Exploring Word Fields using the Free-Sorting Method

This talk centers on a free-sorting approach to German motion verbs and demonstrates the advantages of free-sorting over other methods of creating and delineating lexical fields. In particular, two other approaches are considered: Snell-Hornby (1983) arrives at her word fields of German and English descriptive verbs with help of intuition, dictionary entries and speaker feedback. FrameNet, and its German sister project SALSA, annotate corpora of written text and have native speaker judges classify the lexical units according to semantic frames. While these methods have benefits, the methods are limited in their ability to represent the average organization of word fields in the mind of everyday speakers. Free-sorting, by contrast, does not rely on individual speaker judgments or corpora. Psycholinguists have used the method to explore the perception of color terms across cultures (c.f. Roberson et al. 2005), or to investigate lexical 'clusters in the mind' across speakers of the same language (c.f. Divjak & Gries 2008). In sorting, a group of informants creates visible sets of word items according to perceived similarity. With a sufficiently large number of informants, one can generate a digital data set of clusters for statistical analysis.

I visualized results of a free-sorting experiment of German motion verbs with 36 middle-class school children with help of hierarchical cluster analysis and drew a comparison to the same verb field in Snell-Hornby (1983) and the SALSA corpus. Although these sources do not employ the exact same list of lexical items, my experiment shows that the representation of this lexical field can be improved by considering further dimensions these young speakers employ in lexical field creation, such as body-space relations and the circumstances under which an act of motion takes place.

References:

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