

Report: *A Germanic Sandwich* conference (Sheffield, 12th-13th September 2008)

On 12th-13th September 2008 the University of Sheffield brought together a number of linguists for a conference with the appetizing title *A Germanic Sandwich*. It was the second edition of the comparative linguistics workshop *Nederlands tussen Duits en Engels* ('Dutch between German and English'). The first workshop with this title took place at the Freie Universität Berlin in 2005. The occasion for organizing the latter was the 50th anniversary of the book by the Dutch linguist Van Haeringen with the same title. The aim was to look at the present-day state of the art of contrastive research in West-Germanic languages. It turned out to be such a rewarding subject that there just had to be a sequel. Thus, three years later, West-Germanic comparatists were invited to Sheffield for "part two", which included as many as 15 presentations as well as a poster session. The conference was organized by Roel Vismans (University of Sheffield) in cooperation with Matthias Hüning (Freie Universität Berlin) and Fred Weerman (Universiteit Amsterdam).

In *A Germanic Sandwich* special attention was again drawn to Van Haeringen's positioning of Dutch between its sister languages German and English. The concept of a sandwich chosen by the organizers proved to lend itself wonderfully to visualizing possible positions of Dutch, German and English relative to one another. In his opening lecture, Sebastian Kürschner (Groningen) used the sandwich image to thematize the act of defining relations between languages and present a method for measuring linguistic distance. In other presentations, too, the sandwich image appeared useful as it gave rise to various interpretations.

More than once it became clear that the intermediate status of Dutch between German and English may not be tenable unless it is considered gradual. This gradualness was demonstrated by Johan Van der Auwera (Antwerp) in his excellent talk on Dutch raising: for one type of raising, Dutch turns out to be more like German, and for the other, more like English. On the other hand, the conference revealed that the alleged intermediate status of Dutch has to be handled with care. Tanja Mortelmans (Antwerp), for example, suggested that German may be closer to English when it comes to modal verbs. However, in respect of modal particles, discussed by Natalie Braber & Nicola McLelland (Nottingham), Dutch and German behave similarly. Last but not least, we also have to bear in mind language-specific strategies, as proposed by Johan De Caluwe (Ghent) in his talk on naming procedures (which, incidentally, was complemented very nicely by Barbara Schlücker (Berlin)).

That it is preferable to take other Germanic languages into account as well, was for example demonstrated by Miriam Schmuck (Mainz), who compared German, Dutch and Swedish strong verbs. If we are really ambitious, we may even want to consider the entire European language buffet, as Ulrike Vogl (Berlin) suggested in her presentation on standardization processes.

A Germanic Sandwich was particularly interesting because of the wide variety of topics presented. Even when specific case studies were discussed, speakers were careful not to overlook the broader 'contrastive' picture. To this contributed the fact that the Dutch-German-English comparison was looked at from different linguistic perspectives. Not only did presentations range from phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics to psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, they also paid particular attention to linguistic interfaces between them. Fred Weerman (Amsterdam) established the link between language acquisition and language change. Josefien Sweep (Amsterdam) touched upon the semantic/syntactic interface in her presentation on logical metonymy in Dutch and German. Phonology and language acquisition were brought together by Ellen Simon and Torsten Leuschner (Ghent) in a study on the acquisition of voicing contrast by Dutch learners of

English and German. Ester Ruigendijk (Oldenburg) used research on aphasia as a starting point to raise more general structural questions.

Furthermore, the conference comprised synchronic as well as diachronic approaches. Several contributions provided a present-day account of a linguistic phenomenon, such as the talk by Alan Scott (Manchester) on optional gender agreement and the poster presentation by Geert Stuyckens (Leuven) about a case study on the distribution of coordinated verb-second clauses. Other contributions had a significant historical dimension, such as the presentation on apocope by Damaris Nübling (Mainz), as well as the presentation on adverbial morphology by myself and Freek Van de Velde (Leuven). The poster presentations by Susan Fittkau (Münster) and Jessica Nowak (Mainz), too, took a historical point of view.

The discussions which the presentations and the posters encouraged, have given all participants plenty of food for thought. Fortunately, there was ample opportunity to exchange ideas over coffee and – inevitably – sandwiches. Informal conversation outside the conference room took place in the same beautiful *Durcheinander* of Dutch, German and English as the communication within the conference room. Somehow, everyone just used the language they felt most comfortable with, not having to worry that the addressee would not understand.

To sum up, the comparative linguistics conference *A Germanic Sandwich* in Sheffield was a success. It is important to notice the considerable input from young researchers in this respect. The ‘new generation’ brought along a fresh outlook on the Dutch-German-English comparison raised by Van Haeringen 52 years ago. It seems that this story has to be continued, and so it will be: there is a third edition of *Nederlands tussen Duits en Engels* to look forward to in 2010, for which the university of Oldenburg has kindly offered to be the host.

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