



SFB Guest Lecture

Wednesday, 07 December 2022, 10:00 am
Location: Campus Golm, Building 14, Room 0.12

Invited by the projects C04 and C07

Dr. [Chundra Cathcart](#) (University of Zurich)
will give a talk on

The evolution of similar place avoidance: phylogenetic approaches to phonotactic change

Abstract:

The world's languages exhibit considerable variation in terms of the static sound patterns displayed by individual words. At the same time, a number of recurrent phonotactic patterns are found in a large sample of genetically diverse languages. One such tendency is the statistical underrepresentation of consonants sharing a place of articulation within uninflected morphologically simple lexical items. While this pattern is likely rooted in pressures toward communicative efficiency, not much is understood regarding the specific diachronic mechanisms that bring it about. A working hypothesis found in the literature but as yet untested is that word usage is involved in its maintenance: language users are less likely to coin or adopt and more likely to phase out words containing similar consonants (Frisch et al. 2004, Martin 2007).

In this talk, I employ a Bayesian phylogenetic model to assess this hypothesis. Cognate forms taken from the Austronesian Comparative Dictionary (Blust & Trussel 2013) were coded according to whether they (a) contained identical consonants separated by a single vowel and (b) were part of basic or non-basic vocabulary in a given language. I employ a simple continuous-time Markov model where upon being born, an etymon transitions between the states (\pm basic, \pm identical consonants) before dying. Under this model, it is possible to assess whether vocabulary items are more likely to move from basic to non-basic vocabulary (i.e., become more marginal in usage) if they contain identical consonants, among other questions.

In addition to discussing results of this simple model, I outline additional modeling directions that can investigate more complex aspects of this phenomenon, such as the role of different places of articulation and different

non-place features. I additionally discuss potential extensions of the phylogenetic framework used here to related phenomena.

References

Blust, R. and S. Trussel (2013). The Austronesian comparative dictionary: a work in progress. *Oceanic Linguistics* 52(2), 493–523.

Frisch, S. A., J. B. Pierrehumbert, and M. B. Broe (2004). Similarity avoidance and the OCP. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 22(1), 179–228.

Martin, A. T. (2007). *The evolving lexicon*. Ph. D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.

Everyone is cordially invited.