Language variation: insights from multilingual settings

Multilingualism is a normal condition for humans, and the default in human societies. However, traditionally the focus of grammatical analysis has been on monolingual speakers, who, more often than not, have been regarded as having a privileged access to “native” speaker competence, thus providing a yardstick against which to measure linguistic data. However, lately there have been more and more calls to overcome such a monolingual bias, and my talk will pick up on this.

In particular, I will argue that it needlessly narrows our perspective to treat data from multilingual speakers as a special case, rather than as the core of what language competence, language use, and linguistic systems mean. In this vein, I show that, since multilingualism acts as a motor of linguistic developments, multilingual communities can afford us a privileged view onto ongoing tendencies of language variation and change.

By way of example, I discuss evidence from the domains of NPs, reduplication, and semantic/pragmatic integration, drawing on findings from current projects on heritage speakers’ linguistic repertoires, urban contact dialects (especially Kiezdeutsch), Namibian German, and language use at a multilingual Berlin street market.