

[Current Trends in Pragmatics Oversea]

## A Report from Overseas Research on Pragmatics

The Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands\*

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### 1. About the institute: an overview

The Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (hereafter **MPI for Psycholinguistics**) is one of the 80 institutes around the world that comprise **the Max Planck Society**, founded in 1948, and is the successor organization to the Kaiser Wilhelm Society for the Advancement of Science.<sup>1</sup> Below is the building of MPI for Psycholinguistics from their website:<sup>2</sup>

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\* I would like to thank to the people at the MPI for Psycholinguistics and elsewhere, particularly Stephen C. Levinson who cordially invited me to the institute and made many insightful comments on my presentation, Nick Enfield who stirred up and energized my research interest, Gunter Senft, Mellisa Bowerman, Ad Foolen (Radboud University), Gertie Hoymann, Thomas Widlok (Radboud University), Paul Drew (The University of York) whose talk I unfortunately missed on the last day of my 2010 visit; Kaoru Hayano and Yufuko Takashima (Kyoto University), without both of whom I could not have spent happy days at the institute, Makiko Sadakata (Radboud University), and Penelope Brown, and especially to the Japanese researchers I chanced to meet there.

Most regrettably, Professor Emeritus Mellisa Bowerman passed away unexpectedly on Oct. 31st after I left the institute at the end of September 2011. See the website at <http://www.mpi.nl/news/remembering-our-dear-colleague-melissa-bowerman> and her obituary at [https://www.mpi.nl/condolence-ViewController-context-root/faces/Home?\\_afLoop=7019657636724779&Adf-Window-Id=w0&\\_afWindowMode=0&\\_adf.ctrl-state=1dbd9can9a\\_3&\\_afRedirect=7019658241707815](https://www.mpi.nl/condolence-ViewController-context-root/faces/Home?_afLoop=7019657636724779&Adf-Window-Id=w0&_afWindowMode=0&_adf.ctrl-state=1dbd9can9a_3&_afRedirect=7019658241707815).

I extend my heartfelt condolences to her friends and family.

<sup>1</sup> See the details at the website of the Max Planck Gesellschaft at

<http://www.mpg.de/english/portal/index.html>, and at

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaiser\\_Wilhelm\\_Society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaiser_Wilhelm_Society) about the Kaiser Wilhelm Society.

<sup>2</sup> I got out of the cab at a building in the beautiful woods of the Radboud University Nijmegen (a.k.a the University of Nijmegen) campus on the 6th of September to find a surprisingly modernized, compact and comfortable place, The Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, where I was invited by Stephen C. Levinson to stay for almost three weeks in September, 2010, and also by Nick Enfield in September, 2011. See the website at <http://www.ru.nl/english/>.



When they search for **MPI for Psycholinguistics** on the net, humanities-based linguistic people will be slightly surprised to find it grouped into cognitive research in the Biology and Medicine Section. As explained on the first page of the website of MPI for Psycholinguistics (<http://www.mpi.nl/>) in the general introduction to the world-renowned institute,

- (1) The Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics is an institute of the German Max Planck Society. Our mission is to undertake basic research into the psychological, social and biological foundations of language. The goal is to understand how our minds and brains process language, how language interacts with other aspects of mind, and how we can learn languages of quite different types.

The institute is situated on the campus of the Radboud University. We participate in the Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour, and have particularly close ties to that institute's Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging. We also participate in the Centre for Language Studies. A joint graduate school, the IMPRS in Language Sciences, links the Donders Institute, the CLS and the MPI.

(<http://www.mpi.nl/>)

As the introductory notes show, the institute not only does research in linguistics, but also collaborative work on “the psychological, social and biological foundations of language” encompassing cognitive and neuropsychological processing of, and interaction with, other aspects of mind and language learning. The three key words of the introduction are “psychological, social and biological,” whose implication will be apparent if you read further into the website to see what these people are doing now.

