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Methodological Challenges of Semantic and Pragmatic Studies in Eurolinguistics

Abstract

Since it is not possible to respect all European languages in one single study, this contribution suggests that a study termed *Eurolinguistic* should at least include a representative set of languages and cultures with respect to a historical-anthropological-cultural, a geographical and a language-synchronic definition. Concerning semantics and pragmatics, a variety of natural-language corpora, data-elicited results, metalinguistic sources, word-and-situation matching and the morphological composition of (networks of) lexemes may be used as cross-linguistic material. While qualitative/exclusive features are easy to determine, quantitative/statistical/scalar data require that a feature is defined somehow: it is suggested to define something the 33%-range around the median value as one quantitative feature. For the number of possible variants in a certain variable, the script-flexibility formula is developed. To be labeled *prominent*, a feature should be present in at least two-thirds of the cases (informant answers or corpus hits). To be labeled *European*, a feature should be present in at least two-thirds of the selected countries. Findings lead to the mapping of Europragmatic features that looks like the flight of a bumblebee.

Sommaire

Comme il n'est pas possible de respecter toutes les langues européennes dans une seule étude, cette contribution propose qu'une étude dite *eurolinguistique* doit inclure au moins une sélection représentative de langues et cultures en rapport avec les définitions historique-anthropologique-culturelle, géographique et linguistique-synchronique. En ce qui concerne la pragmalinguistique, une variété de corpus naturels de langue, des résultats de langage élicité, des sources métalinguistiques, les connections parole-situation and la composition morphologique de (réseaux de) lexèmes peuvent servir de matériel linguistique. Tandis que les traits qualitatifs/exclusifs se déterminent de manière facile, des données quantitatives/statistiques/scalaires demandent une certaine définition: il est proposé de définir comme trait l'étendue de 33% autour de la valeur médiane. Quant au nombre de variants possibles pour une certaine variable, la formule de la flexibilité de script est développée. Pour être classifié *prominent* un trait devrait être présent dans au moins deux tiers des cas (réponses d'informants ou score de corpus). Pour être classifié *européen* un trait devrait être présent dans au moins deux tiers des pays sélectionnés. Des recherches mènent à la cartographisation de traits europragmatiques qui a l'air du vol d'un bourdon.

Zusammenfassung

Da es nicht möglich ist, alle europäischen Sprachen in einer einzigen Studie zu berücksichtigen, schlägt dieser Beitrag vor, dass eine Studie, die sich *eurolinguistisch* nennt, zumindest eine repräsentative Auswahl an Sprachen und Kulturen einschließt, und zwar mit Bezug auf eine historisch-anthropologisch-kulturelle, eine geographische und eine sprachsynchrone Definition. Bezüglich Semantik und Pragmatik können eine Vielfalt von Korpora natürlicher Sprache, Ergebnisse experimenteller Datengewinnung, metasprachliche Quellen, Wort-Situation-Verknüpfungen und die morphologische Zusammensetzung von (Netzwerken an) Wörtern als Sprachmaterial dienen. Während qualitative/exklusive Merkmale einfach zu bestimmen sind, erfordern quantitative/statistische/skalare Daten, dass ein Merkmal irgendwie definiert wird: es wird vorgeschlagen, die 33%-Bereich um den Medienwert herum als ein quantitatives Merkmal zu definieren. Für die Anzahl von möglichen Varianten für eine bestimmte Variable wird die Skript-Flexibilitäts-Formel entwickelt. Um als *prominent* bezeichnet zu werden, sollte ein Merkmal in mindestens zwei Drittel der Fälle (Informantenantworten oder Korpusstreffer) vorhanden sein. Um als *europäisch* bezeichnet zu werden, sollte ein Merkmal in mindestens zwei Drittel der ausgewählten Länder vorhanden sein. Bisherige Ergebnisse führen zu einer Kartographierung europragmatischer Merkmale, die wie ein Hummelflug aussehen.

