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Press Release

Why Do Languages Change?

The German Research Foundation (DFG) is funding a new project led by Prof. Dr. Carola Trips, linguist at the University of Mannheim, with a total of EUR 3.5 million. The aim of the project is to investigate language change not only from a historical point of view, but also from a psycholinguistic perspective, thus establishing a new linguistic discipline.

The working methods can hardly be more different: While psycholinguists mainly conduct lab-based experiments using technologies such as eye-tracking - i.e. the measuring of eye movements - historical linguists study the changes of languages over longer periods of time - mostly with the help of historical texts and data. The new SILPAC research group, led by Professor Carola Trips, aims to combine both perspectives to gain new insights into language change. On Friday, the DFG awarded funding for the project in the amount of EUR 3.5 million for an initial period of four years.

SILPAC is short for Structuring the Input in Language Processing, Acquisition, and Change. Eight researchers from five universities will closely collaborate in this research group with the goal of providing an empirically and theoretically well-grounded explanation of the links between language processing, acquisition and change. The speaker university is the University of Mannheim, which also hosts the project's renowned Mercator Fellow, Charles Yang from the University of Pennsylvania, as a visiting professor.

The change of language, its structure and its grammar, is a topic to which the historical linguist Trips has devoted herself for quite some time. In the past, she has researched the development of English and French in the Middle Ages, among other things, as part of another DFG project. In her research work, however, she repeatedly found that she lacked a new perspective to explain language change. For this reason, she wanted to deepen the collaboration with psycholinguists, which had so far only been sporadic. "The fact that we were awarded funding for our project is a great success. This type of collaboration is unique," says Trips.

A special feature of the collaboration are so-called bridge projects. For example, the researchers are investigating the so-called *priming* phenomenon. Priming is a method from psycholinguistics and refers to a subtle influence on thought, action, and speech. Now, historical linguists are also adopting this psycholinguistic method when analyzing historical manuscripts. This enables them to better prove that the writers of historical texts were also

primed, for example because they were bilingual and transferred structures from English to French - or vice versa.

Why does a language change? And what needs to happen for it to change? Generally, languages do not tend to change their structure. Linguists call this phenomenon “language stability”. However, languages change when they come into contact with other languages - which can be easily understood using the example of the Middle Ages, when a large number of Romance and Germanic vernacular languages were spoken in addition to Latin. “Our research work contributes to understanding how multilingualism can trigger language change,” explains the English linguist.

The new research group aspires to establish nothing less than a new discipline: psycho-historical linguistics. To this end, the project leaders have developed a special program for early-stage researchers and designed an interdisciplinary training program for students studying a master's program, doctoral candidates, and postdocs. This is an important prerequisite for ensuring that the structures created as part of the SILPAC framework will last.

See the press release issued by the DFG:

https://www.dfg.de/service/presse/pressemitteilungen/2021/pressemitteilung_nr_39/index.html

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