The research departments and groups are as follows:<sup>3</sup>

- (2) • **Individual differences in language processing department:** Why are some people better with words than others? Director: Antje Meyer.
- **Language acquisition department:** How do we learn a first, second or third language? Director: Wolfgang Klein.
- **Language and cognition department:** What is the relationship between language and general cognition? Director: Stephen Levinson.
- **Language and genetics department:** Which genes underlie human language, and how do they explain its evolution and variability? How does the genome help build a language-ready brain? Director: Simon Fisher.
- **Language comprehension department:** How do we understand spoken language? Director: Anne Cutler.
- **Neurobiology of language department:** How does the brain support language? Director: Peter Hagoort.

**Other research groups funded by the MPG:**

- **Adaptive listening group:** How do listeners understand language spoken with a foreign accent? Headed by: Andrea Weber.
- **Communication before language group:** How do infants communicate before they have language? Headed by: Ulf Liszkowski.
- **Comparative cognitive anthropology group:** How much does human cognition vary across cultures? Headed by: Daniel Haun.
- **Evolutionary processes in language and culture group:** How do languages evolve? What is possible, what is probable, and why? Headed by: Michael Dunn.
- **Syntax, typology, and information structure group:** What are the communicative functions of grammatical structures in different languages? Headed by: Robert Van Valin.

**Externally funded research groups:**

- **Human sociality and systems of language use:** What is the relationship between language and social cognition? Headed by: Nick Enfield.
- **INTERACT:** An interdisciplinary science of human communicative interaction, focusing on the underlying properties of sequences of contingent actions. Headed by: Stephen C. Levinson.
- **Language in our hands: sign and gesture:** Research investigates to what extent using visual-gestural modality shapes language. Headed by: Asli Özyürek.

(<http://www.mpi.nl/institute/research-departments-groups>)

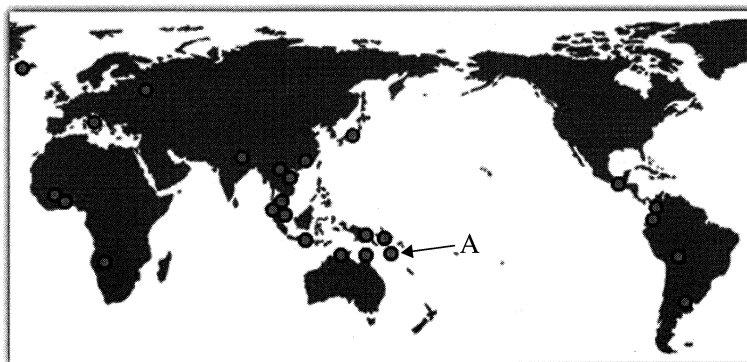
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<sup>3</sup> The institute named them just “Group” until 2010, but renamed it “Department and Subgroup” in 2011.

Of the groups listed above, I attended a couple of meetings of the “Language and Cognition group” directed by Stephen Levinson and sometimes hosted by Nick Enfield. According to the group’s home on the website, the aims are mainly twofold:

- (3) The Language and Cognition group investigates the relationship between language and general cognition, making use of the “natural laboratory” of language variation. To this end, it maintains about a dozen field sites around the world, where languages are described often for the first time, the semantic categories examined and field experiments conducted.

Table 1. The Language and Cognition field sites in 2011.



- (4) Current research has two main strands. The first concerns the use of language in interactive situations and its foundations in cognition — the Multimodal Interaction Project. The second concerns the nature of semantic categories across languages, explores *their diversity*, and investigates the significance of diverse linguistic categories for human cognition — the Categories Project. (<http://www.mpi.nl/institute/research-groups/language-and-cognition-group>)  
(Italics mine) (<http://www.mpi.nl/institute/research-groups>)

As this map shows, the institute has conducted research in almost every part of the world. Most of the languages on the map are endangered. Each dot on the map<sup>4</sup> (Table 1) links to the details of the language investigated. Point A, for example, is the language Yéli Dnye, on which Stephen Levinson is working. Yéli Dnye “is a language isolate, not clearly related to any other language.”<sup>5</sup>

A key notion specifically referred to in passage (4) above is the *diversity* of language, as I have italicized. I will discuss the universals and diversities of language later, in my discussion of a key paper written by Evans and Levinson (2009).

