Lexical borrowing in the worlds languages: A quantitative study of the sociolinguistic and morphosyntactic factors

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Lexical borrowing plays an important role in the evolution of languages. Each contact situation among different speech communities can potentially lead to change in the languages involved. What conditions shape the borrowing of lexical items, and to what extent? Is lexical borrowing determined by the type of social interaction between the speech communities? What role do the morphosyntactic properties of the languages involved play in the borrowing process? Our goal is to estimate the contribution of these and other factors using quantitative tools.

The World Loanword Database (WOLD, Haspelmath & Tadmor 2009) is a cross-linguistically comparable set of 1460 meanings and their lexicalizations in 41 languages from all over the world. This project has generated a massive dataset particularly useful for a study aiming to tease apart the determining factors of lexical borrowing using quantitative methods. While the authors of WOLD have presented preliminary findings regarding universals of lexical borrowing (Tadmor 2009), any claim on the magnitude and the extent of the relevant factors are not feasible without proper statistical methods.

This talk addresses this lacuna by conducting a statistical analysis of the WOLD database, with the aim of determining which factors define the lexemes to be borrowed. A thorough statistical analysis of the database has been essential for answering the questions posed above, as the precise correlations enable one to tease apart the different contributing factors and the extent of their contribution. By implementing a mixed-effects model, we introduce the contribution of parameters such as the area in which a language is spoken, the semantic field of each lexical item, the morphosyntactic properties of the languages involved, and different sociolinguistic aspects in the borrow ability of a given lexical item. On the basis of the model we draw a clearer picture of the dependency between factors, with the aim of accounting for the observed variation in borrow ability and borrowing patterns across languages.
Bibliography


