The starting point of my research is the study of the human language faculty within the generative approach, which aims to identify the basic elements from which complex structures can be generated. The aim is to develop a general theory that reveals the rules and laws that govern the structure of particular languages, and the general laws and principles governing all natural languages. My areas of study include morphology (the study of the structure and meaning of words), syntax (the study of the structure of sentences), and their interfaces with interpretation (linguistic meaning). From this perspective, discovering the rules of language tells us something about human cognition.

In my work, I am interested in explaining how and why languages differ from one another. In my research, I thus combine investigations of seemingly unrelated, cross-linguistic manifestations of what turns out to be the same core phenomenon with an in-depth exploration of individual language systems.

My research and publications focus on the following domains:

1) Nominal systems: It has been a standard assumption since the early grammars that nouns denote things and verbs denote actions, i.e. verbs should encode events. It is also generally assumed that the verb controls the “what’s happening” of the sentence, and thus it determines the participants in the event. In my work, I have shown that nouns across languages, in particular those derived from verbs (nominalizations), can also encode actions/events. However, in comparison to the verbs they are derived form, they show a gradient behavior with respect to verbal properties. For example, they do not necessarily need to encode all participants in the event or they are not temporally located. A typology of this behavior was put forth as well as criteria to distinguish among different types of nominalizations that can be applied to nominal systems of unrelated languages.

Other work examines the way number inflection works across languages, and how this interacts with the mass vs. count noun distinction in linguistic systems. This work pursues the hypothesis that there are two kinds of number inflection, one that is associated with count nouns (book/books), and another one, which can be related with mass nouns (water/waters). The two have very distinct properties, as well as distinct meanings: count plural means more than one, while mass plural means large quantities of some substance/liquid. The availability of the latter type of number in a language is responsible for the presence of various other syntactic features.

Finally, I have been involved in work on the realization of definiteness across languages. In languages which have articles, the expectation is that one article should be enough to mark definiteness and indefiniteness. However, noun phrases in a number of languages permit or
seem to require a double realization of this definite/indefinite marker in certain constructions. My study aimed to describe some of the contexts in which double marking occurs, and the conditions/restrictions it obeys in these contexts. I aimed to provide an answer to the following questions: why does doubling occur in the contexts that it does? What is the role of doubling? How is it related to single marking of (in)definiteness within the noun phrase? Is doubling to be considered the realization of one and the same property across languages or is it subject to variation? In connection with this, I also looked at why doubling occurs in some but not all languages, e.g. English lacks, while Greek has determiner doubling.

2) Word Order variation: In this area, I have been trying to answer the question of what explains word order variation across languages. Two major publications in this domain led to the following proposal: while in all languages there cannot be a sentence without an overt subject, certain languages can escape this requirement, because of the properties of their verbal inflection, their pronominal system, and the type of syntactic operations available to them. This is the case in languages such as (Spanish and) Greek, which, can omit overt subjects in all types of clauses, because their verbal inflection functions as a pronoun. This type of property goes together with relatively free word order, and agreement of a matrix verb with a subject across a subordinator/complement clause. In contrast, all this is not possible in languages such as English.

3) Argument alternations: As verbs determine participants in the events they denote, so-called arguments, a lot of research world-wide is interested in explaining how arguments of verbs are realized across languages. While there seem to exist parallels in the argument realization of verbs across languages, we also find a lot of variation. For instance, the morpho-syntactic resources to encode arguments available to different languages vary considerably. In addition, the morpho-syntactic realization of specific argument alternations also varies. I have been involved in work characterizing the properties of passives (The window was broken), and anticausative predicates (i.e. intransitive variants of predicates such as break, e.g. John broke the window vs. anticausative The window broke) across languages. This work has established tools to describe the differences and similarities between passives and anticausatives cross-linguistically. It further explored the hypothesis that passives are not alike in all languages. This led to a principled analysis of different types of argument alternations. In this area in particular, I have also been involved in extending and testing the theoretical hypotheses in the context of aphasia, language change, language acquisition and heritage languages.

4) Multilingualism/Heritage languages: Recently, I have turned my attention to issues concerning Bi-/multi-lingual acquisition by focusing on heritage speakers. Linguistic discussions and experimental studies of language development rest on the notion an adult, native speaker. Heritage speakers pose a challenge. In the literature, a language qualifies as a heritage language if it is spoken at home or it is otherwise readily available to young children in a context in which it is not a dominant language of the larger (national) society, a situation common in the context of migration. Heritage speakers are generally agreed upon to be some-
where in-between first language and second language learners, making them an extremely useful source of linguistic information about acquisition and native competence. These speakers live in a situation of frequent/permanent language contact and thus it is often argued that their competence lags behind that of native speakers without a migrant background or rather that their grammar differs in significant respects from that of native speakers. Work with heritage speakers will help us identify patterns of development and understand better the relationship between language acquisition, contact, change, and loss, and ultimately inform linguistic theory.

Research in all these areas contributes to determining what the essential components of the language faculty are, how language is acquired and how it changes, and what explains the differences between languages.