Departmental Seminar

Grammatical Gender and Classifiers as Windows to Cognitive Processing

4:00p.m. – 5:00p.m. │ **November 28, 2024 (Thursday)**
Rm 813, 8/F, The Jockey Club Tower │ **Centennial Campus** │ **The University of Hong Kong**

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Abstract

Many Indo-European languages, including French, Spanish, Dutch, and German, have grammatical gender. In German, for instance, nouns have either masculine, feminine, or neuter gender, and that has important repercussions on grammatical agreement in phrases such as "silberner Löffel" (silverMAS spoonMAS), "silberne Gabel" (silverFEM forkFEM), or "silbernes Messer" (silverNEU knifeNEU). However, why is spoon masculine (MAS) in German ("der Löffel"), while fork is feminine (FEM) ("die Gabel"), and knife is neuter (NEU) ("das Messer")? The answer is probably that the human cognitive system developed grammatical gender to subcategorize the nominal system to facilitate lexical access and to bring some structure to the mental lexicon. The psychological reality of the grammatical feature 'gender' has been demonstrated, e.g., in the form of the gender congruency effect. However, many languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, do not have grammatical gender but make use of classifiers. In this talk, I will show that grammatical gender and classifiers fulfill very similar functions and behave similarly in language processing. This supports claims that have been made by theoretical linguists arguing that gender and classifiers are functioning on the same spectrum. From a cognitive perspective, the interesting issue is how human cognition has been able to develop at least two different ways, i.e., gender and classifiers, to achieve similar functions in language processing, i.e., subcategorizing the nominal system of language.

About the Speaker

Niels Schiller received his MA in phonetics, German language and linguistics, and computational linguistics from Trier University (Germany) in 1994. The same year, he was awarded a scholarship from the German Max Planck Society to carry out his PhD research at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, The Netherlands. In 1997, he received his PhD in Psychology from the Radboud University in Nijmegen. In his PhD dissertation, he investigated the role of the syllable in lexical access during speech production. After his PhD, he was a post-doctoral research fellow with the Cognitive Neuropsychology Laboratory of the Psychology Department at Harvard University (1998-2000) and a research scientist of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) at Maastricht University and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (2000-2003). In 2004, he was appointed professor of psycholinguistics at Maastricht University and in 2006 he moved to Leiden to become professor of psycho- and neurolinguistics at Leiden University. Since 2024, he is Chair Professor of Psycho- and Neurolinguistics at City University of Hong Kong and Head of Department of Linguistics and Translation. His research interests include lexico-syntactic, morphological, and phonological encoding processes in mono- and multilingual language production.

Zoom Meeting (For participants who couldn't attend the Seminar in person)

https://hku.zoom.us/j/6985555998?pwd=V05yTGJWNTlzazd2OFZ0Q3FReHVkdz09
Meeting ID: 698 555 5998 │ Password: Psyc

~All are Welcome~

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