1. Introductory Remarks

As noted in the volume's introduction and elsewhere (Grzega 2012a: 15-23, 2012b: 12f., 2013: 2-4), there are various definitions for Europe (geographical, political, cultural-anthropological), European feature (exclusively or non-exclusively European), and European languages (inclusion or exclusion of migrant languages, inclusion or exclusion of varieties exported from Europe, inclusion or exclusion of non-standard varieties). I have also noted (Grzega 2012b: 13f., 2013: 3-4) that, since it is hardly possible to respect all European languages in one single study, at least a representative set of languages and cultures should be included, which should respect the language-groups within the following classifications (or at least within one of these classifications, depending on the question):

- a. historical-anthropological-cultural: more central as well as more peripheral countries
- b. geographical: northern, western, southern and eastern European countries
- c. historical-linguistic: all major Indo-European language groups (Germanic, Romance, Balto-Slavic) and the major non-Indo-European language family (Finno-Ugric)
- d. synchronic linguistic: Western European languages (Standard Average European), East-Central European languages, the Balkan languages, and, for *Europe lato sensu*, Russian

The largest problem for European-wide results, of course, is the consistent use of one single method to gather information on a wide range of languages for semantic and pragmatic variables. I have dedicated my latest book (Grzega 2013) to this question (cf. also the preliminary remarks in Grzega 2012b). This paper sums up the main points, presenting already used as well as new examples. (Abbreviations used are according to the ISO 639-1 international language codes and ISO 3166 country codes).

2. How Do We Get Comparable National Data?

2.1. Natural-Language Corpora

The Internet enabled us access to a virtually infinite amount of naturally occurring spoken and written language data. But we have to make sure that the data stems from comparable extralinguistic contexts and that the deep structure of concrete surface structures are the same or at least highly comparable. Furthermore, there is not only a relation between form and function, but also a relation between one form and other forms. Natural-language corpora enables us to pick out all sorts of collocations (phrases as well as the co-occurrence of not directly neighbored words).

2.2. Data-Eliciting Methods: DCTs, MLJTs, SICSs and Semantic Differentials

DCTs (discourse completion test, with one brick to be completed [cf. Blum-Kulka/House/Kasper 1989]) and similar tests (e.g. the discourse production task, with a full dialog to be created) as well as MLJTs (meta-linguistic judgement tasks) have become classical tools in cross-cultural pragmatics, despite criticism that should not be ignored (cf., e.g., Geluykens 2007: 35f.). In a sense, also the—idealized or parodied—representation of spoken language in written literary genres and the—idealized or parodied—representation of spoken language in movies are special variants of the discourse production task.

Since the target of cross-linguistic analyses is commonly a more general and abstract one, the semi-expert interview on communication strategies (SICS) was suggested as an alternative complementary technique (cf. Grzega/Schöner 2008). A SICS presents typical situations and has

informants judge strategies as frequent (polite) or infrequent (impolite). The informants are not linguistic researchers, but people who are, due to their biographies, very much aware of cross-linguistic differences. They are asked to both choose from a list of communicative offered patterns and to add further information.

Still another technique is the semantic differential, developed in the 1950's by Charles E. Osgood and his team. A number of variants exist, but the core idea is always that informants mark the association between a word and a category on a scale, either a two-dimensional scale (e.g. Osgood's universal categories good—bad, active—passive, strong—weak) or a one-dimensional scale (e.g. by using nouns that express universal needs). The resulting arithmetic means show the group connotations of a word (cf. Osgood/Suci 1955, Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum 1957, Osgood 1964); with small groups, though, the median should be used (cf. Grzega 2013: 37f.). A technique that may be conceived as a non-classical semantic differential (but well established technique in sociology) are Likert-scaled tests, where informants have to say whether they fully agree, rather agree, rather disagree or fully disagree with a statement. With respect to connotations, this refers to statements of the pattern “X is {QUALITY}”.

2.3. Metalinguistic Sources, Word-and-Situation Matching and Morphological Composition

Data may also be collected through metalinguistic explanations, e.g.

- the representation of spoken language in language, or conversation, guides (cf. Grzega 2012a: 220-260, 2013: 111-122)
- reports from participant observers and non-participant observers (including critical incidents)

Still another way of getting pragmalinguistic “insights” is the look at seemingly non-pragmalinguistic vocabulary. But the look at lexemes and networks of lexemes can also say something about world perception and thus pragmalinguistic aspects. Therefore, the use of dictionaries is valuable to look at networks of lexemes from the same conceptual field. Even the look at one single word can be helpful, for instance by analyzing the motivation of a word-coinage (its transparent morphemes, as it were).

