

Dissolving boundaries: Continua across synchrony and diachrony, lexicon and syntax, in language contact

Workshop proposal for the 59th Annual Meeting of SLE Universität Osnabrück (26-29 August 2026)

Convenors

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1. Introduction

The study of language contact has long been structured by foundational dichotomies: the analysis of synchronic speech phenomena versus diachronic contact-induced change, on the one hand, and of lexical phenomena versus grammatical outcomes, on the other, have traditionally been conducted separately (Backus 2020b). While these divisions have provided analytical clarity, they risk obscuring the dynamic interplay that underlies contact-induced linguistic behaviour and change.

Building on usage-based approaches to language contact (Zenner et al. 2019; Backus 2015; 2020a; Hakimov & Backus 2021; Hakimov 2021; Lantto 2021), this workshop aims to dissolve such boundaries, framing code-switching, lexical borrowing, structural interference/borrowing, and calquing as phenomena distributed along interconnected continua – both across temporal axes and levels of linguistic structure – rather than as discrete phenomena. Through this lens, the workshop explores how synchronic usage and diachronic change are interconnected, as well as how lexical and syntactic mechanisms interact.

2. Theoretical premises

While earlier research attempted to account for different dimensions of language contact together, considering both temporal axes, both forms and functions of phenomena, and multiple levels of linguistic structure (e.g., Weinreich, 1953; Johanson, 2002; Matras, 2009; Muysken 2013), the usage-based paradigm most clearly rejects a strict separation between these domains and integrates them within a unitary account (Langacker 1987; Bybee 2010; 2023; Backus 2020b; Schmid 2020).

This approach views linguistic knowledge as a systematic inventory of units (or constructions), conceived as form-meaning pairings entrenched in speakers' memories through repeated use

and exposure (Langacker 1987; 2017; Goldberg 2006; Bybee 2010; Ibbotson 2013). Units vary in size, from single words to multiword sequences, and in schematicity, from fully lexically specific items, via partially schematic, to fully schematic constructions. A unit's level of entrenchment, and consequently its ease of activation during speech production, depends on its frequency of use: the more frequently a unit is used, the more deeply it becomes entrenched, and the more easily it can be retrieved.

This model has some crucial implications. Firstly, it dissolves the synchrony-diachrony divide: every linguistic element used synchronically both reflects past usage and has the potential to alter a speaker's mental representation or to become conventionalised within a speech community, thereby potentially leading to diachronic change (Díaz-Campos & Balasch 2023; Backus 2020a). Secondly, it erodes the traditionally strict boundary between lexicon and syntax, since similar mechanisms govern all kinds of units, allowing complex sequences to be stored, processed, and retrieved as holistic chunks.

Consequently, traditional oppositions among contact phenomena – whether based on their association with one temporal axis rather than the other, or with one level of linguistic structure instead of another – need to be reconceptualised as interrelated points along the continua summarised below.

2.1. The Synchrony-Diachrony Continuum

- Code-switching vs. borrowing

Contact linguistics has traditionally distinguished between code-switching – the synchronic alternation by a speaker of two or more languages within the same conversation – and lexical borrowing – the diachronic outcome whereby a lexical item from one language becomes established in another (Myers-Scotton 1992; Muysken 1995). However, not only is distinguishing a genuine instance of code-switching from a fully-fledged borrowing difficult, but a rigid distinction between the two may also be impractical for several reasons:

- a) Every synchronically used unit both reflects past usage and can immediately affect mental representations, thereby contributing to changes in its degree of entrenchment and conventionalisation (Langacker 1987; Backus 2020b).
- b) Entrenchment and conventionalisation are a matter of degree: interindividual variation in entrenchment levels can persist despite a certain degree of conventionalisation (Lantto 2015).
- c) Strong variation often persists between at least partially equivalent forms in the two languages (Muysken 2000; Hlavac 2006; Dal Negro 2015).
- d) Even when certain elements are well established, bilingual speakers may still recognise their 'foreignness' (Lantto 2015) and strategically use them in the other language for social or pragmatic purposes, much like typical code-switching (Backus 2005).
- e) Patterns can also shift direction: fossilised forms may regress and return to being variable features of speech due to sociolinguistic factors (Smith-Christmas 2016).

