

Report by Hanna Mahler on participating in the ICAME

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Travel

While travelling to Great Britain, there are already many interesting things to notice for the attentive linguist. In the waiting hall for the Eurostar, one cannot help but be intrigued by the various British accents that can be heard. Multilingualism can also be wonderfully observed during the journey. Starting in the train from Germany to France, announcements are made in both German and French (but not in English). At the French train station, all signage appears to be in French only and one is hard-pressed to find a staff member able to help customers in English or German. Once one has arrived at the Eurostar station, announcements are in English and French.

The pre-conference workshop

The pre-conference workshop had the main theme “Comparing cross-linguistic complexity”, which was reflected in all of the presentations. The presenters looked at complexity at various levels (clauses, phrases, individual parts of speech) and in various languages (English, German, Norwegian, Czech, and Spanish). While many of the researchers present have their main interest in translation and translation strategies for specific structures, comparable corpora (such as the one I am working with) also played a major role throughout the day.

What might turn out to be especially fortunate for me as an early-career researcher is the opportunity to potentially publish alongside the other presenters in a special issue of the journal “Languages in Contrast”, which is the main journal in the research area of contrastive linguistics. The special issue will focus on complexity and can feature six or seven publications from the workshop. Even if my contribution should not be accepted by the publishers, structuring my thoughts for a potential publication will in itself be a valuable step.

My presentation

Since I only had 10 minutes to present and there were only 5 minutes for questions, there was not much time for feedback from the audience. We managed to squeeze in three questions. Two of the questions centred around the specific registers included in the corpus and their properties. Another audience member pointed out that type-token ratio is sensitive to text length, which is already addressed in my project through the use of standardised type-token ratio instead of type-token ratio (which I could have pointed out more clearly).



Other presentations

One of the programme elements that impressed me the most was the panel with NLP industry speakers on Thursday afternoon. The organisers invited 5 experts who either had a linguistics background and were now working in the tech industry, or who had a background in programming/computation and were now

working together with linguists in their companies. The speakers all emphasised the important knowledge and skills that linguists can bring to technological projects and how valuable they are for interdisciplinary teams. They also showed ways in which linguistics can enter the tech field and how they can best prepare themselves for the transition from academia to industry. Without wanting to turn any young researchers away from an academic career, I think it is important to show other career options and to get to know people who pursued other career paths.



From the remaining sessions, the three that were most useful for my personal work were the sessions on “Exploring corpora”, on grammar and on statistics. The “Exploring corpora” session featured a talk by Laurence Anthony, who is famous in the discipline for his open-access tools around “AntConc”, and three presentations coming from the “Corpus approaches to Social Sciences (CASS)” group in Lancaster. All talks focused on new methodological options to exploit corpora and to visualise results from corpus studies, which might turn out useful for my project as well.

The session on statistics included talks by well-known experts Sean Wallis, Stefan Th. Gries (whose work, especially the 2020 paper on quantitative methods in contrastive linguistics, is central for my own methodological approach) and Jack Grieve.

In the grammar session, Tove Larsson presented a joint paper with Douglas Biber and Gregory Hancock on grammatical complexity in different spoken and written registers. This was very relevant for me, as I am working basically on the same topic but from a contrastive perspective. I had the chance to talk to her afterwards and she was very interested in exploring these tendencies in other languages as well.

Socialising

During the conference I had the chance to meet interesting people from many different regional and discipline areas, which I am very grateful for. Apart from many German linguistics, I got to know Katie Ireland, who teaches the use of the programming language R for corpus exploitation. I hope that we might be able to collaborate in the future, for example by inviting her to give a talk in our local Freiburg group of R-learners.

Summary

Summing up, I was positively surprised about how much I was able to take away from this conference and how many useful contacts I was able to make. I am very grateful for having been given the opportunity to attend the conference in person.

Hanna Mahler, 30.07.2022

Handwritten signature of Hanna Mahler in black ink.