<sup>4</sup> The dots have increased by 10 to 25 in 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See the details at

<http://www.mpi.nl/institute/research-groups/language-and-cognition-group/fieldsites/yeli-dnye>.

## 2. What people are doing at the institute.

The Language and Cognition Department is composed of Director Stephen C. Levinson, Senior investigators Nick Enfield, Asifa Majid and Gunter Senft, 8 Research staff members, 15 Ph.D students, 5 affiliated members, 2 research assistants, and Secretary Edith Sjoerdsma, along with many others.<sup>6</sup> The department's main task, as noted above, includes two research programs. One is field work, such as that in Table 1, and the other is analysis from perspectives ranging from psycholinguistics to pragmatics, anthropological linguistics, cognitive linguistics, conversational analysis, sociolinguistics and ethnomethodology, psychology, anthropology, biology, neurology, semantics and pragmatics. Compared to Japanese universities and research institutes, I was surprised to find that people there are well organized, get along well enough to do collaborative work, led by the world's leading scholars, two of whom are Director Stephen Levinson and Senior staff member Nick Enfield who have been sending a message to the linguistic camps worldwide for more than 20 years. That message is, in a word, the integration of humanities-based and science-based linguistic methodologies, and is aimed at people who only specialize in one aspect of language study, and who have been sitting, as it were, each sunk deep in his/her own armchair, living in a separate world from each other. The institute is sounding the alarm about the present state of academic linguistics and its capacity to contribute to society in the future after having faced with, and suffered from, substantial educational budget cuts.

Specifically, institute members' everyday work is consists of meetings of each group, lectures by speakers from other universities and institutes, so-called "lunch talks" (which were very intriguing to me during my stay) where one or two graduate or post graduates give brief presentations for about half an hour which are discussed over lunch, and some workshops held by outside and inside scholars, mostly sponsored by grants.<sup>7</sup> Inside the institute, they do their research, such as experimental work and interviewing, and give the sort of talks mentioned above, just as researchers, post-docs, as well as ordinary graduate students do at every other university or institute. But outside the institute, especially, in spring and summer, they go to a dozen or more field sites around the world to collect research data and describe target languages.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.mpi.nl/institute/research-groups/language-and-cognition-group/people>.

<sup>7</sup> See the website titled "Levinson awarded prestigious ERC Advanced Grant", recently upgraded to the website at <http://www.mpi.nl/news/levinson-awarded-prestigious-erc-advance-grant>, according to which he has been awarded 2.5 million Euros. See the website of ERC—European Research Council at <http://erc.europa.eu/advanced-grants>, whose main purpose is "ERC Advanced Grants allow exceptional established research leaders of any nationality and any age to pursue ground-breaking, high-risk projects that open new directions in their respective research fields or other domains. The ERC Advanced Grant funding targets researchers who have already established themselves as independent research leaders in their own right."

According to the website of the institute, (the site says, “as of 2007, the institute has switched to a bi-annual format with selective publication lists only” and unfortunately, The Research Report for 2009–2010 is highly restricted for copyright reasons so that I am unable to directly cite from it here), group members get together and collaboratively report on completed research work. The Annual Report 2006 lists the 11 projects which were, have been, and will continue to be the institute’s major focus of investigations, including *Phonological Learning for Speech Perception*; *Decoding Continuous Speech*; *Utterance Encoding*, *Multimodal Interaction*; *Categories and Concepts across Language and Cognition*; *Language Production Units*; *Information Structure in Language Acquisition*; *The Comparative Study of L2 Acquisition*; *The Dynamics of Multilingual Processing*; *Sign Language Typology*, and *Other Research*. The project which interests me most is the fourth one, *Categories and Concepts across Language and Cognition*, which concerns the ongoing dispute among a group of scholars who have not only crossed the boundary between semantics and pragmatics, but also gone further to bridge more distant interdisciplinary fields that relate to the study of language. The participants in this group are Penelope Brown, Nick Enfield (coordinator), Trine Heinemann, Marijn Lamers, Stephen Levinson, Jan Peter de Ruiter (coordinator), Gunter Senft, and Tanya Stivers; Ph.D. students Gertie Hoymann, Lilla Magyari, Federico Rossano, and Connie de Vos; and other external collaborators.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. “Interactional engine” and exploring linguistic diversity

