

AG 8: The role of variation in language evolution

Regine Eckardt

University of Göttingen
Seminar für Englische Philologie
Kaete-Hamburger-Weg 3
37073 Goettingen
regine.eckardt@phil.uni-goettingen.de

Gerhard Jäger

University of Bielefeld
Department of Linguistics and Literature
PF 10 01 31
33501 Bielefeld
gerhard.jaeger@uni-bielefeld.de

It is a basic assumption of functional linguistics that the language system is the result of adaptation to the pressure of language usage. This has succinctly been expressed by Du Bois' (1987) dictum "Languages code best what speakers do most." Formal linguists have largely remained skeptical towards the functional approach because of its teleological flavor. *Prima facie*, there is no causal mechanism linking the cognitively founded properties of the language system to the properties of language use.

This predicament is reminiscent to the issue of adaptation in biology, and it is well-known that evolutionary theory offers a non-teleological, causal explanation there. In the past ten years or so, various authors (Nowak, Hurford, Kirby, Croft, Haspelmath *inter alia*) have proposed to apply evolutionary concepts to language. Under this conception, **variation** is essential to establish the link between language usage and language system. Among extant theories of (cultural) language evolution, there is disagreement though about the precise nature of this link. Some authors (like Haspelmath) propose a quasi-Lamarckian view of language evolution. This means that variation itself is adaptive. There are also arguments for a quasi-Darwinian view whereas variation itself is non-adaptive (i.e. random, as far as the language system is concerned). Adaptation of the system to usage is achieved via a process of selection, because some linguistic variants are more apt to be acquired by infants and to be imitated by adults than others (cf. for instance Kirby 1999).

The workshop will explore the precise role of linguistic variation in language evolution. We invite submissions to the following (and related) topics:

- Empirical studies of language variation that are relevant for language evolution. This includes experimental psycholinguistic studies as well as corpus investigations.
- Computer simulations of language evolution.
- Studies of grammaticalization phenomena (and language change phenomena in general) that relate diachronic change to synchronic variation
- The role of variation in creolization
- Mathematical models of language evolution

References:

- Du Bois, J. (1985). The discourse base of ergativity. *Language* 63, 805-855.
Croft, W. (2000). *Explaining Language Change*. New York.
Haspelmath, M. (1999). Optimality and diachronic adaptation. *ZS* 18, 180-205.
Kirby, S. (1999). *Function, Selection and Innateness*. Oxford.
Nowak, M., N. Komarova & P. Niyogi (2002). Computational and evolutionary aspects of language. *Nature* 417, 611-617.