

Crossing Borders 2013

The Volkswagen Foundation and Its International Focus



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Berlin – An Inspiring Environment for Linguistics Research

The Transatlantic Fellowship Program has enabled Dr. Seunghun Lee to swap his desk in Connecticut for a year of research at the Berlin Center for General Linguistics.

To the visitor, Dr. Seunghun Lee's office leaves a rather austere impression – it is devoid of all adornment: simple desk, bare white walls. A closer look, though, reveals that the dark blue outdoor shoes beside the desk have been changed for more comfortable slippers, an indication that the Korean-born scholar might be staying for some time. On the desktop a "Duden" dictionary, numerous other reference works, and text books on linguistics lay around in profusion.

Lee often works quite long hours at the Berlin Center for General Linguistics (Zentrum für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, ZAS). The 38-year-old linguist has resided in the German capital since summer 2012, on a research stay funded by the Volkswagen Foundation's transatlantic fellowship program for humanities scholars and the American Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. "I draw inspiration from being able to look out of my window over the heart of Berlin", says Lee. And, indeed, the ZAS is located right in the middle of the historically important district around Checkpoint Charlie and Friedrichstraße. During his stay in Berlin, though, Lee is living in the more colorful student quarter of Neukölln, a neighborhood where he has come to feel quite at home.

His work, on the other hand, has to do with a totally different region. He is investigating Tsonga, a South African language spoken by some four million people. Lee takes this language to investigate the phonology-syntax interface – the relation between sentence and tone structures, and the means of expression they give rise to. For example, the contrast between a simple statement and a question, which differ not only in sentence structure but also in the tone they are spoken in. "Tson-

ga lends itself particularly well to my research because it is a written language and its sentence structure is well documented", Lee explains.

When asked about why he became so interested in finding out what distinguishes one language from another, he answers: "I grew up bilingual: German and Korean. Later, at school and during my studies I went on to learn English, Japanese and Chinese. That left a lasting impression on me and shaped my thinking." Lee was born in Krefeld as the son of Korean parents. The first eight years of his life were spent in Germany, before the family then moved back to Korea, where he graduated from school and later from university. One of the subjects he studied at the university in Seoul was "German as a Foreign Language". "One reason I find the German language so attractive and expressive is because the sentence structure is so variable, with its combinations of principal and subordinate clauses", explains the linguist with a smile.

In the meantime, Seunghun Lee has spent eleven years working as a researcher in the U.S., where he is Assistant Professor for Linguistics and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at the Central Connecticut State University. He is one of the first four U.S. postdoc fellows who have benefited from the Foundation's program, which at first aimed at supporting young German researchers who wanted to spend time researching at American institutions. Then, in 2012, the program was extended "in the other direction" by grants of the Mellon Foundation.

This proved to be a stroke of luck for Lee: "The ZAS is one of the top research addresses for linguistics worldwide. It not only attracts experts from



Facets of a one-year research sojourn: Linguist Seunghun Lee takes advantage of the library services at the Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm Center (right); preparing for a presentation at the Center for General Linguistics/ZAS (top); discussing problems of language acquisition with a guest of the Center, Professor Peter Jordens from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nimwegen (bottom). The weekly "prosody lunch" (center) is an informal meeting for "talking shop" among colleagues Prof. Dr. Hubert Truckenbrodt and Dr. Fatima Hamlaoui from ZAS (front left and right), and Dr. Satoshi Tomioka, Associate Professor of Linguistics and Cognitive Science, University of Delaware, (background right).

around the globe, it also combines different areas of linguistics under one roof – including my specialty of prosody"; behind his spectacles you can see his eyes light up with enthusiasm. Prosody is the study of speech characteristics like intonation, word and sentence emphasis, as well as patterns of speech tempo, rhythm and pauses.

"When I asked the institute management back home whether I could take leave to spend a whole year in Berlin the response was overwhelmingly positive." Seunghun Lee stresses: "My supervisors were all in favor. They know that my work at ZAS would lead to networking with scholars from all over the world." Indeed, this is one of the aims of the program. Soon after his arrival Lee organized a workshop with the title: "Syntax-Phonology

Interface from a Cross-linguistic Perspective". A dozen colleagues from different countries came to participate in a discussion on the possibilities for archiving their copious amounts of data and on the syntax and prosody of various languages.

This is not Lee's first time at ZAS: In 2009 he visited the Berlin institute as a DAAD scholarship holder. During his renewed stay he has been able to refresh some of the contacts he made on that occasion. "On Thursdays we get together for a 'prosody lunch', and Tuesdays I meet up with my reading group to discuss the latest journals." He then adds: "That's most enjoyable, and at the same time it helps to catch up on new developments".

Mareike Knoke