

Interview mit unserer Doktorandin Jordan Chark



Jordan Chark ist Doktorandin (MGK Fellow) im DFG-Projekt A05 „Die Modellierung von semantischen Registerunterschieden“ im Rahmen des SFB 1412 „Register: Language-Users’ Knowledge of Situational-Functional Variation“ im Forschungsbereich Semantik und Pragmatik. Ihre Dissertation fügt sich in das umfassendere Ziel des Projekts A05 ein, bedeutungsbasierte Variation zu modellieren.

Could you explain your dissertation project in a few sentences?

Sure. One of the most important principles in historical linguistics is called the „Uniformitarian Principle“ which states that the same processes shaped language in the past as they do in the present. In my dissertation, I take this as a starting point to investigate the question of how register variation — broadly speaking, how a speaker chooses between possible ways of „saying the same thing“ — relates to how language changes more generally.

How do you approach this research question?

I look at a few case studies from the history of Icelandic where new functional words emerged and spread throughout the language. Nowadays, speakers still have a choice between the newer and older forms, but the choice is determined by aspects of the situational context rather than solely their meaning. I use a number of methods in my research. One of them is a corpus with 900+ years of texts, enriched with detailed grammatical information, which allows for an understanding of where and how a change originates and spreads. For modern Icelandic, I use experiments which place people in different kinds of fictional situations and look at how their linguistic behaviour is affected by aspects of these situations (i.e., at the office vs. home, speaking to your boss vs. your best friend). Finally, I use computational/statistical methods to test theories of how different levels of linguistic knowledge interact with one another: how does this knowledge of situational appropriateness relate to more „core“ knowledge of a language’s grammatical system?

You mentioned at the beginning that you are especially interested in what historical data can teach us about ongoing change. Can you say a little more about this?

I am interested in gaining a better understanding of how certain linguistic forms become embued with conventionalized social meanings across a speech community (what Anthropologist Asif Agha popularized under the term „enregisterment“). These conventions can lead interlocutors to communicate

and infer properties like „conscientiousness“ and „cosmopolitan“ from utterances based on the choice of forms amongst possible alternatives. There is a straightforward way in which this relates to language change: newer forms attract social evaluation, often negative evaluation, while an older, alternative „way of saying the same thing“ typically exists alongside it as an unmarked or neutral form. The chronologically older form may also be more established in a situation in which a high degree of formality is called for; the use of the younger form in these contexts is hence all the more striking and evaluated more harshly than elsewhere. A quick, concrete example comes from the work of Andrea Beltrama who shows experimentally that *totally full* does not carry social meaning but *totally tall* does.

How did you end up with this research topic?

I have been interested in language variation and change ever since I started studying linguistics. In fact, I came to the study of linguistics through an interest in the Icelandic language. I completed a BA in Icelandic as a second language at the University of Iceland, where I was able to acquaint myself in some depth with the unique situation of the Icelandic language. Icelanders take pride in the conservativeness of their language, being able to read medieval texts with relative ease. Sometimes this pride can be turned into something negative, however, and used as a basis to belittle those who use words which are considered too new by some to be considered ‚proper‘ Icelandic and therefore inappropriate in some contexts.

What is, in your view, the „real world“ consequence of such research?

The greatest consequence of this type of research is something that many linguists are well-aware of, but perhaps could make more effort to communicate to the broader public. Namely, that there is no factual basis for the stigma that surrounds certain ways of speaking. These are social judgements like any other, but people are very quick to attribute moral failings to someone who, in their eyes, does not use language „correctly“ or „appropriately“. As linguists, we know that someone’s manner of speaking communicates a great deal about who they are, just that we may not immediately pick up on all of the relevant cues if we’re not part of the same group. We would benefit from a society to realize that these things say nothing about someone’s moral character.

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Finally, what brought you to ZAS?

Having studied for my master’s at the University of Potsdam, I had been aware of the existence of ZAS and knew that Berlin is home to a very vibrant linguistics community. When I saw the posting for my current PhD position, I knew immediately that it would be a good fit for my research interests, the core of which combines formal semantics and social aspects of meaning — areas of focus shared by a number of ZAS members. Altogether, the research environment at ZAS is vibrant and collaborative, and I feel lucky to have regular exchange with more senior researchers outside of my direct supervisors.