Finally, also asking people to connect or match terms with extralinguistic situations can be fruitful. Requesting such a matching could look like this: “What would you expect someone you call a friend to do in the following situation?”. Some of the questionnaires used by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2009) go in this direction.

3. When Is a Semantic or Pragmatic Feature European?

3.1. General Remarks

Strictly speaking, a trait is European only if it is present in 100% of the European languages or cultures¹. Such a conceptualization, though, will probably not lead to many Europragmatic traits, and it will lead to even fewer traits if these variants should additionally define Europe in contrast to other civilizations. Such a conceptualization also ignores that humans think in prototypicalities. Therefore, a more helpful approach is to look for traits that are “typical” of European languages or cultures. Analyzing two variants A and B, it seems sensible to make three “result-groups” of similar size: If the A:B-ratio is from 100:0 to 67:33, then variant A (or +A) is typical; if the A:B-ratio is

¹ This is how Haarmann defines *europeme* (1976).

from 0:100 to 33:67, then variant B is typical; if the A:B-ratio is from 66:34 to 34:66, then we have a balanced situation. If the analysis includes just one feature A, then only a +A:–A-ratio from 100:0 to 67:33 allows us to say that the feature is present. In other words, a variant can be labeled European if it occurs in at least two thirds of a representative selection of countries or languages. This shall also hold true when more than two variants are involved.

Example 1: A Lexemic Mini-Network

An interesting analysis is the field of economic terminology. Let us take 15 representatively selected countries with one official language and have a look at the opposing lexically related designations for those that regularly give money to people who work for them and those who work for someone from whom they get money for this work. Only in very few cases is there a semantic hierarchy, with the former being the ‘work-giver’ and the latter the ‘work-maker, worker’. In many European languages, though, the former is frequently in a “better” semantic position than the latter: a mildly “better” semantic position can be defined for the active–passive pair ‘the one who employs, employ·er’: ‘the one who is employed, employ·ee’, such as in E. *employer:employee*, Fr. *employeur:employé*; a strongly “better” position is a pair where the employer is lexicalized as the “work-giver” and the employee as the “work-taker”, such as German (*Arbeitgeber:Arbeitnehmer*). For German, the word-choice was already criticized by Marx and Engels (cf. Wunsch 1962). A third group of word-pairs is formed by semantically hierarchical equality, i.e. where both lexemes express an active contribution to the working process.

1a.	“work·give·er”	↔	“work·er”, “work·make·er”
hu:	munka·ad·ó	↔	munká·s
pl:	praco·daw·ca	↔	pracow·nik
ee:	töö·and·ja	↔	töö·taja
1b.	“work·give·er”	↔	“work·lend·er”
it:	da·tore di lavore	↔	presta·tore di lavore
1c.	“work·give·er”	↔	“work·accept·er, work·adopt·er”
hu:	munka·ad·ó	↔	munka·vállal·ó
2.	“employ·er”	↔	“employ·ed”
fr:	employ·eur	↔	employ·é
en:	employ·er	↔	employ·ee
ro:	angaja·tor	↔	angaja·t
cs:	zaměstna·vatel	↔	zaměstna·nec
sk:	zamestná·vatel	↔	zamestna·nec
es:	empleador	↔	empleado
pt:	empregador	↔	empregado
3.	“work·give·er”	↔	“work·take·er”
de:	Arbeit·geb·er	↔	Arbeit·nehm·er
nl:	werk·gev·er	↔	werk·nem·er
sv:	arbeits·giv·are	↔	arbeits·tag·are
dk:	arbejds·giv·er	↔	arbejds·tag·are
si:	delo·daja·lec	↔	delo·jema·lec

We can thus define three groups (white = no hierarchy, light-gray = mild hierarchy, dark-gray = strong hierarchy):

