Core vocabulary, borrowability, and entrenchment. A usage-based onomasiological approach

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This paper aims at assessing the validity of the claim that core vocabulary is highly resistant to borrowing. Though frequently mentioned in contact linguistics, historical linguistics and linguistic typology, this statement has not been subjected to much empirical testing. If we want to provide such a test in a methodologically sound way, we need both a quantitative measure of coreness and a method for quantifying borrowability. In this paper, we suggest a usage-based operationalization of coreness in terms of entrenchment, and of borrowability in terms of onomasiological success. Both measures are applied in a quantitative corpus-based study on the use of English person reference nouns in Dutch.

Relying on two large lemmatized and syntactically parsed newspaper corpora of Dutch (together comprising over one billion words), we take a concept-based approach to calculate variation in the borrowability of 150 English person reference nouns (*manager, babysitter, hooligan*). Using an onomasiological measure (cf. Speelman et al. 2003, Zenner et al. 2012), we define the borrowability of a loanword as the relative preference for the loanword vis-à-vis existing synonymous expressions. As concerns our operationalization of "coreness", we propose a usage-based approach to coreness, defining it as a continuous concept tightly connected to the notion of entrenchment. Crucially, we introduce a distinction between communicative entrenchment (based on frequency information) and experiential entrenchment (based on concept age).

Using mixed effect regression modeling, we assess the relative importance of the entrenchment-related predictors vis--vis a number of additional variables (e.g. speech economy, lexical competition, regional and stylistic variation) in explaining variation in the success of the English loanwords in our dataset. The regression model shows how there indeed exists an inversely proportional relationship between the success of the English nouns and the degree of coreness/entrenchment of the concept lexicalized by the loanword.