The English *rob/steal* alternation and its German equivalents

This talk explores various alternations found with stealing verbs in German and English. I show that alternations of both languages are sensitive to three types of sources, distinguished by their degree of animacy and sentience. A contrastive analysis shows that German employs two different patterns reminiscent of the English *rob* variant, both of which exhibit subtle syntactic and pragmatic differences from English.

Acts of thievery are interesting for studies on argument alternations, because many languages allow the speaker to assign prominence to either the stolen goods or the source of the goods. The most well-studied alternation in this domain involves the syntax associated with *rob* and *steal*. With *steal,* the goods are the direct object and the source is in a *from* PP (*steal goods from source*), whereas with *rob*, the source is direct object and the goods are in an *of* PP (*rob source of goods*).

Three types of sources must be distinguished to account for the *rob/steal* alternation in English. Animate (human) sources can occur in the *rob* variant with or without the goods in an *of* PP (*she robbed the man*), while inanimate sources may not occur in the rob variant (*she robbed the table*). A third type of source includes non-human entities which have properties of both animate and inanimate entities, such as banks and stores. These must be distinguished because they occur in the *rob* variant, but only marginally with the goods (*she robbed the bank (??of money)*). These distinctions among members of role complexes demonstrate the influence of perspecitivization on argument realization and must be integrated into theories on semantic roles.

In German, the *rob* variant can be construed in two ways. One construal is syntactically quite similar to English, differing only in that the *of* PP in English is a genitive NP in German (*sie beraubt ihn-ACC der Sachen-GEN*). It is also sensitive to the source-animacy distinctions discussed above. However, two important differences affect the distribution of this pattern. First, the German *rob/steal* alternation is not triggered lexically by the equivalents of *rob* and *steal* (*rauben, stehlen*), but by means of a prefix *be-*, which can be applied to both *rauben* and *stehlen*. Second, the genitive case is uncommon in colloquial varieties, so users avoid mentioning the goods in the *rob* variant in spoken language.

The second equivalent of the *rob* variant involves stealing verbs without the *be-* prefix which realize the goods as direct (accusative) object and the victim as a dative object (*sie stiehlt ihm-DAT die Sachen-ACC*). The source-animacy distinction also applies to this variant. The use of dative rather than genitive case makes this variant more common in spoken language. A notable cross-linguistic difference is that English dative objects with stealing verbs are interpreted as recipients, not victims.

This analysis demonstrates that a wide range of syntactic, lexical, semantic, and sociolinguistic factors play into prominence-related argument alternations. It also reveals that the cross-linguistic comparison of alternations must proceed carefully and fully account for these factors, in order to arrive at valid generalizations.