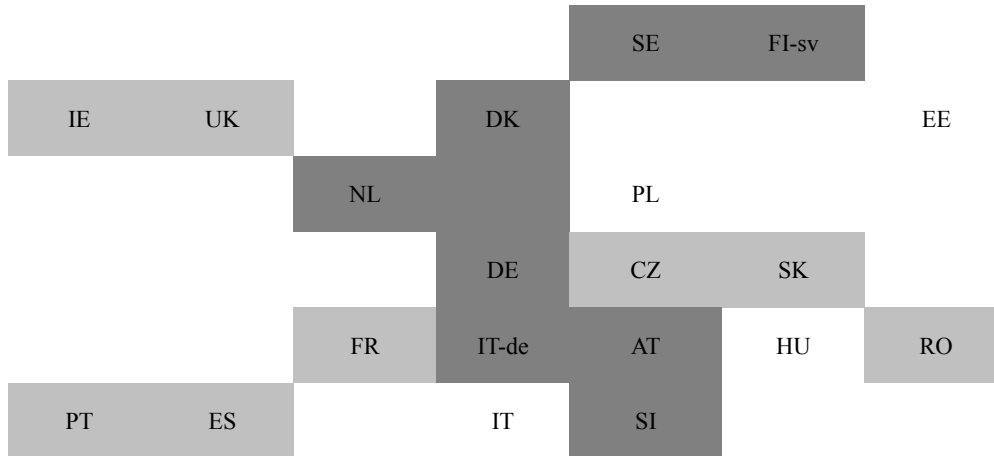


Fig. 1

None of the three groups isolatedly can be said to be European. But the list shows that in a lot of European languages there is an absence of lexicalizing this relationship as a partnership on equal levels. The money-giver is mostly lexicalized in a way that makes him more “active” or “giving” than the “passive” or “receiving” work-giver, namely in 16 of these 20 nations. Actually, in some languages, the work-giver is lexicalized as the work-taker and the work-taker/money-giver as the work-giver. In more than two thirds of the countries, the official language shows the verbalization of a hierarchical conceptualization of this two players in the economic world (only in Polish and Finnish, the usual way seems to abstain from hierarchical expressions). This also shows us one of the lenses through which Europeans (as well other, though not necessarily all, civilizations) look at the economic world. Here we come very near to networks of metaphors in George Lakoff’s sense (cf., e.g., Lakoff 1987).

Example 2: Collocations

The strong financial focus of societal issues may also be shown in an analysis of collocations of words for ‘save, not use, use less’ with or without accompanying nouns. I processed Google searches for ‘save’ in the respective infinitive (E. *save*, G. Du. *sparen*, Swed. *spara*, Fr. *épargner*, It. *risparmiare*, Hung. *félreteszni*) on sites in the major administrative language of the following specific countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, and the UK. Then I had a look at the first 25 hits of words. The verbs were originally not financial terms. As far as I can see these words could originally only be used in connection with a real good as object or target of a purchasing process. You could “preserve oil” or “preserve money for oil”. But the purely monetary meaning (without the connection to a specific good) has become the most prominent one. It has even become so prominent that in all countries that were investigated occurrences without a noun referred exclusively to the saving of money.

	alone (in the sense of 'money')	+ 'money' / 'expens- ses' / 'sum' / amount	+ percent- age	+ 'energy'	+ 'electric- al pow- er'	+ 'petrol'	+ 'water'	+ 'heat'	+ 'battery'	+ 'environ- ment'	+ 'time' / 'month'	+ 'breath'
DE	18	3		3		1						
UK	6	15	1			1				1		1
FR	25											
IT	14	2	2	7								
HU	6	7		3							9	
PL	13	6		2	1		1	1	1			
SE	16	6		1			2					

Fig. 2

Example 3: Likert-Scaled Statements

Many Likert scales include 4 degrees: “fully disagree”, “rather disagree”, “rather agree”, “fully agree”. Sometimes statements are like pieces of connotative information. We can convert the figures, which are percentages, into an index again (possible maximum: 100). Only the two degrees on the agree side can indicate the presence of a connotation. Occasionally, elements of the Eurobarometer questionnaires edited by the European Commission are formulated in a way that they can be considered variants of a semantic differential, namely when they have the form “X is good” or another adjective. An example are the Questions 1.1 and 1.2 from Flash Eurobarometer 362: “Do you think that having the euro is a good or a bad thing for your country?” and “Do you think that having the euro is a good or a bad thing for the EU?”. The overall answers of each country using the euro is illustrated in the following map (dark gray = good was given by at least two thirds of the interviewees with both questions; light gray = good was given by at least two thirds of the interviewees only with the second question).

