

AG 9: The role of information structure in language change

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In the last few years a lively discussion on information packaging in the sentence has arisen for various languages. The traditional dichotomies Theme/Rheme, Topic/Comment and Focus/Background have been taken up again and partly reinterpreted. The discussion is being held in syntax, but also in the fields of semantics and pragmatics. Some remarkable progress has been made especially in Focus phonology (cf. Uhrmann 1991 for German), not least of all thanks to the latest experimental methods which enable us to precisely determine prosodic prominence.

Even if the role of information conveying and information packaging in the Indo-European languages was hinted at as early as in the classical studies of the Neogrammarians, this field has remained neglected in today's historical linguistics – and here we mean above all the kind of historical linguistics which makes use of modern linguistic methods – apart from very few exceptions (SFB Informationsstruktur: Die sprachlichen Mittel der Gliederung von Äußerung, Satz und Text, Universität Potsdam; Forschergruppe: Sprachtheoretische Grundlagen der Kognitionswissenschaft - Sprachliches und konzeptuelles Wissen, Leipzig).

In this workshop we want to concentrate mainly on the role information structure plays in linguistic change; thus our interest is not aimed at the description of earlier linguistic stages but on the diachronic perspective. Is it possible to determine, in spite of the lack of prosody, what the informational structure of a given language is like? And above all: does informational structure entail different ways of language processing with certain syntactic structures (e.g. so-called 'weiterführende' vs. 'nicht-weiterführende' subordinate clauses, cf. Brandt 1990)? In which field of grammar does information structure intervene in a way to trigger language change? Examples to be mentioned here are the distribution of subordinate clauses and other word-order regularities.

This workshop is of interest to linguists of all fields but also to philologists.

References:

- Brandt M. 1990 Weiterführende Nebensätze. Zu ihrer Syntax, Semantik und Pragmatik. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
 Uhrmann S. 1991 Fokusphonologie. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.