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Spreading in linguistic systems

Languages change over time (a trivial statement). The obvious case is given by changes that are induced “from the outside” – changes that come about through external influence: import of lexical material, types of inflection, syntactic constructions, etc. Quite differently, territorial expansion, the seizure of power, the overtake of another country’s economy, culture, etc is, as a rule, accompanied by the intrusion of foreign language, which may lead to the marginalization or even death of the native language. This has been described as “Language Shift”, cf., e.g., Prochazka & Vogel (2017, 2022), Vogl & Prochazka (2020).

My presentation will be concerned with the investigation of a different way change may occur. The fundamental question is whether natural languages undergo processes that are objective in character, hence, not determined by the volition and intentions of speakers. Seen from this angle, one should wish to investigate into processes that may, in some sense, be similar to what has come to be known in natural science as “diffusion”, cf. Fick (1855), Einstein (1905), Kärger (2019), Chmelik et al. (2023), Nicholson (2023), to name but a few. Such processes would have to be characterized as language-internally induced, since, in fact, we would deal with changes in the language system itself, changes emerging without external pressure.

On closer inspection one can find spreading phenomena in all modules of linguistic systems. In my presentation I will demonstrate examples from phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics/pragmatics of various languages.

The search for language-internal spreading processes, their causes, paths and bounds delineates an entire research program. Ideally, we will be able to construct a theory with predictive power. Step one and two, of course, are the identification (observation) and analysis (explicit description) of linguistic spreading processes.

As a first insight it may be stated that the functions of linguistic elements crucially restrict diffusive processes within the language system. The question whether spreading is facilitated through overlap, assimilation, or neutralization of formal features is a line of theory-building that is worthwhile pursuing.

At some point, one has to consider whether the envisaged theory of linguistic spreading is superior to other approaches to change in language systems, e.g. Keller (1990), Wurzel (1994), or Labov (2001).

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