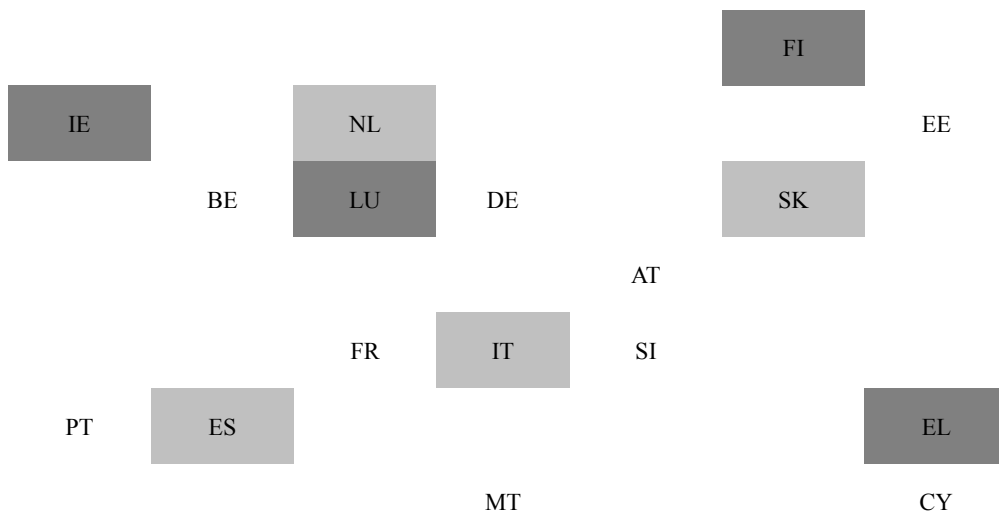


Fig. 3

The connotative feature “Euro = good” is prominent in less than two thirds of the countries analyzed—even less than half of the countries. Although, there is no country in which at least two thirds of the informants voted “Euro = bad”, the result is nevertheless historically remarkable,

viewing that the euro once was a strong symbol for creating a sense of commonness among Europeans (cf. Wagner 2006). In other words: a semantic-pragmatic European feature has disappeared over time.

Further Remarks

The approaches we have used so far will make the classification of a phenomenon as European much easier when it comes to nominal or qualitative data, or variants (= presence of features). It is not that easy with quantitative data. With quantitative data (= intensities of features), we first need to verify whether the cross-cultural differences in the prominence of a feature are statistically significant or not. For this purpose, a chi-square test (χ^2 test) has to be applied. Once differences within Europe or between Europe and other cultures are shown to be significant, we can begin to define the data that can be considered typically European. This is shown in the next section.

3.2. Scalar Indexes

For reasons of facilitation we may suggest to convert values into scales with a maximum of 100. Then the distance from some sort of middle value seems helpful here. Statisticians have suggested to use the so-called median especially when dealing with small numbers of values (anything below 100). The median is found if you go step by step from both extremes of an ordered set of numerical values toward the middle². As an example, let's assume a row of the following values: 75, 70, 70, 69, 67, 65, 35. Here, the median is 69. The natural next question is then: How far away from this median should all values be allowed to be for being considered the same feature? I have suggested the 33-point range around the median (i.e. up to 16.5 points, or 16-17%, deviation under and above the median). Then again, I have suggested to speak of a European feature if at least two thirds of the values, or countries, are within the accepted range around the median.

Example 4 (cf. Grzego 2013: 64-66)

A typical textlinguistic website device to create coherence are internal links. In one study I analysed internal links on Wikipedia Talk pages in a corpus of contributions by authors whose nationality could be identified. The next figure presents the distribution of internal links per line by Wikipedians of various nationalities.

