



Cukier-Goldstein-Goren Center for Mind, Cognition and Language,
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THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 31/03/2022

16:15-17:45

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A constrained syntax in a creative mind

In a recent statement on multilingualism, Felix Ameka emphasizes that humans, with their more than seven thousand languages, represent a unique species to cope with a wide variation in their communicative systems. His view recalls Levinson's (2012: 397) observation that "there is no other animal on the planet, as far as we know, which has such myriad variants of form and meaning at every level in its communication system" or Tomasello's (2008: 299) conclusion that "all individuals of all social species, with one exception, can communicate effectively using their evolved communicative displays and possibly signals with all other individuals of their species [...] The one exception is, of course, humans."

Indeed humans, not only have the propensity to learn and use multiple languages, but they change these communicative systems as they learn and use them, so that successive generations of speakers may end up speaking variants that are mutually unintelligible (e.g., Old English vs. Modern English). In terms of Universal multilingualism and hybrid grammars (Aboh 2015, 2020) such variation is expected because language acquisition (whether L1 or Ln+1) necessarily involves contact of idiolects of speaker-learners (SLs) of different profiles acting in different (though sometimes overlapping) socio-cultural contexts (cf. Mufwene 2001). These interactions generate fluctuating and heterogeneous linguistic inputs (i.e., competing variants) which feed into newly emerging individual grammars. Variation is therefore a ubiquitous feature of language acquisition and use.

Yet, seven thousand languages over thousands of years of human evolution does not seem an impressive number. If one considers the creative possibilities the human mind affords, one would expect the range of cross-linguistic structural variation to be much wider than what typologists actually observe in human communities and report in textbooks. It therefore seems that linguistic structural variation is severely restricted: variation is not at every level after all. In this talk, I argue that the limitations on language variation are explained by the fact that not all domains of phrase/clause structure undergo change: only left peripheral properties (i.e., C/D) are subject to structural change (to some extent).

Aboh, E.O. 2015. *The Emergence of Hybrid Grammars: Language Contact and Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aboh, E.O. 2020. Lessons From Neuro-(a)-Typical Brains: Universal Multilingualism, Code-Mixing, Recombination, and Executive Functions. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 11:488. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00488>

Ameka, F. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2021/02/felix-ameka-multilingualism-is-the-answer-to-many-problems>.

Levinson, S. C. 2012. *The Original Sin of Cognitive Science*. *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4: 396–403 Mufwene, S. S. 2001. *The ecology of language evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Tomasello, M. 2008. *Origins of human communication*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Click [here](#) to see the colloquium program.

