THE MORPHEME ADI AS A MARKER OF EXISTENTIAL CLOSURE IN BURA (CENTRAL CHADIC)

In this talk, I discuss the semantic contribution of the morpheme adi in Bura (Central Chadic), which is traditionally glossed as an existential predicate there is (Hoffmann 1955). Syntactically, adi occurs only in a limited set of – at first sight – heterogeneous environments, namely in (i.) most negative clauses, including negated clefts (it is not x that ...); (ii.) thetic constructions used for introducing new discourse referents (there is x ...); and (iii.) existential clefts (there is some x that ...); but never in affirmative clauses with full verbal predicates. I propose a unified semantic-based account of the distribution of adi, on which adi is an overt indicator of existential closure over event and individual variables. Adi is introduced as a last resort operation when alternative means of existentially closing a variable fail: In the default case, the existential force observed with Bura indefinite NPs such as mda ‘a/ some man’ is contributed by the meaning of the lexical verb, but adi can step in to take over this function in verbless clauses, or if an event variable needs to be clused under negation.

The discussion of Bura adi has repercussions for semantic theory as a whole, for it shows that apart from the indefinite NP itself (Montague 1973), the mapping from syntactic structure to logical form (Diesing 1992), or the meaning of the verb (van Geenhoven 1998), there are yet other means of introducing existential force into a clause. Furthermore, the overt occurrence of adi provides insight into the syntactic locus of existential closure.