² In an odd number of values, the middle value is the median. In an even number of values, there is not one middle value, but two values coalesce if you go from the extremes to the middle; in this case, the median is the sum of the two middle values divided by two.

	internal links	lines	links/l.	index	
DE	59	294	0.2007	100	DE
AT	42	250	0.1680	84	AT
RU	50	302	0.1656	82	RU
RO	47	285	0.1649	82	RO
CH-it	55	342	0.1608	80	CH-it
US	30	215	0.1395	70	US
FR	30	256	0.1172	58	FR
UK	36	315	0.1143	57	UK
HU	26	228	0.1140	57	HU
CO	30	264	0.1136	57	CO
ES	33	301	0.1096	55	ES
IT	26	256	0.1016	51	IT
BE-fr	36	370	0.0973	48	BE-fr
CH-fr	21	224	0.0938	47	CH-fr
MX	18	210	0.0857	43	MX
SE	18	216	0.0833	42	SE
IE	19	231	0.0823	41	IE
BE-nl	19	233	0.0815	41	BE-nl
NL	18	234	0.0769	38	NL
PL	17	232	0.0733	37	PL
CH-de	11	235	0.0468	23	CH-de

Fig. 4

A chi-square test reveals that the differences are extremely statistically significant ($\chi^2=70.1794$; $df=20$; $p<0.0001$). The European median is 51. The 33%-range around it covers more than 66% of the European countries (from France with 58 points to Poland with 37 points); so we can speak of a European feature here.

I have suggested to convert quantitative data into scales from 0 to 100 to illustrate the spread among two variants. For cases where the scale has no upper limit, e.g. if we check the quantity of just one certain feature in a written or spoken text, I have suggested the following. Zero instances are converted into 0; 100 equals the highest score of a European language or culture (included in the EuroLinguistic study).

Aside from scales with open-end there may also be scales that do not have a set zero-point. Let us suppose we want to find the association of *old*. The lowest answer will not be 0 and not even 1 (year). In a way, the scale is also open-ended. We have already seen that the highest European value could be determined as 100. In this instance, with an open-end-and-open-start scale also 0 must be defined. One suggestion is to use the lowest European value as definition for 0. The interval between the lowest and the highest European value will then define the 0-to-100 scale.

3.3. Script-Flexibility

Another aspect to determine is how fixed the forms of slots are. Are there very clear rules for the choice of a form for a certain slot or is there flexibility in the choice of forms? How rigid is a script? It would be advantageous for comparisons if we could work with figures here, too. These figures would represent the script-flexibility/rigidity rate. The value 1 could stand for one variant for a specific slot in a specific script (respecting the situational context), 2 for two variants, etc. In other words: the lower the value, the less the variability, the lower the script-flexibility (or the higher the script-rigidity). However, two variants is not always two variants, three variants not always three

variants, etc.: If a variant A occurs 30 times, a variant B 30 times and a variant C 30 times, this is different from a situation where a variant A occurs 80 and variants B and C 5 times each or a situation where variant A and B occur 40 times each and C 10 times. The first case is an ideal case of 3 variants, the second case is close to a one-variant situation with a few aberrant uses, and the third is close to a two-variant situation with a few aberrant uses. This should be expressed in the script-flexibility rate. It is clear that a formula that expresses this must work with the mathematical differences between the single variant tokens, which are then somehow subtracted from the figure that is the number of variants. We can express this in a mathematical formula:

$$\sigma = n - \left(\frac{\sum_{i=1, j=1}^{i=n, j=n} \sqrt{(X_i - X_j)^2}}{2} \right) - 1$$

with n being the number of variants (types) that occur in this slot, x being the fraction that a variant occurs (token ratio).

Example 5 (cf. Grzega 2013: 71-75)

An analysis of 343 contributions at plenary sessions of the EU parliament revealed 9 different types of opening patterns. They were distributed as shown in the table (with script-flexibility rates):

	tokens	var1	var2	var3	var4	var5	var6	var7	var8	var9	no. var	script-flex/rig
IE	24	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	1	0.00
RO	46	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	1	0.00
UK	27	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	1	0.00
CS	14	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	1	0.00
PL	23	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	1	0.00
SK	14	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.93	2	0.14
ES	25	0.00	0.08	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.92	2	0.16
SE	14	0.00	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.86	2	0.28
IT	40	0.68	0.00	0.23	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.00	5	1.00
AT	23	0.09	0.22	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.65	4	1.04
HU	32	0.28	0.09	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.56	4	1.31
FR	26	0.15	0.15	0.19	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.50	4	1.91
DE	35	0.23	0.09	0.14	0.03	0.03	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.49	6	2.05

Fig. 5

A chi-square test reveals, however, that these differences cannot be labeled statistically significant ($\chi^2=4.338$; $df=12$; $p=0.976$).

