



Fachbereich Philosophie

Fachbereichskolloquium

Sommersemester 2021
18:15 bis 19:45

Im Rahmen des Philosophischen Kolloquiums findet am **Donnerstag, 17. Juni**, folgender Vortrag statt:

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Two Approaches to Explaining Semantic Universals

Semantic universals are properties of meaning shared by all (or nearly all) natural languages. A prototypical type says that all expressions of a certain kind (e.g. determiners) denote meanings of a certain kind (e.g. only monotone quantifiers). A natural question to ask is whether any unifying principle can explain what makes these universals hold. Can we find a general pressure on meaning systems which distinguishes the natural languages from mathematically possible meaning systems that are not attested in any language of the world?

In this talk, I will look at two approaches to answering this question and discuss the way that explicitly modeling language change may distinguish between them.

One approach---which I have worked on over a series of papers---argues that natural language meaning systems are easier to learn than unattested ones. On this approach, one compares natural language meanings to artificially generated but unattested ones. Across several domains---quantifiers, responsive predicates, and color terms---we have consistently found that the attested ones are easier to learn. This suggests that languages choose to lexicalize easy-to-learn meanings and rely on complex syntax and compositional interpretation to express hard-to-learn ones.

Another approach argues that semantic typological facts reflect an optimal trade-off between competing pressures for simplicity and informativeness. Across several domains---kinship terms, color terms, and recently quantifiers and indefinites---it has been found that natural languages come much closer to optimizing this trade-off than artificial languages. This suggests that languages are solving a multi-objective optimization problem, doing their best to balance the simultaneous need to be used to communicate and to be represented mentally in language speakers.

After surveying many recent results from these two approaches, I will suggest ways in which explicit work on language change may be able to distinguish between these possibly competing explanations of semantic typological facts.

Alle Interessierten, insbesondere auch Studierende, sind herzlich eingeladen.

nächster Vortrag: 1. Juli
Burri, Susanne

A Subjective Impermissibility Account of Liability to Defensive Harm

