UNIVERSITÄT BERN

Philosophisch-historische Fakultät

Center for the Study of Language and Society (CSLS)

CSLS-Vortrag vom 28. September 2011
Unitobler, Lerchenweg 36, 3012 Bern
18-20 Uhr, Raum F-105

Language in the community and in the mind: grammar, usage, and individual differences

Prof. Dr. Ewa Dąbrowska

Northumbria University

Most linguists assume, either implicitly or explicitly, that all native speakers of the same language variety have more or less the same mental grammar. It is, of course, well established that there are vast individual differences in lexical knowledge and knowledge of archaic, formal and literary grammatical constructions (e.g. *Little did I know that…*); all speakers, however, are thought to share the same 'core' grammar.

In this talk, I summarise a number of recent studies showing that this is not the case. The studies involved several different aspects of linguistic knowledge, including inflectional morphology, passives, quantifiers, and a variety of more complex constructions with subordinate clauses. For some of these constructions, language learners attend to different cues in the input and end up with different grammars; for others, some speakers acquire only fairly specific, 'local' generalizations which apply to particular subclasses of items while others extract more abstract rules. The latter cases are particularly interesting, as they sometimes result in situations in which patterns which are arguably present in the language are not explicitly represented in its speakers' minds, or at least not in all speakers' minds. This raises questions of how such patterns come to be in the language in the first place, and how they manage to resist change; what their theoretical status is; and the level(s) at which they should be described.

I show that some such cases are motivated by functional constraints such as Goldberg's BCI (Backgrounded Constituents are Islands; Goldberg 2006). However, functional pressures don't shape mental grammars directly: they shape usage which in turn shapes mental grammars. Thus, speakers are not necessarily aware of these pressures, and they are not part of the internalised grammar. Alternatively, a particular pattern may become fixed in the language even if only a small proportion of speakers are sensitive to it. Consistent usage by a small number of speakers is enough to skew usage frequencies; other speakers will tend to match the usage patterns without necessarily being aware of the underlying motivation. I conclude that language as a shared system belongs to the community rather than to individual speakers – that is to say, individual speakers "own" only parts of it. To understand the dynamics of language acquisition and language change, it is important to distinguish between individual grammars, the patterns found in the language as a whole, and the interactions between them.