English *rather* vs. German *eher*:

A Study in Semantic Micro-variation

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Contrastive Linguistics

- support foreign language teaching, translation, study of bilingualism, …
- in theoretical linguistics, highlight principles of grammar, e.g.,
  König & Gast (2007), Beck & Gergel (2014) – English-German contrasts.
- in semantics: explore how languages encode meaning, e.g.,
  - Krifka (1995) – NP semantics in English / Chinese,
  - Chierchia (1998) – kind reference cross-linguistically,
  - Beck et al. (2009) – cross-linguistic variation in comparison
  - Behrens et al. (2014) – conjuncts in Norwegian and English
  - Aloni & Port (2015) – Epistemic indefinites in German vs. Italian
  - Burnett (2011) – Adverbial quantifiers in two variants of French
  - ➢ Largely, coarse-grained differences between typologically unrelated languages

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Semantic Micro-variation

Bridging theme of the DFG project *Degree attenuators* (Solt) and the proposal *Equative comparison* (Umbach):

"English-German micro-variation in the field of scalarity and comparison"

Basic ideas: Investigate subtle differences between 2 closely related languages

Using language specific results as foils for one another may yield insights that would not have been available through the study of only a single language.

Four studies

- Downgrading interpretation of negated extremes (*not exactly*/*nicht gerade*)
- English *much*/*many* vs. German *viel*(*e*)
- German *wie* vs. English *like* in non-scalar comparison
- Equatives with measure phrases

Show case: Study on English *rather vs.* German *eher*

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English *rather vs.* German *eher*

- Both originate as comparatives of temporal expressions (*soon*/*early*)

- Readings:

German *eher*	temporal	probability	preference	contrast	(degree)
English *rather*	~~temporal~~	~~probability~~	(preference)	contrast	degree

In this talk: focus on explicit contrast

(1) … psychologists and therapists have to have a broad background.
   a. Psychotherapy is an art RATHER than a science.
   b. Psychotherapie ist EHER eine Kunst als eine Wissenschaft.

   → No difference in meaning at first sight

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Colors

(2) I ordered a beautiful green shirt from Amazon. But when the package arrived and I opened it, I saw that …

a. … what they send was blue rather than green.

b. … dass das Hemd eher blau als grün war.

(3) I ordered a beautiful orange shirt from Amazon. But when the package arrived and I opened it, I saw that …

c. … what they send was blue rather than orange.

d. *… dass das Hemd eher blau als orange war.

→ Why can *eher* be used when contrasting green and blue but not when contrasting green and orange?

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Places

(4) Before I went on vacation I told my colleague I was going to the north of Spain. When I returned we had the following conversation:

colleague: How was your trip to the north of Spain?

a. me: Actually I was in the west rather than the north of Spain.

b. ich: Ich war tatsächlich eher im Westen als im Norden von Spanien.

(5) Before I went on vacation I told my colleague I was going to Spain. When I returned we had the following conversation:

colleague: How was your trip to Spain?

a. me: Actually I was in Portugal rather than Spain.

b. ich: * Ich war tatsächlich eher in Portugal als in Spanien.

→ Why can *eher* be used when contrasting the north and the west of Spain but not when contrasting Spain and Portugal?

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Our understanding of the data

English *rather* sentences

(i) are about facts in the world.

(ii) are used to reject an alternative under discussion.

German *eher* sentences

(i) are about interpretations;

(ii) express that one interpretation is more suited than another to capture the facts in the world.

(iii) This is reasonable only if the denotations of the predicates in the two interpretations are overlapping .

Overlap is possible…

- for *blue* and *green* but not for *blue* and *orange* because of their distinct positions in the color spectrum;
- for vague expressions such as *northern Spain* and *western Spain* but not for *Spain* and *Portugal,* as country borderlines do not allow variance in interpretation

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Past approaches to *rather / eher*

Dietrich & Napoli (1982): Semantic distinction between *rather* with tensed vs. tenseless verb (denial of assertion/assumption vs. preference)

Gergel (2009,to appear): Diachronic focus: temporal →modal shift for *rather* (quantifier over possible worlds); semantic parallels between *rather* and *eher*

Hehl (2014): unified comparative analysis for temporal and modal (preference) *eher* as quantifiers over degrees

Herburger & Rubinstein (2014): comparative analysis of *eher* as *eh* + *er*, where *eh-* denotes an epistemic predicate relating a proposition *p* to the degree to which a certain individual *z* is ready to believe that *p* is true

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Approaches to the semantics of *rather*

rather **Dietrich & Napoli (1982)**

- reading associated with the tensed verb: 'denial of assertion or assumption'
- reading associated with the untensed verb: 'preference'
  (the subject – not the speaker! – intends to eliminate q in favor of p)

Gergel (2009)

- focus on untensed cases, modal (preference) analysis (quantifiers over possible worlds)

Names and topics only – 1 slide

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Approaches to the semantics of *eher*

