Course Description of "Specificity"

The semantic-pragmatic category "specificity" was introduced in the late 60ies by applying the then modern logical tools to indefinite NPs in opaque contexts. The intuitive concept of specificity as "the speaker as the referent in mind" then spread to descriptive grammarians, who found a great variety of grammatical contrasts associated with specificity (including specific and non-specific articles). Even though, specificity is now generally accepted as a proper referential property of noun phrases, its exact semantic (and pragmatic) nature is still controversial. In the last two years a new semantic and typological discussion on specificity has emerged. Therefore, specificity qualifies as a very good example to illustrate modern semantics (and semantic reasoning) and its impact on typological research. The following aspects may be discussed in the course:

- noun phrase semantics, the semantic-pragmatic categories of definiteness and specificity
- "discovery" of a new semantic property (methodological issues)
- typological and cross-linguistic observations (morphology and semantics)
- noun phrase typology: (i) cross-linguistic (ii) different types of NPs
- theories to describe this new category

Plan of the seminar

1. Tuesday, May 22: Definiteness and Indefiniteness

We begin with a brief summary of the main distinction between definite and indefinite noun phrases. We present some semantic and some syntactic test that distinguish these two types of noun phrases. In the second part we discuss different types of indefinite noun phrases (partitive indefinites, specific or strong indefinites, non-specific or regular indefinites, weak indefinites and incorporated indefinites).

Literature: For definiteness we follow Lyons 1999, chapter 1 (p. 1-32), for the tests 15-32. For different types of indefinites Lyons 1999, 89-104
2. Wednesday, May 23: Specificity Types

We discuss different contexts in which we have clear contrasts between different readings of indefinites. We doubt this contrast as specific vs. non-specific. We then categorize the different contexts and give labels to the different types of specificity.

Literature: For specificity we follow Lyons 1999, chpt 4.2 (p. 165-178). For the different types, see von Heusinger 2011 (1025-1029). Background: Farkas 2002

3. Thursday, May 24: Grammatical Encodings of Specificity

We investigate the cross-linguistic differences in the encodings of specificity, such as articles in Moroccan Arabic (Fassi-Fehri 2006) or Maori (Chung & Ladusaw 2004), differential object marking in Turkish (Enç 1991, von Heusinger & Kornfilt) or Spanish (Leonetti 2004), indefinite pronouns in Russian (Dahl 1970, Geist 2008), or specificity adjective like a certain (see Ebert & Ebert & Hinterwimmer 2012 for German).


In this final meeting we discuss different theoretical approaches to specificity, in particular such approaches that try to compare specificity with the much better understood concept of definiteness. We follow Kamp & Bende Farkas 2006, who assume that specific indefinites are „anchored indefinites“.

Discussion of potential research projects and final evaluation.

Literature: Roberts 20??, Kamp & Bende-Farkas 2006, 24-41.

Reading list for the seminar

von Heusinger, Klaus & Jaklin Kornfilt 2005. The case of the direct object in Turkish: Semantics, syntax and morphology. Turcic Languages 9, 3–44.

Background