

Meaning in Contact

Heike Wiese, Humboldt-University Berlin

In contexts of language contact, we can observe dynamic patterns of semantic and pragmatic variation and change that pose interesting challenges for linguistic theory. Traditionally, structural approaches to linguistic architecture have been based on idealisations positing homogeneity and stability. This has been changing to a more inclusive perspective that also takes into account variability and crosslinguistic interactions and has a stronger empirical grounding in speakers' linguistic practices and competences. What has remained unchanged, however, is an underlying assumption of distinct, bounded languages. As modern sociolinguistics has shown, this is a social construct based on European nation-state building and colonialism that cannot capture the fluidity and dynamics of language in settings of linguistic diversity. I propose a linguistic architecture that takes this into account and is based on 'com-sits', representations of communicative situations that serve as an organising domain for linguistic structure and make bounded languages optional. Crucially, such an architecture can account for the dynamics of meaning in contact: drawing on evidence from different contact-linguistic settings, I show that com-sits can generate semantic structure even in the absence of bounded 'languages', and analyse their impact on propositional semantics, coercion and semantic transfer, pragmatic enrichment, social meaning, and nonverbal conceptual structure.