4. Conclusion

To sum it up again: In order to be labeled *prominent*, a feature should be present in at least two-thirds of the cases (informant answers or corpus hits). In order to be labeled *European*, a feature should be present in at least two-thirds of the selected countries.

If we do not find a European commonality, we may at least be able to find cluster-distributions of variants in Europe, which will also help us to, first, become aware and, second, understand the communicative diversity within Europe. But the more variables we analyse, the higher the chance to also realize the Europragmatic commonalities. In my 2013 book, I have illustrated 36 Europragmatic commonalities, whose distribution, or density, I have visualized as the flight of the Europragmatic bumblebee (and the addition of the 2 Europragmatic features added here do not essentially change the picture):

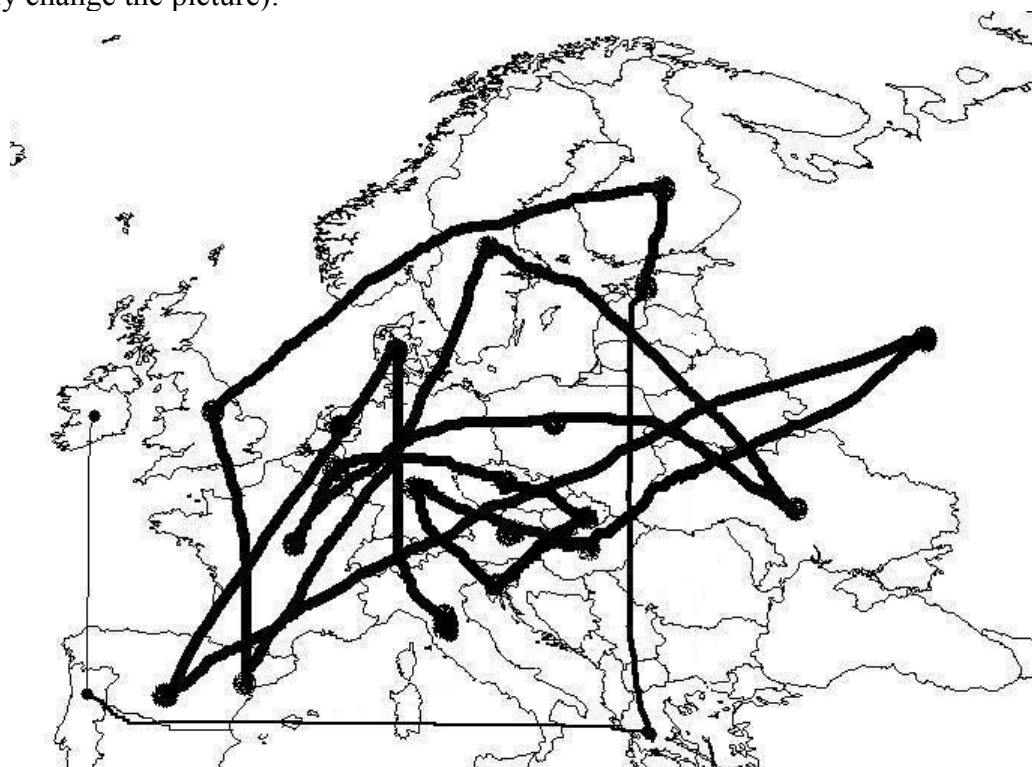


Fig. 6

The Europragmatic bumblebee begins its flight in Italy, then continues zigzag, without losing much weight, through many parts of Europe. But from Estonia to Greece, it visibly loses weight, and still loses more when coming to the pragmalinguistically least European countries, Portugal and Ireland.

The area-individual and trans-areal features may not only be used to acquire a better “passive” understanding of linguaculture-dependend cognitive bases, but also help to improve the acquisition of active intercultural skills. For instance, they can be incorporated in a concept of teaching English truly as a European or global means of communication, such as Basic Global English (cf., e.g., Grzega 2008a and <http://www.basicglobalenglish.com>; cf. also Grzega 2008b). The results of Eurosemantics and Europragmatics can certainly play a vital role in achieving European or global citizenship.

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