Hehl (2014)

unified comparative analysis for temporal and modal (preference) *eher* as quantifiers over degrees,

Herburger & Rubinstein (2014)

comparative analysis (*eh* + *er*) such that

- the *eh*- component denotes an epistemic predicate relating a proposition p to the degree to which a certain individual z is ready to believe that p is true, $[[\text{eh-}]]^z = \lambda p.\lambda d.$ z is **d-ready to believe** p
- *-er* comparative form (taking sets of degrees as arguments – the maximal degree of the second is greater than the maximal degree of the first)
  $[[\text{-er}]] = \lambda P_{<d,t>}.\lambda Q_{<d,t>}.\max(Q) > \max(P)$
- presupposition: lack of direct evidence
  $[[\text{eh-}]]^z = \lambda p.\lambda d$: z's beliefs regarding p are based on indirect evidence. z is d-ready to believe p.

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Metalinguistic comparison

Morzycki (2011) English *more* (*George is more dumb than crazy*.)

Basic idea:

While ordinary comparatives make use of a scales lexically determined by particular adjectives, metalinguistic comparatives use a generally-available scale of imprecision or 'pragmatic slack'.

Giannakidou & Yoon (2011) Greek *para,* Korean *kipota*

Basic idea:

MORE_{ML} expresses preference of expression ('appropriateness')
as well as preference of content ('emphatic preference');
MORE_{ML} operates on propositions or sentence expressions.

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Framework - Descriptive vs. definitional update

Barker (2002) *Feynman is tall*

- "What is Feynman's height?'
- "Who counts as tall in the actual context?" (face-to-face situation)

Krifka (2012)

Framework to account for definitional as well as descriptive use of sentences

The Common Ground is a pair of sets of **interpretations** and **worlds <I,W>**.
The meaning of an expression is relative to interpretation and world, $[\![\alpha]\!]^{i,w}$

Two update components

- **Descriptive update** reduces the set of possible worlds
  $\langle I,W\rangle + \textbf{DES}([\![\varphi]\!]) = \langle I, \{w \in W \mid \exists i \in I.\ [\![\varphi]\!]^{i,w}\}\rangle$
- **Definitional update** reduces the set of interpretations
  $\langle I,W\rangle + \textbf{DEF}([\![\varphi]\!]) = \langle \{i \in I \mid \forall w \in W\ [\![\varphi]\!]^{i,w}\}, W\rangle$

We further assume a discourse framework with a question under discussion and a procedure for answer to enter the common ground (e.g. Farkas & Bruce 2010) 12

Semantics

Both *rather* and *eher* are discourse markers (no denotation)

A sentence with *rather*

- imposes a precondition such that the question-under-discussion asks for confirmation of the first alternative (which can be accommodated).
- is normally used descriptively.

A sentence with *eher*

- triggers a presupposition on the set of worlds/interpretations:
  for each world under consideration there are interpretations such the first alternative is true and there are interpretations such that the second alternative is true.
- A (contrastive) sentence with *eher* can only be used definitionally.

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The shirt is blue rather than green. (i)

- Sentences with *rather* are normally used descriptively, conveying information about the world while assuming that the interpretation is fixed,
- QUD : *Is the shirt green?*
  For the QUD to be non-trivial, there have to be worlds in CG such that the shirt is green and worlds such that it is not green ('informativity')
- Descriptive update will discard worlds in which the shirt is green without affecting the set of interpretations:

$$\langle I,W\rangle + \textbf{DES}([\![\textit{The shirt blue.}]\!]) = \langle I, \{w\in W \mid \exists i\in I.[\![\textit{The shirt blue.}]\!]^{i,w}\}\rangle$$

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The shirt is blue rather than green. (ii)

- Sentences with *rather* also have a definitional use in face-to-face situations, where it is assumed that the world is fixed, W = $\{w_0\}$

- QUD : *Is the shirt green?*
  - Since the actual color of the shirt is given, this can only be a question about about the use of language (word meanings)

  The situation is such that there are (at least) two interpretation under discussion; the speaker instructs the hearer that only one of these is adequate (e.g. language teaching context)

- Definitional update will discard interpretations in which the shirt is green without affecting the set of worlds:

  $\langle I,W\rangle$ + **DEF**($[\![$*The shirt blue.*$]\!]$) = $\langle\{i\in I \mid \forall w\in W\ [\![$ *The shirt blue.*$]\!]^{i,w}\}, W\rangle$

  = $\langle\{i\in I \mid [\![$ *The shirt blue.*$]\!]^{i,w0}, \{w_0\}\rangle$

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Das Hemd ist eher blau als grün. (iii)

Sentences with German *eher*

- always target interpretations instead of worlds;
- presuppose *overlap*: for each world under consideration there are interpretations such the first alternative (i.e. blue) is true and there are interpretations such that the second alternative (i.e. green) is true.

In a face-to-face situation, only the actual world w_0 is under consideration.

