

Linguistic Perspectives on the Expression of Necessity

Workshop Proposal for SLE 2026 (Osnabrück)

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Workshop Description

We propose a workshop dedicated to exploring how languages encode, interpret, and deploy the concept of necessity. Necessity is a pivotal notion within human communication, cutting across semantics, syntax, pragmatics and typology. It is realized through a wide variety of linguistic strategies, from modal verbs, adverbs and grammatical markers to holistic discourse constructions. Yet, because research on necessity has emerged in parallel across different subdisciplines, our collective understanding of this phenomenon remains fragmented. This workshop aims to bring together scholars from multiple theoretical and methodological traditions to examine necessity in language with a view to attaining a more integrated perspective.

Traditionally, logicians and formal semanticists have investigated necessity through the lens of modal logic, exploring relationships between necessity, possibility and contingency (see Prior 1957; Hintikka 1969; Kripke 1980). Their models provide rigor and abstraction but can sometimes remain detached from actual language use. Syntactic theories have examined how necessity interacts with clause type, tense, aspect or negation, noting that structural configurations often impose constraints on interpretation (see Chierchia 1985; Condoravdi 2002; De Haan 2015; Hacquard 2009, 2011, 2020; Stowell 2004; von Stechow 2003). What is missing is a venue where formal perspectives can dialogue with work that adopts more usage-based (e.g. Biber 2004; Flach 2020) or typological approaches (e.g. van der Auwera and Plungian 1998; Palmer 2001), ensuring a more comprehensive picture of necessity as both a cognitive and a communicative category.

Equally important, the workshop seeks to highlight the pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions of necessity. Expressions of necessity often vary in force depending on context: what counts as obligation, epistemic certainty, or interpersonal directive may shift with cultural norms and interactional dynamics (see Myhill and Smith 1995; Gibbard 2012). Understanding necessity in actual use requires careful attention to these pragmatic realities. By engaging with scholars in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, participants will gain a fuller appreciation for how necessity operates as both a linguistic and a social tool.

Typological and cross-linguistic perspectives can further enrich the dialogue. While necessity in many European languages is commonly associated with modal auxiliaries,

other language families rely on affixal morphology, clitics, adverbs, or particles to cover this semantic domain. These differences call into question universalist assumptions and raise key questions about the cognitive and communicative foundations of modality. A core objective of the workshop will be to bring typologists into sustained conversation with descriptivists and formalists, ensuring that fine-grained data is integrated into broader theoretical models.

The study of necessity also calls for interdisciplinary engagement. Beyond linguistics, necessity connects directly to philosophy, logic, cognitive science, and computational modeling. Philosophical inquiry distinguishes between metaphysical, epistemic and normative forms of necessity, while computational approaches require nuanced accounts of modality for natural language processing. This workshop will thus provide a platform for dialogue not only among linguists but also with scholars in related fields, promoting intellectual exchange at the boundaries of traditional disciplines.

We warmly invite scholars working on necessity from any theoretical, methodological, or lectal perspective to participate in this workshop. By creating a forum for collaboration across disciplinary divides, we aim to advance our collective understanding of how necessity is encoded and interpreted in human language. Contributions may address formal analyses, pragmatic usage, cross-linguistic diversity or interdisciplinary connections. Together, we hope to develop a richer, more comprehensive view of necessity as a linguistic universal that is always realized in locally specific ways.

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