

Silent pause as a discursive sign across languages:

Reporting on a cross-linguistic study of direct speech, silent pause and word order using corpora from DoReCo

Direct speech is, as far as it has been documented, a universal discursive device. In this talk, I will report from a study done in collaboration with Frank Seifart, ZAS. We investigated the position of speech verbs and of silent pauses relatively to direct speech reports in oral narratives. We annotated 12 language documentation corpora from an areally balanced sample from DoReCo to test the following hypotheses:

1. the position of speech verbs depends on the basic word order of verbs and their complements (VO vs. OV),
2. the occurrence of speech verbs and pauses exhibit complementarity based on their shared function of marking the onset or end of reported speech.

After a brief introduction on direct speech in oral narratives as well as silent pauses, I will present the methodology used for this quantitative study. Then, I will come to the results, first that most VO languages speech verbs exclusively precede speech reports, while in OV they may precede or follow them, or intervene, as middle verbs. Secondly, I will show that speakers of VO languages pause much more often after speech reports, while speakers of OV language often pause before the speech report, and seldom between a speech report and a following ending verb. The main conclusion is that there is a correlation between the basic word order associated with a language and where speakers tend to produce silent pauses and speech verbs. I will finish the presentation by discussing some of the implications I see in those results, in particular regarding the concept of text sequence and how silent pauses are among the discursive cues that speakers are using to structure their speech into a text.

Keywords: corpus-based typology, silent pause, direct speech, word order, speech verbs