 'references' section in a paper) and what the typographic layout of various types of linguistic publications looks like (i.e. monographs, essays, journal articles, reference articles).

I know how to write an abstract of a linguistic paper.

*I know how to work with the OED online, the OPAC, the GBV and the EZB.*

I know what linguistic variables are, and I can distinguish between independent and dependent variables in an investigation. I can interpret diagrams displaying variation in a dependent variable and infer possible directions of change.

I know how to structure a linguistic paper appropriately.

I know some useful recurrent phrases of linguistic argumentation (as found in the literature we read).

Perspectives on language we have taken… and how you can proceed from here
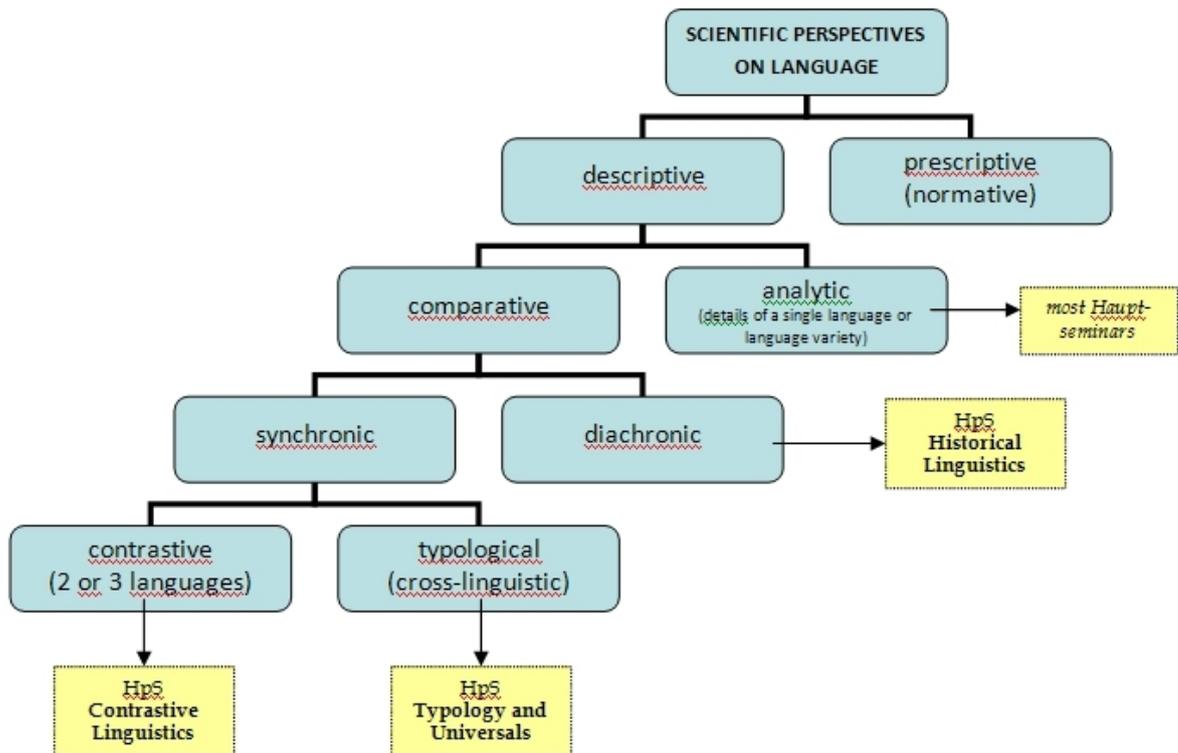
Criteria for the evaluation of your term paper

Your grade for the term paper will be calculated with respect to the following criteria:

1. Choice of topic, thematic focus and argumentation (Themenwahl, -fokussierung und Argumentation)
This comprises the appropriateness and originality of your topic and your specific research focus as well as the correctness, logic and plausibility of your argumentation.

2. Literature research (Recherche)
Relevant aspects are the depth of your literature research and the way you deal with previous studies on your topic (presentation of methodology, main findings, integration with your own focus etc.).

3. Qualitative aspects of your own analysis (Qualität der eigenen Auseinandersetzung)
Does the paper merely summarise the literature, or do you rather manage to use the literature in support of your goal? Do you operate with your own data? If so, how well do you deal with them (gathering, presentation and analysis of the data)?

4. Formal aspects of the paper (Formale Aspekte)
Does your paper read like an essay in linguistics? Does it conform to the conventions of academic writing in general, and to linguistic conventions of layout, citation etc. in particular? How well do you integrate quotations, previous findings and your own data into the argumentation? How well is the paper structured? Does the structure of the paper reflect your line of argumentation? Does it contain a well-designed and typographically correct reference section (bibliography)?

5. Language and style (Registerspezifische Sprachbeherrschung)
Overall quality of your English in terms of grammar, orthography, idiomaticity, stylistic appropriateness. Register-specific use of English (How well do you deal with linguistic terminology? How well do you manage to make logical transitions between paragraphs and sections?).

Make sure you use the ***Guidelines for Writing a Paper in Linguistics*** (pdf online) as a resource for drafting your term paper.

Also, don't forget the *declaration* at the end of your paper stating that you abided/abode by the academic rules of conduct!