#### 3.1. “Interactional engine”

One of the main themes of Stephen Levinson’s group is that, as Levinson (2006: 44) says, “humans are endowed with a set of cognitive abilities and behavioral dispositions that synergistically work together to endow human face-to-face interaction with certain special qualities,” which he called “human interactional engine.” Kataoka (2011) describes this notion as the move toward seeking the foundations of acquiring human sociability based on human interaction, by incorporating other interdisciplinary schools into linguistic research. The current research aim of this group is that of looking in more detail into the total interactive activities of human beings to gain ground in the exploration of the “human interactional engine,” which purports to the essence of human’s embodiment and language use, such as joint attention, joint intention, and environmentally coupled gesture as well as intersubjectivity. Pragmatics, on which their work cen-

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<sup>8</sup> The details at <http://www.mpi.nl/institute/annual-reports/annual-reports>, and for the Annual Report 2006 which is open to the public, and the full version,

<http://www.mpi.nl/institute/annual-reports/archive-annual-reports/MPI-Anrep-2006-print.pdf>.

Also refer to 2007–2008 Research Report for overall research of the institute. See the pdf file at [http://www.mpi.nl/institute/annual-reports/archive-annual-reports/copy\\_of\\_BiAnRep2007\\_08\\_MPI\\_f\\_PSYL.pdf](http://www.mpi.nl/institute/annual-reports/archive-annual-reports/copy_of_BiAnRep2007_08_MPI_f_PSYL.pdf).



#### 4. Concluding remarks<sup>10</sup>

Since my allotted space is running out, see Levinson's (2006) 'Interactional Engine' and Evans and Levinson (2009) for more detailed discussion on the diversity and universality of language. Diversity of language is the main theme of the institute, and one that greatly interests me personally. Other studies which will be explored at the institute include language and thought, language and evolution, and language comprehension. Lastly, let me cite the final passage of Levinson and Majid (2009) regarding the future orientation of research at the institute, which I found very intriguing.

Our senses, and arguably our more abstract thoughts too, may be set up innately to deliver veridical information and inference, but rapidly in infancy we imbibe the language and categories of our culture and use these to make the discriminations and inferences that the culture has found useful through historical adaptation to its environment. As psychology enters an era of preoccupation with individual differences, we can be sure that many more ways in which language and

<sup>10</sup> I was invited to a Ph.D defense ceremony, which is always held in the Radboud University aula next to the institute—*aula* means "hall" in Latin. It looked to me to be a very solemn, heated discussion. The following is an explanatory passage at

<http://kumlandereng.blogspot.com/2008/09/dutch-phd-defense-ceremony.html>.

**Dutch PhD defense ceremony:** The Dutch thesis defense reminds me most of a traditional American wedding. The defense takes place in a chapel. The players include the defender, two *paranimf* (the groomsmen role), the promotor (advisor), a *Pedel* (an official position in the university), who plays a master of ceremonies role and eight opponents. The defender and *paranimf* are in full tux and tails, the *Pedel* and full professors in academic gowns and the other opponents in suits. In the audience are the defender's friends and family.

The ceremony starts by the defender giving a short description of this thesis to the audience from a Podium in front of the chapel. Led by the *Pedel*, the promotors and opponents enter the chapel from the back and march to sit in the choir seats. For forty-five minutes the opponents, one at a time, ask hard questions to the defender about his thesis. At the end the *Pedel* reenters the chapel marches to the front, hits her staff on the ground and says "*Hora Est*" (Time has expired). The opponents and promotors march out of the chapel to a discussion room where they vote on the defense and sign the thesis. After that they return back, present the diploma where the promotors read some traditional text and give a short speech. The ceremony is followed by a receiving line and reception with dinner.

This picture below was taken by me on Sept. 23, 2011:





culture influence cognition (and, no doubt, constraints on those effects) will be discovered.

\*MPI for Psycholinguistics



([http://abstrakkt.blogspot.com/2010\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://abstrakkt.blogspot.com/2010_05_01_archive.html))

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