An experimental investigation of long-distance indefinites in English and German

In this talk, we report an experimentally oriented research program on the scope behaviour of indefinites, that is carried out collaboratively by the Universities of Stuttgart, Tübingen and Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We present first results from a truth value judgment task experiment addressing the question how scope readings are influenced by determiner choice and accent marking in English and German ("a" vs. stressed and unstressed "one" in English and enclitic "n" vs. stressed and unstressed "ein" in German).

In particular, this research program is concerned with long distance (LD) readings of indefinites. It is known that, opposed to other quantifiers, indefinites seem to be able to scope out of scope islands. Example (1) from Fodor & Sag (1982) (the indefinite embedded in an if-clause island) allows for such a long distance reading: there is a particular relative of the speaker such that if this specific relative dies the speaker will inherit a fortune.

(1) If a relative of mine dies, I will inherit a fortune. [cf. Fodor & Sag 1982]

It has further been noted (e.g., Farkas 1981) that indefinites can scope outside an island but underneath a higher quantifier, obtaining a so-called long distance intermediate scope reading. Wide scope and intermediate scope readings of indefinites out of islands are undisputed. However, it is still under debate how LD scope readings are best explained, whether all indefinites are equally compatible with LD readings and by which mechanism(s) wide and intermediate scope readings are derived. Our research program contributes to all of these questions, through experimental testing of the availability of wide and intermediate scope readings in different contexts and to different types of indefinites in English and German. We will present the methods of how we test for these questions and first results from our studies.