

Learning and use in multilingual contexts as a partial contributor to linguistic universals

Savithry Namboodiripad (University of Michigan)

What explains the universal tendencies in language? Approaches from language evolution look to cognitive biases such as processing preferences as a causal factor in language creation and change (e.g. Christiansen & Chater 2016). Related work looks at the role of population structure in shaping typological patterns, including the role of non-native speakers in directing language change (Wray & Grace 2007, Lev-Ari 2017, Dale & Lopyan 2011, Bentz & Winter 2013). The approach presented here builds on these areas: I take a broad view of language contact and argue that systematically investigating the outcomes of language contact via psycholinguistic methods can help explain typological distributions and motivate universal tendencies.

The empirical domain of this project is flexibility in constituent order. I present a series of formal acceptability judgment experiments which show similarities in how experience with English affects speakers' flexibility in Malayalam (Dravidian) and Korean. SOV is the canonical order in both Malayalam and Korean, and all other orderings of the major constituents (subject, object, and verb) are grammatical and have the same truth-conditional meaning. I propose an operational measure of flexibility in constituent order, arguing that a greater preference for canonical order as compared to non-canonical orders translates to decreased flexibility. Using this measure, I compare speakers of Korean (Namboodiripad, Kim, & Kim forthcoming) and Malayalam who have less contact with English to those with more contact and show that increased contact with English corresponds to decreased flexibility: more experience with English corresponds to a greater relative preference for canonical SOV sentences in Korean and Malayalam.

The explanation for this pattern comes from some well-motivated assumptions about processing difficulty. Lower acceptability ratings correspond to greater processing difficulty, and psycholinguistic measures have shown processing difficulty or reduced acceptability associated with non-canonical constituent orders (Kwon et al. 2013, Kaiser & Trueswell 2004, Miyamoto & Takahashi 2001). In addition, reduced experience with a language has been shown to increase processing difficulty and reduce acceptability for more complex and/or low-frequency constructions: constructions which incur some effort for highly proficient or mostly-monolingual individuals tend to incur even more effort for those who are less dominant in the language. So, the greater processing effort associated with non-canonical orders for higher contact speakers of Malayalam and Korean contributes to the lower relative acceptability for non-canonical orders, and thus, reduced flexibility.

Finally, I discuss the patterns of language learning and use in both high-contact populations: the high-contact Malayalam speakers are young people who grew up in post-colonial India where English is an inextricable part of daily life, while the high-contact Korean speakers are English-dominant individuals who grew up in the United States. Contact has been connected to reduced flexibility (Heine 2008), but increased flexibility has also been described (e.g., Friedman 2003). So, though contact does not uniformly lead to reduced flexibility, the similarities between these two contact situations here could explain the similar outcomes of contact. On analogy with "frontier conditions" posited by Nichols (2017), I discuss the potential for common contact outcomes under "post-colonial conditions" and "immigrant conditions."

In this approach, cross-linguistic speech perception and sentence processing/production are domain-general mechanisms which interact with the specific linguistic structures in the languages speakers know. Factors like literacy, language attitudes, and language policy shape the contexts in which the languages and varieties in an individual's repertoire are used. Individuals inherit the social contexts in which they learn and use language (cf. ontogenetic niche). Thus, links between social structure and language structure are derivable from research on how languages are differentially processed in multilingual contexts across the lifespan.