

Société de Linguistique de Paris
École Pratique des Hautes Études, IV^e section

La séance aura lieu à l'ÉCOLE NORMALE SUPÉRIEURE
Salle de Conférences du 46 rue d'Ulm 75005 Paris (voir affichage)

Séance du 16 novembre 2013 (17h-19h)

The quantitative turn in linguistics

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Within the last decade quantitative methods have gained increasing prominence within the field of linguistics. It is now more common to see hypotheses of a quantitative nature being investigated through the analysis of systematically collected data. Quantitative methods are very powerful because (1) they can put to rest hypotheses that look both interesting and plausible but turn out not to lead anywhere; (2) they can correct and improve hypotheses that are partly correct; and (3) they can produce new and unexpected results. This presentation will provide examples of all of these three situations. (1) is illustrated through an investigation of the question, “which typological features diffuse more easily”? (2) is illustrated by an investigation of the claim of Tsunoda (1985) that the applicability of certain types of syntactic construction is sensitive to a universal, implicational verb hierarchy. (3) is illustrated through a systematic comparison of the world’s language families in search for deep genealogical relations that have a > 90% probability of being correct. A cautionary tale is also warranted, however. Any quantitative research relies on good data, which usually has to be collected through traditional methods, and the research has to be guided by insightful hypotheses that ultimately rely on intuitions derived from experience. At the same time as solid quantitative studies are being produced, papers are also published that have a parasitic behavior, using datasets for research questions for which the datasets in question were not intended, and making claims that are not hypothesis-driven, but simply rely on *p*-values of more or less random correlations. The take-home message of this presentation will be that quantitative methods are best suited to test hypotheses, not to produce them.

La conférence sera donnée en anglais.

Séances scientifiques ultérieures de la SLP pour l’année 2013

14 décembre : Jacques FRANCOIS « La difficile affirmation de la linguistique générale en Allemagne au 19^e siècle entre l’héritage de Humboldt et celui de Bopp ».