- *Overlap* requires that there are interpretations in which the shirt is blue and ones in which it is green in w_0:

  $\exists i_1,i_2\in I.[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]^{i1,w0}$ & $[\![$*Das Hemd ist grün.*$]\!]^{i2,w0}$

- Definitional update discards interpretations under which the shirt is green:

  $\langle I,W\rangle$ + **DEF**($[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]$)

  = $\langle\{i\in I \mid [\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]^{i,w0}\}, \{w^0\}\rangle$

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Das Hemd ist eher blau als grün (iv)

- Sentences with German *eher* can be used to convey information about facts in the world even though they are always definitional.
- This is achieved by presupposition accommodation.

  Accommodating the *overlap* presupposition reduces the set of worlds to those for which there are interpretations such that the shirt is blue and interpretations such that it is green:

  $\langle I,W\rangle$ + **ACC**($[\![$*Das Hemd ist eher blau als grün*$]\!]$)

  $= \langle I,w\in W \mid \exists i_1,i_2\in I.[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]^{i1,w}$ & $[\![$*Das Hemd ist grün.*$]\!]^{i2,w}\rangle$

  $=\langle I,W'\rangle$

- Definitional update will then, as in (iii) above, discard interpretations under which the shirt is green:

  $\langle I,W'\rangle$ + **DEF**($[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]$)

  $= \langle \{i\in I \mid \forall w\in W'[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]^{i,w}\}, W'\rangle$

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Conclusion

- ✧ Contrastive *eher* is metalinguistic; *rather* is not (contra Gergel)
  - ✧ A possible extension: ‚degree modifier' *rather/eher*

    (6) a. Leo is rather tall
    b. Leo ist eher groß

- ✧ This analysis shows the benefit of the microvariationist approach to semantics
  - ✧ Fine-grained comparison of apparently parallel expressions in closely related languages can bring to light patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed, and thereby serve as the basis for more adequate formal semantic analysis

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Thank you!

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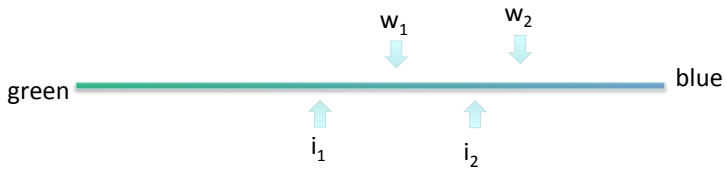
Worlds and interpretations



i_1, w_1	Das Hemd ist blau
i_2, w_1	Das Hemd ist grün
i_1, w_2	Das Hemd ist blau
i_2, w_2	Das Hemd ist blau

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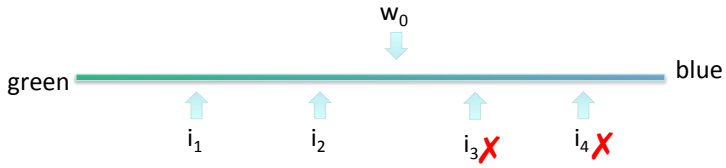
Das Hemd ist eher blau als grün. – face-to-face



Overlap presupposition satisfied:
$[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]^{i1/i2,\ w0}$ & $[\![$*Das Hemd ist grün.*$]\!]^{i3/i4,\ w0}$

Definitional update:
$\langle \{i_1, i_2, i_3, i_4\}, \{w_0\} \rangle$ + **DEF**($[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]$) = $\langle \{i_1, i_2\}, \{w_0\} \rangle$

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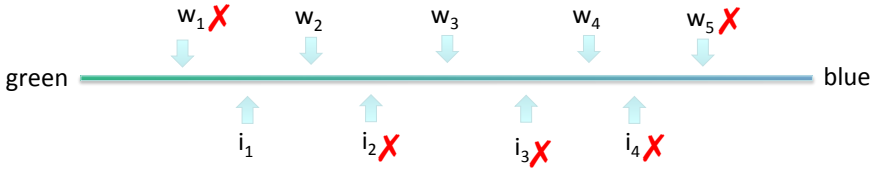
Das Hemd ist eher blau als grün. (general)



Presupposition accomodation:
$\forall w \in W.\ \exists\, i_1, i_2 \in I.[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]^{i1,w}$ & $[\![$*Das Hemd ist grün.*$]\!]^{i2,w}$
$\langle \{i_1, i_2, i_3, i_4\}, \{w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4, w_5\} \rangle$ + **ACC**($[\![$*Das Hemd ist eher blau als grün.*$]\!]$)
$= \langle \{i_1, i_2, i_3, i_4\}, \{w_2, w_3, w_4\} \rangle$

Definitional update:
$\langle \{i_1, i_2, i_3, i_4\}, \{w_2, w_3, w_4\} \rangle$ + **DEF**($[\![$*Das Hemd ist blau.*$]\!]$) = $\langle \{i_1\}, \{w_2, w_3, w_4\} \rangle$

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