Mini-workshop “Experimental approaches to indefinites”

When? Thursday, May 19, 2011
Time: 09:30-13:00 h

Where? Universität Stuttgart
Institut für Linguistik/ Germanistik
Keplerstrasse 17
D-70174 Stuttgart
Room: 1.036

Contact: Sofiana.Chiriacescu@ling.uni-stuttgart.de

Projects: C2 & C4

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ABSTRACTS

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

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.
**Topic-shift of German indefinites**  
* Sofiana Chiriacescu, Annika Deichsel, Klaus von Heusinger

This talk is about the analysis of the two German indefinite determiners *dieser* and *so’n* in terms of information structure. To account for the discourse effects of indefinite noun phrases headed by *dieser* and *so’n*, we looked at the potential of their referents to become topics in a matrix clause in the subsequent discourse (see Chiriacescu & von Heusinger). The notion of *topic* was defined in terms of grammatical subjecthood, as different linguistic and psycholinguistic studies (Givón 1983, Brennan et al. 1987, Gundel 1988, Gordon et al. 1993, Lambrecht 1994, Arnold 1998, Walker et al. 1998, Ariel 2001) showed that referents mentioned in subject position are more salient in a given discourse than referents mentioned in other syntactic positions. Starting from the findings of two sentence continuation studies, which showed that the referents of indefinite *dieser* and *so’n* make better candidates for topic shift, this talk will address several theoretical and empirical questions concerning this measure method. First, how does the topic shift potential of different referents in a discourse interact? Second, should the maintenance of topic shift be measured as well (i.e. whether a referent is mentioned in subject position over more than one sentence)? Finally, we will discuss different understandings of the much-debated notion of topic; how these understandings relate to each other, and the ways in which we could empirically test them.

**Most somes are not quantifiers**  
* Mira Ariel

Quantifier *some* stars in the semantics/pragmatics literature. But actually, natural discourse mostly shows English *some* in numerous other functions: ‘Determiner’, ‘small amount’ ‘considerable amount’, ‘partitive’, ‘downgraded’, ‘exclamatory’, ‘approximate’, ‘adverbial’. It is no accident that these rather different uses are all realized with the same lexeme. In this informal talk I will take a first shot at drawing up a semantic map in an attempt to connect all the uses of English *some*. 