The Multilingual Gaze: Implications for Formal Syntax

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In this talk, I would like to return to some proposals I made in Aboh (2015, 2020) about universal multilingualism and hybrid grammars. In these works, I defended the position that 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) to which SLs are exposed throughout their life. The result of this process is that SLs harbor different linguistic sub-systems (call it registers, dialects, accents, etc.) that cannot be stated formally in a single holistic mental grammar (sometimes idealized as the target E-language in acquisition studies).

Assuming linguistic theory is about understanding the multilingual SL's knowledge to combining different pieces of grammar during production and processing, the question arises how to formalize such hybrid grammars in an ecologically valid model (see also Roeper 1999). My working hypothesis has been that acquisition results from a basic cognitive process: *recombination*, which enables human learners to *merge* linguistic features selected from the varied inputs into new variants. The outputs of *recombination* are new hybrid linguistic constructs which in turn form the inputs of new generations. Since *recombination* is a free process, this view raises the question of what domains of linguistic systems can be subject to change, and what domains cannot (cf. Aboh 2020). Another more pressing question is the implication of hybridization for functional categories. For instance, what does it mean to say that Haitian Creole has a 'hybrid' D resulting from the *recombination* of properties of D in the Gbe languages and French varieties of the 17th-18th century? It appears from this discussion that functional categories (i.e., the basic ingredients of syntax) are internally more complex than commonly assumed in the literature.

References

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