



CSLS-Vortrag vom 12. November 2012
Unitobler, Lerchenweg 36, 3012 Bern
18:15 Uhr, Raum F 005

The Impact of Language Contact on Grammar: German influence on the Czech aspectual system and its consequences for event conceptualization

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The paper presents the results of several elicitation studies, including linguistic, eye-tracking and memory data, as well as speech onset times, comparing Czech, German, Russian, Polish as well as Slovak native speakers producing verbalizations of a set of short video clips. In addition to data from native speakers some data from very advanced German L2-speakers whose L1 is either Czech or Russian will be presented and discussed. The overall focus of the presentation is on the investigation of the role of grammatical forms in the construal of goal-oriented motion and events with resultant state.

The results show a consistent pattern: Czech, even though typologically similar to the other Slavic languages, clusters in all four measures with German. In other words, Czech and German speakers behave similarly when conceptualizing and remembering events. These patterns are further supported by the L2-data: Russian and Polish speakers rely on different conceptual strategies than Czech speakers when construing goal-oriented motion and events with resultant state in L2 German. The “Czech pattern” in L2 German is very similar to that found in verbalizations of German native speakers.

I will argue that patterns of event construal differ in relation to the grammatical system of the underlying linguistic system: Grammaticalized structures play a crucial role in determining how speakers proceed in solving the manifold tasks of language production. In keeping with the view of cognitive linguistics (cf. Langacker, 2010; Talmy, 2000), I assume that grammatical categories are fundamental for organizing content. They represent basic conceptual categories that are highly abstract, fully automatized, and provide a conceptual grid for planning processes (conceptualization) recruited for language production.

With respect to Czech and German clustering in one group I will argue that the Czech aspectual system has been affected by language contact with German. In particular, a re-analysis of the perfective has led to a verbal form, which allows for the integration of endpoints under the perspective of the deictic *now* that is expressed as the combination of a perfective (event marked as complete) and the present tense, under a present tense reading (cf. Schmiedtová, 2011; Schmiedtová et al., 2011). In contrast to descriptions in reference grammars, the observed compatibility of the perfective and the present tense in Czech shows a marked difference from the other Slavic languages with respect to grammaticalized aspect. The present findings illustrate the importance of comparing actual usage preferences across languages; in addition to cross-linguistic categorizations based on the linguistic system.