

## **Prof. Dr. Geoffrey Haig (Universität Bamberg)**

### **Explaining the “Avoid Lexical A”-constraint: Lexical semantics, or information management in discourse?**

**Vortrag am FREITAG, den 21.06.13 um 14 Uhr c.t.  
Raum S 227 / Schellingstraße 3 /VG**

In a landmark paper published some 25 years ago, Du Bois (1987b) suggested that in natural discourse, there is a cross-linguistically universal tendency to avoid transitive subjects (A) expressed through full NPs, a constraint generally known as “Avoid Lexical A”. Subsequent research on areally and genetically diverse languages has largely confirmed the empirical generalization: across most texts, considerably less than 20% of transitive subjects are full NPs. Du Bois (2003a, 2003b) maintains that Avoid Lexical A follows from considerations of information management in discourse, essentially building on the insights of Chafe, Givón, and associates. More recently, however, doubts have been raised (Haspelmath 2006, Everett 2009, Kibrik 2011) regarding the validity of this line of explanation. In this paper, I present evidence from ongoing research in collaboration with Stefan Schnell (Haig & Schnell 2013), drawing on spoken language data from corpora of endangered languages. We assess the validity of different explanations, concluding that Du Bois’ explanation in terms of information management in discourse is not correct; a relatively simple semantic feature [+/-human] turns out to be a better predictor of argument realization, and is largely independent of syntactic function.