

Intercognitive linguistics and language diversity

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During its initial decades, much of the energy of the cognitive linguistics movement went into investigating the way that features of the human mind structure the representation of the external world – the world of space, time and causality, which would exist whether or not humans were there. Increasingly, however, there is a realisation that the biggest challenge comes from the representation of the human world – of other minds and emotions, of the way events impact on our fellows, and of the complex balancing of multiple social and psychological factors that is needed in every conversational move. I will use the term ‘intercognitive linguistics’ to refer to the domain of this set of representational challenges, which includes the establishment of intersubjective relations with one’s interlocutors but also other types of representation of the minds, feelings and intentions of others.

Our prehuman forebears had to represent the essentials of the external world long before the evolution of language. On the other hand, the relatively recent coevolution of language, culture and human society, in phylogenetic terms, along with the great diversity of human cultures, means that there is likely to be more variation in how languages represent the intercognitive world than in how they represent, say, time or space. At this point the panoramic conceptual diversity contained in the world’s six thousand languages – many now fragile and barely known to linguistics – becomes a key scientific resource in studying how the human mind responds to the challenge of representing intercognition through language.

In this talk I will take three themes that illustrate the great diversity in the design space of grammars for this semantic domain, drawing on the way they differentially treat: (a) the configuration of the speech event (conversational nexus), (b) the representation of thought, feeling and intentionality, and (c) the representation of the social and psychological ramifications of depicted events. I will exemplify from a wide range of little-known languages, particularly of Australia and New Guinea, sketching an overall model of social cognition in grammar that is at the same time comprehensive enough to encompass wide cross-linguistic variation and at the same time sensitive enough to allow for very specific language-specific effects.