- Code-switching as a driving factor for contact-induced language change

Code-switching is rarely considered as a potential driver of language change, especially at the structural level. A few exceptions, however, have both theoretically and empirically examined how patterns of code-switching – both insertional and alternational (Muysken 2000) – can become conventionalised (Auer 1999; Gorla 2021), and how even structural patterns may be borrowed as a result of frequent code-switching (Backus 2005). Therefore, understanding interactional dynamics is crucial for explaining language change (Matras 2021).

2.1. *The Lexicon-Syntax Continuum*

As observed by Backus and Verschik (2012), traditional borrowability hierarchies claim that content words are more borrowable than function words, yet they fail to explain the reasons for this, intra-category variation, and why structural patterns are sometimes also “copied” (Johanson 2002). The authors suggest that copying operates along a continuum of semantic-pragmatic specificity and frequency: highly specific elements, or those well entrenched due to high frequency, are especially “attractive” for copying. Meaning and frequency thus predict borrowability better than parts of speech.

This perspective, grounded in usage-based models of language, blurs the traditional modular boundary between lexicon and syntax and positions multiword units as a critical testing ground for this continuum. Multiword units can be switched, borrowed, or calqued as holistic chunks, behaving like single processing units, if they are “attractive” (Backus & Verschik 2012). This explains a key empirical finding: multiword units can be more frequently borrowed or switched than single words (Backus 2003; Treffers-Daller 2025), as they often encode more specific meanings (e.g. ‘high school’ is more specific than ‘school’; Backus & Verschik 2012: 137). This challenges the traditional single-word bias in borrowing studies (Poplack 2018) and demonstrates that structurally complex items may behave like simpler ones when subject to the same social and cognitive mechanisms.

Interestingly, not only can specific multiword units be fully borrowed or calqued, but they can also undergo intermediate processes whereby globally copied morphemes and selectively copied patterns appear within a single instance (Johanson 2002; Backus & Verschik 2012).

The continuum is further exemplified by partially schematic units, which combine lexically fixed items with variable, abstract slots and can, in bilingual speech, accommodate material from multiple languages (Demirçay & Backus 2014; see also Ciccolone 2015).

Therefore, maintaining a strict separation between lexical and structural phenomena is untenable. Growing evidence highlights connections among code-switching, calquing, lexical borrowing, and structural borrowing (Backus & Dorleijn 2009; Doğruöz & Backus 2009). Reinforcing this view, recent studies emphasise the central role of multiword units in both code-switching and calquing and propose a continuum between the two, arguing that these phenomena are best explained by the same usage-based principles, rather than accounted for separately (Hennecke & Wiesinger 2025).

3. Call for abstracts

This workshop provides a forum to explore the continua outlined above, both empirically and theoretically. Our aim is to move beyond the mere classification of surface phenomena and to investigate the cognitive and social processes that underlie the full spectrum of contact-induced innovations, from single-word insertions to structural change. Ultimately, the workshop promotes a perspective on language contact as an arena in which synchrony and diachrony, cognition and sociality, and lexicon and syntax are continuously co-constructed.

We welcome papers for **20-minute presentations** that address, both empirically and theoretically, the dissolution of traditional boundaries in contact linguistics. Relevant topics include, but are not limited to:

- Theoretical and methodological challenges in distinguishing synchronic and diachronic phenomena, as well as lexical and syntactic phenomena in language contact situations;
- Empirical studies of contact phenomena, including code-switching, borrowing, calquing, and structural interference, considered along the synchrony–diachrony and/or lexicon–syntax continua;
- Empirical evidence of the sedimentation of code-switching patterns;
- Multiword units in language contact phenomena;
- Discourse markers at the interface of code-switching and conventional patterns;
- Comparative studies across different contact settings;

Studies employing diverse methodologies – corpus-based, experimental, or a combination of the two – are encouraged.

- Submission guidelines

Please, send your provisional abstracts (max. **300 words**, excluding references) to the workshop convenor Valentina Del Vecchio (v.delvecchio@tilburguniversity.edu) before **17 November 2025**.

After the submission, if the workshop is accepted by the SLE organising committee, the authors will need to submit their final abstracts by **15 January 2026** through the EasyChair platform.

- Important dates

17 November 2025: deadline for the submission of provisional abstracts;

20 November 2025: notification of (provisional) acceptance and workshop submission;

15 December 2025: notification of workshop acceptance/rejection;

15 January 2026: deadline for abstract submission via EasyChair.

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