Expressing ‘sadness’ – differences between the semantics of some Danish and German negative adjectives.

Abstract:

The emotion ‘sadness’ seems to be a culture-specific concept. Unlike in European languages, in many Pacific languages, for example Tahitian, there is no expression for ‘sad’ (Goddard, 2007). ‘Sadness’-expressions have been compared through relatively distant languages, such as English and Chinese (Zhang, 2016). Our hypothesis is that linguistic expressions for sadness differ even between two genetically and typologically closely related neighbouring Germanic languages in Europe, Danish and German. To our knowledge, ‘sadness’-expressions in these two languages have not been studied so far, from a comparative point of view.

The German adjective traurig ‘sad’ can in many contexts be equivalent with the Danish adjectival expression ked af det ‘sad’ if it refers to a person. In contexts where traurig refers to the object causing the emotion of ‘sadness’, on the other hand, it can be equivalent with the Danish adjective trist ‘sad’. In some very specific contexts, the Danish adjective kedelig ‘boring, embarrassing or flat’ can also be equivalent with traurig.

Our aim is to analyse the similarities and differences between the semantic structure of some Danish and German negative adjectives (and adjectival expressions) expressing ‘sadness’, possibly as an example for linguistic relativity. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 How do expressions for sadness differ conceptually, lexically and/or grammatically in Danish and German, and what do they have in common?

RQ2 Do some of the adjectives represent a unique concept of ‘negative emotion’?

For the analysis of the semantics of the adjectives we will use definitions from monolingual dictionaries and two different methods. Quantitative corpus analysis based on dependency analysis relations with help of the tool DeepDict (Bick, 2009) will shed light on co-occurrence patterns and use of the adjectives. Natural Semantic Metalanguage analysis will explain native speakers’ language use and intuitions about the meaning of the adjectives.
References:

