UGent/GIST & ACLC/ABC

A probe into the multilingual mind.
How languages evolve.

Book of abstracts

Universiteit Gent

Linguistics Department

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SPEAKERS

Enoch O. Aboh

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A multilingual mind in a monolingual brain: Ingredients for a research project

Several recent studies have shown that acquisition occurs during contact of idiolects in which children are exposed to competing alternatives in the inputs. Based on such inputs, children learn to master multiple subgrammars allowing communication in their community (e.g., Roeper 1999, Amaral and Roeper 2014, Aboh 2015). Aboh's working hypothesis is that learning in multiple-varieties ecologies results from a basic cognitive process: recombination, which enables human learners to merge linguistic features selected from the inputs into new variants. The outputs of recombination are new hybrid linguistic constructs which in turn form the inputs of new generations. As a consequence, language inputs are always varied and in flux, hence language change. This new perspective subsumes variation across speakers, as observed in sociolinguistics, and is compatible with the idea that the human mind is multilingual. The brain is presumably prewired to handle ever changing linguistic inputs. Several questions arise, however, that require further investigation:

1. If learners internalize multiple subgrammars (rather than just one overarching grammar), what is the nature of these subgrammars? Is each subgrammar complete? Do subgrammars compete with each other (maybe sometimes leading to blending)? How can subgrammars be formalized within Generative theory? How can they be modelled?

2. A logical alternative to the theory of multiple subgrammars is that learners develop an overarching system which, because it derives from diverging inputs in constant flux, contains 'add-ons'. These 'add-ons' can be activated to produce specific registers. How can one distinguish between this view and the theory of multiple grammars on principled ground?

3. Recombination, as described above, suggests that variation is unconstrained. Yet, cross-linguistic tendencies and learning biases evidenced by typological, acquisition, and psycholinguistic studies point to the contrary. How to account for this paradox? What aspects of learning constrain linguistic recombination and linguistic variation?

These research questions can only be addressed adequately in an interdisciplinary study. The aim of the talk is to lay the groundwork for discussions that could lead to the formation of a consortium to further develop a multi-language approach to the human language capacity and collaborate to a grant application.

Artemis Alexiadou

Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

A default design for heritage grammars? The breakdown of nominal inflection

Heritage speakers are considered unbalanced bilinguals and typically, as their linguistic behavior deviates from that of native speakers, their grammar is thought of as the result of incomplete acquisition or attrition. In this talk, by focussing on the breakdown of nominal inflection (nominative-accusative case syncretism and the re-organization of declension classes in Heritage Greek in comparison to Heritage Russian), I will entertain the hypothesis that heritage languages follow a default design employing a restricted set of operations, similar to what we find in creole languages.

Adriana Belletti

Université de Genève – Università di Siena

a-Marked left peripheral topics in standard Italian: Reflections from acquisition

Direct objects are never marked through use of a preposition in standard Italian. This is in contrast with southern varieties, in which lexical direct objects are typically introduced by preposition *a,* as an instance of the Differential Object Marking/DOM phenomenology, found in several languages (e.g. closely related Spanish). Sentences like (1) are judged ungrammatical by speakers of standard Italian, who attribute to them a marked southern flavor:

(1)   a. Ho   incontrato   a   Maria
               I met   to   Maria
          b. Saluterai   all'invitato
               You will welcome   to-the guest

However, in the left periphery some a-marked topics are judged as rather acceptable by most adult speakers, when the topic is an Experiencer as in the example below (from Belletti & Rizzi 1988, reporting Benincà's observation):

(2)   a. A Gianni, questi argomenti non l'hanno convinto
               to Gianni, these arguments him-CL have not convinced
.   b *A Gianni, la gente non lo conosce
.   to Gianni, people him-CL do not know   (Belletti & Rizzi 1988, footnote 27)
.   c *Questi argomenti non hanno convinto a Gianni
               these arguments have not convince to Gianni

a-Marking appears to be a property of the left periphery, as witnessed by the contrast between (2)a and (2)c (Belletti 2016). Recent experimental results presented in Belletti & Manetti (2016) have indicated extensive use of a-marked topics by young children acquiring Italian, also irrespective of the experiencer interpretation, thus confirming the left peripheral nature of the phenomenon. The following question then naturally arises: Are children's a-marked topics the sign of an ongoing linguistic change leading to introduction of DOM in standard Italian? (For relevant considerations on the possible development of DOM in standard Italian see also Berretta 1989). As the children investigated in the quoted experiments are all monolingual speakers of a central (Tuscan) non- southern variety of Italian, their resort to a-marked topics indicates the adoption of a grammatical option, which is internally motivated and not driven by contact. Similar developments in other languages will also be considered (e.g. Spanish, Japanese, Leonetti 2006).

Carlo Cecchetto

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The bimodal mind: co-activation of sign and spoken languages

Bilingualism involving two spoken languages obeys the articulatory filter, that forces inhibition of one of the two languages since they compete for the same channel. However, the articulatory filter does not apply when a spoken and a sign language are involved. In principle, two lexical items or even two sentences can be simultaneously produced by the different articulators for the sign and for the spoken language. To what extent does this actually happen? What are the constraints governing simultaneous sign and spoken production? In my talk I will address these questions by reporting an experiment that studies the co-articulation of a sign and of the corresponding word (so-called *mouthing*) and by making a survey of the existing literature about so-called code-blending, in which bimodal bilinguals sign and speak simultaneously.

Anne-Sophie Ghyselen

Universiteit Gent

A probe into the multivarietal mind of Flemish speakers: on the consequences of dialect contact

When studying the multilingual mind, attention should not only be devoted to the way in which speakers use and perceive different languages, but also to the way in which speakers handle stylistic and regional variation within their mother tongue. The last decades many European speech communities have witnessed a tremendous increase in mobility and mass media, which in its turn has caused a significant change in the linguistic input language users deal with in everyday life: speakers are no longer only confronted with their own local dialect variety, but also with other dialects and the standard language. In this paper, I will discuss the linguistic consequences of these changes on the basis of speech data of 30 Flemish highly educated women in 5 speech settings. First, I will illustrate the impact of the mobility changes on individual language repertoires in Flanders, after which I will discuss the more abstract mechanisms which seem to be steering language variation in Flanders.

Terje Lohndal, Maren Berg Grimstad, Brita Ramsevik Riksem, Tor A. Åfarli

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Generative approaches to language mixing

This talk will discuss two generative models that have been applied to language mixing: a minimalist lexicalist model based on Chomsky (1995), and an exoskeletal model based on Borer (2005, 2013), Åfarli (2007), Lohndal (2014), etc. We will consider data from English-Spanish mixed noun phrases discussed in Moro (2014) as well as English-Norwegian mixed noun phrases and verbs taken from the Corpus of American Norwegian Speech (CANS). Whereas the lexicalist model in Chomsky (1995) only can explain a subset of the mixing patterns attested in both authentic English-Spanish mixed noun phrases and the American Norwegian corpus, we show that an alternative exoskeletal model can account for all of them. Such a model would entail that rather than assuming lexical items with inherent, functional features that determine the derivation, syntactic structures are generated independently from the lexical items that come to realize them.

Roland Pfau

Universiteit van Amsterdam

Gestures, Features, and Grammaticalization: The Case of Sign Language Negation

Sign languages, as visual-spatial languages, have the unique possibility to integrate manual and non-manual co-speech gestures in their lexicon and grammar. A case in point is the side-to-side headshake which is used as a marker of negation in basically all sign languages studied to date. The fact that the headshake has evolved beyond its gestural use is evidenced by the observation that sign languages display language-specific constraints when it comes to the use and distribution (scope) of the headshake. In particular, in some sign languages, a proposition can be negated by a headshake alone, while in others the additional use of a manual negative particle is obligatory.

In my presentation, I will address the grammaticalization of gestures associated with negation, and I will offer an account of the attested variation in terms of (un)interpretable features. Also, I will speculate about the possibility that one type of system evolved from the other type in a diachronic scenario akin to Jespersen's Cycle.

Ljiljana Progovac and Natalia Rakhlin

Wayne State University

Proto-syntactic foundation: Argument omission at the two-word stage

A key question for language evolution and language acquisition is whether there is a foundational stage of syntax that can provide a stepping-stone from no syntactic combination to hierarchical syntax. Progovac (2015) proposed such a proto-syntactic stage for language evolution. By peeling off clausal functional layers postulated in Minimalism, she arrives at the most basic clausal construct, a flat TP-less and vP-less small clause (SC/VP), intransitive and absolutive-like. We hypothesize that early language acquisition may also exhibit a comparable foundational stage, arguably the common denominator for crosslinguistic variation.

Acquisition studies found that children's omission of arguments is not random, but follows an absolutive pattern: omission of transitive subjects and production of intransitive subjects and objects (Zheng & Goldin-Meadow 2002; Clancy 1993 for Korean; Ochs 1982 for Samoan). We analyze language samples of typically developing children and children with SLI and Down's syndrome from the Childes database, at MLU = ≈2.0. We conclude that a substantial majority of children's utterances at this stage exhibit this pattern, and can be analyzed as vP-less proto-clauses consisting predominantly of a verb and one, mostly post-verbal, argument (*Eve climb, Go truck, See Adam, Put baby, Hurt doggie*). The emerging two-argument utterances contain a surprising number of post-verbal, inconsistently ordered, subjects and objects (*Adam mommy climb*, *Write Adam pencil*, *Take off paper Adam, Hit tow truck knee, Hit door head*). This early stage also conspicuously lacks in utterances instantiating the top layers, whether TP (*%He does, Billy might*) or CP (*%Where did?, Who does?, Whether he?*).

Jeannette Schaeffer

Universiteit van Amsterdam

L2 English article acquisition by Dutch adolescents: Similar or different from (impaired) L1?

Languages differ in the way they organize their (overt) article systems. Some languages base article choice on [specificity] (Samoan), others on [definiteness] (English: a vs. the). As for L2 article acquisition, Ionin et al. (2008) argue that [definiteness]-based article choice in the L1 (Spanish) enhances article-acquisition in a [definiteness]-based L2 (English). However, Deprez et al. (2008) show that Dutch learners of L2-French (both [definiteness]-based) perform poorly on French article choice, suggesting reliance on [specificity], and refuting positive L1 influence.

The current study investigates L2-English article choice in 104 native speakers of Dutch. The results show (in)definite article overuse in the low, but not in the high-proficiency groups. Overuse of the definite article is also found in the early L1 acquisition of English-, Dutch-, French- and Hebrew-acquiring children (all [definiteness]-based). Overuse of the indefinite article is found in the language of Dutch-speaking children with autism or with SLI age 6-14. We discuss the question as to whether article choice errors in different populations can be explained by one unifying account, but conclude that this is not possible. We propose that in the L2 acquisition of English articles lexical-semantic proficiency is a necessary condition for cross-linguistic influence to be visible, resulting in (in)definite article overuse in the lower, but not in the higher proficiency groups. For young children acquiring their mother tongue, it is the lack of the pragmatic "Concept-of-non-shared-Assumptions" that renders overuse of the definite article, whereas children with autism or SLI fail to draw the scalar implicature related to the definiteness scale, causing overuse of the indefinite article.

Manuela Schönenberger

Université de Genève

'They baked a Swiss roll they call it' or amalgams in Swiss German

This talk considers amalgams in Swiss German, illustrated in (1) and (2), that were produced during informal interviews that were recorded and then transcribed as part of a three-year project investigating variation and change in Swiss German. Amalgams suggest that a speaker has merged two sentences into one. Sometimes the last constituent of the first is also the first constituent of the second, e.g. *wacher* 'more awake' in (1).

(1)   Denn bisch es Zitli lang wie "wacher" isch vilicht en Usdruck.
        then are (you) a time long like awaker is perhaps an expression
        'Then you are for a little while like more awake is perhaps an expression.'

(2)   I ha früener im Sekretariaat han i vil Kòntakt gha.
        I have formerly in-the secretary's office have I much interaction had
        'In the past I had a lot of interaction in the secretary's office.'

Amalgams seem to be a characteristic feature of spoken language, and are found in various languages (cf. e.g. Meinunger 2011). Typical examples in English are shown in (3).

(3a)   They used a hover board they call it.
(3b)   There's this crazy guy lives up the street.

In my data I have found over 200 amalgams in a sample of 100,000 words, produced by speakers of different ages. Many are of the type in (2), i.e. subject-initial followed by an adverbial and a repetition of the verb and subject. This suggests Verb-Second languages might be conducive to the production of amalgams. I first present the data, and then discuss why some speakers produce many more amalgams than others.