



Language Science Colloquium 2017-18

Monday, January 22nd

Time: 11:00-12:30 pm

Location: Social Science Tower, Room SST 442

Lunch provided.

[Maria Polinsky, University of Maryland](#)

It's still about grammar: Cascading structural reorganization in bilinguals

The study of multilingualism has long been the intellectual property of linguistics subfields like sociolinguistics and language acquisition, and with good reason: we must understand the complexities of the multilingual experience before we can analyze its exponents in language users. In this talk I present reasons for appropriating multilingualism inquiries into core domains of linguistic theory: they offer novel evidence on ways linguistic systems may be reorganized and undergo change. Taking this approach to multilingualism means that our research is no longer focused on the idiosyncrasies of bilingual/multilingual grammars, but also on the resources and pressures at play in the development, maintenance, and change of bilingual grammars. The two main sources of pressure for change in such grammars include processing constraints and grammatical reorganization. In this talk, I show that bilingual speakers differ from the monolingual baseline in underlying representations, not in processing alone.

As a case in point, I will examine elliptical constructions in bilingual grammars. Ellipsis constructions are well known for having two readings: strict, and sloppy. For example, the sentence "The linguist blamed himself, and the logician did too" is ambiguous between a strict reading (the linguist and the logician both blamed the linguist) and a sloppy reading (the logician blamed the logician, that is, himself). All factors being equal, English speakers show a strong preference for the sloppy reading in coordination contexts. A similar preference for sloppy readings is observed in a number of other languages (Dutch, German, Russian). While the sloppy-reading preference under ellipsis is strong in monolingual Russian, it disappears in Heritage Russian: The Russian language spoken by unbalanced bilinguals who are dominant in English (better known as heritage speakers of Russian). The disappearance of the

sloppy reading is particularly surprising given that both Russian and English favor that reading. I show that the restructuring of Heritage Russian ellipsis follows from two changes in the heritage language: (a) reanalysis of the aspectual system and (b) changes in the inventory of null pronominals available to heritage speakers. As a result, what may appear to be an unexpected change is actually well motivated by systematic restructuring in the heritage language. These results confirm that heritage speakers differ from the monolingual baseline in underlying representations, not in processing alone, and that syntactic reorganization can be predicted based on information about critical properties of a particular heritage language and heritage languages more generally.

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