Concepts and explanations: two double complexities

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Complexity 1: Linguistic categories depend on the linguistic reality they categorize but no less on the (generations of) linguists that define these categories.

Lecture 1. Old categories with diverging meanings: mood and modality
Date: October 6th, 2015 10:00-12:00
A linguist needs clear concepts. This is particularly difficult when the concepts have been around for a long time. This general point will be made explicit with an analysis of the current use of the notions mood, mode, modality, modus, irrealis and more, as well as their origin and development in Western linguistics, all the way back to Greek Antiquity. I will focus on the current relevance of older debates and, announcing the topic of the second lecture, the danger of applying concepts deemed appropriate for one language to another language.

Lecture 2. Language-specific vs. cross-linguistic categories: similatives
Date: October 20th, 2015 10:00-12:00
I support the idea that every language has to be described in its own terms (‘linguistic particularism’). I do not support the idea that the concepts that one needs for this enterprise are ontologically different from the ones one needs for cross-linguistic analysis. This general point will be made with an analysis that starts off from the English word such. The reason for choosing this word is that it defies any neat categorization. Though it is similar to English determiners, adjectives and pronouns, it is no less different from them and in the English language, it must be considered a one-member category (if one’s theory allows such categories) and thus provides strong support for linguistic particularism. But one also needs this category for language-specifically equally unique words and constructions in other languages. Furthermore, these unique categories are manifestations of a more general cross-linguistic category (‘the similative’), which is ontologically no different from the language-specific ones.

Complexity 2: Explanations of (a phenomenon in) a language refer to properties internal to that language, but sometimes very strongly also to properties of contact languages, external to the language in question.

Lecture 3. Language-internal vs. language-external explanations: multiple negation
Date: November 3rd, 2015 10:00-12:00
For some kinds of multiple negation, we more or less know how to explain them. Thus for French ne ... pas one invokes the so-called ‘Jespersen Cycle’, and preferably even in the Meillet (1912) version, antedating Jespersen (1917). But multiple negation comes in many different shapes and a particular problem is found when multiple negation is manifested in languages that are genetically unrelated but geographically close. What is due to language-internal development and what to contact influence? We will focus on the multiple negation in three

Lecture 4. Language-internal vs. language-external explanations: le français germanique -
Date: November 10th, 2015 10:00-12:00
Language contact often can target individual categories, but it can also target an entire language. The idea that French was strongly influenced by Germanic – in the second part of the first millennium – dates back to at least the middle of the 19th century and though it attracted concentrated research efforts esp. by German, Swiss and Austrian philologists, it has not been prominent in French historical grammar at all. The time has come to reconsider this issue.