

COMMITTED SUPPORT FOR YOUNG ACADEMICS



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Heike Behrens and Stefan Pfänder are engaged in an animated discussion about the next generation of young academics in linguistics. Both of them are firmly convinced that “doctoral candidates are young academics, not old students”. Heike Behrens and Stefan Pfänder wrote books and essays, led research projects, submitted successful applications for external funding and developed a range of projects in collaboration with other FRIAS fellows during their fellowships at the School of Language & Literature. In addition, they collaborated to put linguistics into practice. Linguistics is a fast moving field: while there are aspects of language that are best studied with the classic methods of the humanities, there are many domains where the study of language involves other disciplines. After all, human communication is not only the most interesting, but also one of the most complex achievements of mankind. It is therefore not surprising that linguists now cooperate with colleagues from medicine, genetics, anthropology, as well as cognitive, developmental or comparative psychology. At Freiburg, linguists and researchers from neighbouring disciplines collaborate in various third party funded projects, and the

FRIAS is an ideal place for them and their international partners to start up projects that overcome the traditional divides between disciplines and approaches.

But modern interdisciplinary linguistic research is only possible if our young researchers get the respective training. Since there are so many angles from which language can be studied, a multitude of methods is needed, but typically not taught at a particular university. Similarly, students from other disciplines typically learn little about the nature and complexity of human language or linguistic theory. Thus joint effort is needed to create the best of both worlds.

Stefan Pfänder and Heike Behrens are speakers of the research training group “Frequenzeffekte in der Sprache“ (Frequency effects in language), which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG GRK 1624). Together with nine colleagues from the different language departments and from cognitive science, they and their students and postdocs explore how frequency effects drive the establishment of linguistic categories as well as their variation in language acquisition, language processing and language

change. This very focussed doctoral program now acts as a role model for graduate studies in linguistics in general.

Above all, young academics at HPSL need to learn how to collaborate with each other. “The laboratory research we are in the process of setting up here takes up best practices from international research institutes,” explains Stefan Pfänder, “especially in enabling them to become independent from early on.” Heike Behrens continues, “I had my training at two Max Planck Institutes and want to bring the spirit that young scholars learn to develop their projects with colleagues from different disciplines and to be able to present their research to different target groups.” The aim of the HPSL is consequently to provide young academics with the tools they need to conduct successful, autonomous research, including wide-ranging methodological and theoretical knowledge. Doctoral candidates receive extensive support from two mentors grounded in different disciplines ranging from diverse fields such as cognitive science, philosophy, psychology, medicine and neuroscience.

The Hermann Paul School of Linguistics (HSPL) has initiated a restructuring of training available to doctoral candidates in linguistics and associated disciplines, in large part thanks to input from Heike Behrens and Stefan Pfänder during their time with FRIAS. As of 2012, the HPSL-program will be an international one since Freiburg and Basel unite forces. These benefits are now being felt by more than eighty HPSL doctoral candidates and associated postdocs as well as guest researchers. Recent examples of this collabora-

tion include Freiburg linguists such as FRIAS fellows Martin Hilpert and Lars Konieczny lecturing at the University of Basel, and External Senior Fellow Nick Ellis being attracted to Switzerland. The future for linguistics along the Upper Rhine looks bright indeed.

The intense exchange between young scholars and the FRIAS fellows is made possible because the third party funded PhD programs are located in a building close to Albertstraße that also hosts some FRIAS fellows. This provides an effective meeting ground in the desired ‘lab atmosphere’: PhD students do not need to ask and wait for appointments, but can often profit from day to day contact on the work floor or at workshops and talks. In addition, more than ten External Senior Fellows from the School of Language & Literature have offered customised tutorials for the doctoral candidates. “The best thing of all is that these well-known academics really enjoy it, and they take the work of our young people seriously, which in turn gives them a lot of self-esteem. We even got a pat on the back from the renowned psychologist Nick Ellis for our ‘talented young researchers’,” observes Stefan Pfänder enthusiastically. “Both groups want to communicate with each other, and it is wonderful that here they have both the space and the time to do so,” adds Heike Behrens.

These expectations are evident in HPSL’s open door policy to young academics from abroad. “Anyone with an interest in our programmes is welcome to visit,” says Heike Behrens. Freiburg and FRIAS colleagues Bernd Kortmann and Peter Auer are establishing a network of linguistic

research centres that is supposed to facilitate exchange. “We encourage cooperation with young researchers from Africa, the Caribbean and South America,” points out Stefan Pfänder, “and we are in a fortunate position to be able to invite them here.”

Stefan Pfänder is telling us about the latest exciting research into varieties of French in Senegal and the French Caribbean when there is a knock at the door. The visitor is Lars Konieczny, a cognitive scientist, psycholinguist and another former FRIAS fellow. He is accompanied by Daniel Müller from the “Frequency Effects” research training group who is having one of his regular “Milestone” talks with his supervisors and the head of the Graduate School. They talk about finalizing the dissertation, how to best to publish his thesis and how to and how to organize the post-doctoral phase. “We believe it is very important to hold regular meetings and fix the next steps so that we know how our young academics are progressing with their work,” explains Heike Behrens. We have no doubts that this collaborative, interdisciplinary environment helps doctoral candidates from Freiburg and Basel to prepare for a distinguished, international career in academia and beyond.



Heike Behrens,
Stefan Pfänder and
Lars Konieczny in
debate with a
doctoral candidate.
(f.r.t.l.)