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Explaining learners' L2 Dutch language learning difficulty by means of L1-Ln lexical, morphological, and phonological distance measures

Monday, 24 October 2022, 2:00 p.m., H80 (Philosophikum) & Zoom

The talk will try to provide insights into the effects of linguistic distance, age, and educational background in adult additional language learning as based on several studies that use state exam data from many adult learners of Dutch. We measured global linguistic distances based on morphological, vocabulary, and phonological differences between the first languages (L1) of the learners and the additional language (Ln) Dutch using typological databases. We defined 1) lexical distance as a symmetric measure of the branch lengths in a phylogenetic language tree based on expert cognacy judgements of words in Swadesh lists, 2) morphological distance as an asymmetric measure based on the number of Ln morphological features that are more complex compared to the L1, and 3) phonological distance as an asymmetric measure based on the number of new phonological features of new Ln sounds. I will discuss three main findings. First, we found that the combination of lexical, morphological and phonological distance measures successfully yields an accumulative, unbiased, and fairly complete account of L1-related differences in Ln Dutch test scores. Second, we found that proficiency for all four language skills declines after an age of arrival of about 25 years and that linguistic distance increases this decline for speaking in particular. Finally, we found that education has a stronger facilitative effect for the offline skills (reading and writing) and that linguistic similarity increases this facilitative effect for receptive skills particularly (listening and reading).