

Contact and the architecture of the language faculty

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This workshop proposes to investigate the catalyzer role of contact in language variation and change. Contact is seen as a medium to have a better understanding of variation and change and, ultimately, of the architecture of the language faculty.

Linguistic variation and change are interesting to the extent that, no less than language universals, they appear to be not accidental to language, but rather art of its basic design. Specifically, conceptual and inferential components are presumably not subject to variation/change – nor are the computational components (syntactic operations, phonological operations). Rather, variation arises when these components interact (notably at externalization), posing questions of functional optimization to the system. “Why are there so many languages? The reason might be that the problem of externalization can be solved in many different and independent ways”. “Diversity of language results from the fact that the principles do not determine the answers to all questions about language, but leave some questions as open parameters” (Berwick & Chomsky 2015).

In classical Principles and Parameters models, linguistic differences are encoded as different parameter settings, where parameters are all present at the initial state of language acquisition S_0 in the form of an extensional finite list of every possible points of variation in human grammars, represented as open binary choices. Though this model has been extremely productive, it does not seem adequate as a really plausible model of the language faculty. Various recent proposals attempt to re-discuss the nature of parameters and their place in the general architecture of grammar, to bring them to bear on current minimalist theorizing. In particular:

- Biberauer et al. (2014), Roberts (2019) propose that parameters are organized along hierarchical schemas, which are identically organized only at general level.
- Longobardi (2017), proposes that parameters are based on a universal set of simple possible parameter schemas (e.g. “Is F, F a feature, grammaticalized?”; “Is F, F a grammaticalized feature, spread on X, X a category?”; “Does a functional category ... X have a phonological matrix ?”) which may in principle interact with one another.
- Manzini & Savoia (2011), Manzini (2015) take an even weaker approach, namely that “the parameters interacting with [Externalization] are ... the categorical splits” for instance “speaker vs. hearer, 1st/2nd person vs. D” in the realm of nominal properties. Thus even parameters schemas are epiphenomena, the conceptual workspace and the categorial cuts (parameters) that are or are not externalized by the lexicon is all there is. Interactions between categorial cuts take the form “categorial split A is not defined for value 0/1 of ... categorial split B”.

Within this general theoretical framework, contact phenomena provide a unique vantage point into models of parametrization, for they are one of the external factors that may act as catalyzers or at least as accelerators for variation and change. By contact, we mean any situation in which two different languages are spoken by the same community, hence in a condition of bilingualism. Specifically, we are interested in situations of protracted (centuries-long) contact, often historically documented, which allow us to observe internal diversification of the languages involved both on the temporal axis (change) and on the spatial axis (dialectal variation).

By bringing together scholars working on the syntax of varieties spoken in conditions of contact, the workshop will investigate how factors external to the grammar of a given language can influence the shape of the grammar, determining divergence/convergence phenomena with close cognates and with the contact language.

Range of topics

Proposed talks focus on the syntax of varieties spoken in conditions of contact. The selected papers

- present a formal analysis of data relating to syntactic variation and change in languages in contact;
- contribute to the analysis of syntactic phenomena involved in variations and change, possibly lying at the interface between syntactic computation and externalization systems.

The papers address one or more of the following core questions:

- (i) the scope and limits of morpho-syntactic diversity: what kinds of linguistic properties and relations are subject to variation and what is the admissible extent of this variation, given the constraints imposed by the Faculty of Language?
- (ii) the structure of morpho-syntactic diversity: does the analysis of languages in contact provide new evidence for different parametric models (hierarchies, schemas, lexical parametrization)?
- (iii) constraints on externally-induced change: is it possible to delimit the possible changes that may happen in a situation of contact? Proposals in this sense are:
 - a. *Resistance Principle* (Guardiano et al. 2016): “Resetting of parameter α from value X to Y in language A as triggered by interference of language B only takes place if a subset of the strings that contribute to constituting a trigger or value Y of parameter α in language B already exists in language A” (i.e., the resetting of a parameter under the influence of interference data is possible only if the new triggers are similar enough to triggers already unmistakably present in the interfered language).
 - b. Given *Inertia* (Keenan 2009, “Things stay as they are unless acted upon by an outside force or DECAY”), contact situations provide an “outside force”; then the question arises whether parameter resetting takes place not simply when possible, but rather when needed to fill an independently-created void (we may call this the *Functional Void* principle).

The ultimate goal of the workshop is contributing to the description, analysis and explanation of language diversity, using the “external” impulses acting on it in a situation of language contact as a key to get to the core of the “internal” structures that determine language diversity.

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