

Meanings of verbs vary widely across languages, but cross-linguistic comparative research has so far focused more on grammar than on meaning. As a result, our general knowledge about patterns of verb meaning in some domains is still relatively scarce. Despite that, some theories clearly predict that linguistic meaning has its limits, since there are aspects of reality which cannot be put into words or combinations of meaning elements which cannot be contained within a single word. Although such claims are general in character, in many cases they have not been empirically tested in diverse languages, so even if they point to important constraints, it is unclear if they can really be treated as universal rules. This project will focus on two such claims relating to limits of meaning, evaluating them in verbs of an understudied language – Maniq (a member of the Austroasiatic language family spoken in Thailand by a hunter-gatherer community of 300 speakers), which has a rare profile in terms of encoding meaning.

An exceptional property of Maniq is the fact that it has a high number of semantically specific verbs, used even in everyday contexts. For example, in the domain of eating verbs, it has five specific verbs expressing different types of eating actions (*hâw* ‘to eat soft things mostly by chewing’, *kap* ‘to eat hard objects that require biting’, *lik* ‘to eat by swallowing immediately’, *paŋ* ‘to eat and spit out hard elements’, and *hop* ‘to eat liquid foods’), and no general verb ‘to eat’. Speakers of Maniq are thus forced to choose between a specific verb every time they refer to the activity of eating. The same is true of many other domains in Maniq. Semantic specificity in verbs at the basic level of contrast is the norm in this language and is also characteristic of, for example, verbs of carrying, moving, placing, perception, and many others. Relevant to the present project, some Maniq verbs have meanings which are unexpected given previous literature, allowing to question previous generalizations about the proposed limits of meaning. For example, contrary to a frequently repeated claim that a rich vocabulary for different types of odors isn’t possible in any language, Maniq has about a dozen different verbs denoting specific smell qualities. Such a linguistic profile makes it a perfect test case for the above claims on general limits of meaning.

The first claim on the apparent limit of meaning addressed by the project concerns the inexpressibility of certain aspects of human facial appearance. Research suggests that people find it hard to talk about details of facial appearance, in particular in a way which would allow others to recognize the described person. However, we do not really know how speakers of different languages actually deal with this challenge and if their languages differ in the richness and specificity of facial appearance vocabulary. The project will address this knowledge gap and examine how easy it is to describe faces in Maniq, comparing it to Polish, a representative of the Indo-European language family. The investigation will consider different aspects of faces—invariant facial characteristics and facial gestures—because these two are processed differently by our neural system so they may differ with respect to language. The results will extend our knowledge of this understudied area in the cross-linguistic study of linguistic meaning and shed new light onto the topic of difficulty in verbalizing faces.

The second claim addressed by the project concerns the idea that verb meaning is constrained by a universal rule of “Manner-Result Complementarity”, which says that a single verb can express either manner (as in *scrub* and *amble*) or result (as in *break* and *descend*), but verbs that express both simultaneously are impossible. Though this constraint was proposed to hold in all of the world’s languages, so far most work in this area focused on English and there has been surprisingly little work outside the Indo-European family. The project will thus concentrate on Maniq and examine this claim in a highly debated area of ‘climb’ verbs, for the first time testing it in a language which is rich in specific ‘climb’ verbs and a culture where climbing itself is a common everyday activity. The results are expected to reveal previously undescribed patterns of meaning in ‘climb’ verbs, shedding new light on the complementarity rule and the broader issue of limits of meaning.

Together, the studies in this project will contribute to the answer to the question of whether the proposed limits of meaning are true limitations of human language or if they signal malleable constraints that can be overcome under certain linguistic and cultural conditions. The results will help extend our knowledge about both areas by adding information on an understudied language type and will shed light onto verb meaning generally.