



**Der Sonderforschungsbereich 991 "Die Struktur von Repräsentationen in Sprache, Kognition und Wissenschaft" lädt herzlich ein zum Vortrag**

**von**

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***Semantic and Syntactic Bootstrapping and the Formation of Grammatical Categories: Arguments from Tolai of New Britain***

Bootstrapping is a commonly cited mechanism by which children acquire the categories of their native language (Carey 2009). This is typically invoked as the means by which children learn the claimed universal distinction between the syntactic classes noun and verb (Pinker 1994): on the basis of presumed universal cognitive/semantic prototypes, such as countable objects and dynamic events, children identify lexemes belonging to these opposed classes (semantic bootstrapping), note their distinctive grammatical properties, and then extend the categories previously formed to new lexemes on the basis of shared grammatical properties (syntactic bootstrapping). Tomasello (1992, 2003) has shown that contrary to what we might expect from this simple opposition of object/noun to event/verb, the age at which children learning English can be identified as having formed these categories (ie syntactic bootstrapping) differs: verbs cohere into a unified syntactic class in the grammar of children acquiring English significantly later than nouns (Tomasello's (1992) verb island hypothesis). This is explicable in the light of Gentner and Boroditsky's (2001) hypothesis of cognitive versus linguistic dominance in language acquisition: because event denoting lexemes or verbs are higher in linguistic dominance (syntactic bootstrapping) and lower in cognitive dominance (semantic bootstrapping) than object denoting lexemes or nouns, we might expect a delay in their coherence into a unified category until a greater facility in the language being acquired is attained. Indeed, we might go further: if NO unique and global syntactic properties can be identified by the child for the lexemes that denote events of various types as opposed to those that denote objects, then no coherent syntactic class of verb may ever emerge in the grammar of the language being acquired, even for adult competence. Hence, we might have a syntactic category of noun, albeit itself weak, but none of verb. The paper will argue in detail that Tolai (aka Kuanua) is such a language. Note, that contrary to much of what has been argued in the typological literature, establishing that a language has a syntactic category of noun does not establish a noun-verb distinction. That is faulty logic: it simply establishes a category of noun. A coherent category of verb requires independent evidence, and as this paper will argue, such evidence is lacking in Tolai.

**Studierende und andere Interessierte sind herzlich willkommen.**