Speech Acts in Grammar and Discourse (SPAGAD)

The SPAGAD project will investigate speech acts, the basic linguistic units with communicative function. It is made possible by recent breakthroughs in our understanding of speech acts as devices to change the world by establishing new commitments and constrain the future development of conversation.

The project will propose a formal model for speech acts. In the light of this model it will investigate the role of speech acts in three areas. It will elucidate their role in grammar in typologically diverse languages: how they are expressed by morphological, syntactic and prosodic means, how expressions like adverbials and clause-embedding verbs can operate on them, and how they can be integrated in a formal model of the syntax/semantics interface. It will investigate speech acts in discourse: how they are used to enrich the common ground, how they are employed to negotiate conflicts in the development of conversation, how questions, contrastive topics and discourse particles function as devices that restrict the development a discourse can take, and how the choice of one speech act out of a set of alternatives creates pragmatic effects like bias in questions or politeness in commands. And it will explore speech acts in communication: What are the societal norms of different speech acts, like the prohibition against asserting falsehoods, which strategies can increase or decrease the commitments of speakers, how does the context influence the type of commitments, how do social groups within one language community differ, what are the differences across language communities, how are the societal norms that come with speech acts acquired?

The SPAGAD project will have a major impact on linguistic semantics and pragmatics; it will reconceive them by a model theory based on commitments, rather than truth. Due to the pivotal role of speech acts, it will offer new perspectives for syntax, discourse studies, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and the philosophy of language.