

Universality *vs.* particularity in language

Recitation #1

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- Office hours: Monday, 5–6pm
 - ▶ Or by appointment. Please send me an e-mail.
- Office: 32-D972
 - ▶ It is at Stata Center.
 - ▶ When going to my office, make sure you are on the Dreyfoos tower!

Some things about me

■ I am from Brazil

- ▶ Before you ask: my parents are immigrants from China

■ I speak Brazilian Portuguese (BP)

Obvious question: why Brazilian Portuguese?

My honest answer:

There are differences between European Portuguese and BP.

- But I don't know whether they are enough to classify BP as a separate language.

Linguist's answer: It's a dialect.

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- I am starting my fourth year at MIT.
- My pronouns: *she/her/hers*
 - ▶ A resource you may find useful:
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 - ▶ Basically, this means that I try to understand the internal structure and the building of sentences.

Some things I have worked on

Let's start with English:

- (1) a. The dogs seem to have eaten watermelon.
- b. It seems that the dogs ate watermelon.
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- (2) Os cachorros parecem ter comido melancia.
the dogs seem to.have eaten watermelon
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- (3) Parece que os cachorros comeram melancia.
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Brazilian Portuguese:

- (4) Os cachorros parecem que comeram melancia.
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'The dogs seem to have eaten watermelon.'

■ Recall the English ungrammatical example:

(1c) *The dogs seem that ate watermelon.

■ Noteworthy: the string in (4) is ungrammatical in European Portuguese.

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Why should we care?

More modestly: why do you think I cared?

Recall what we saw in class:

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- Is language something that is formally (*e.g.* explicitly by our care takers or in a school) taught to us?
- No: our knowledge of language seems to be **innate**.

Some suggestions that this is true:

- We have knowledge that is not taught to us:

(5) Massa-fucking-chusetts

- We also have 'negative knowledge':

(6) *Ma-fucking-ssachusetts

(7) *The dogs seem that ate watermelon.

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■ Arguments from language acquisition:

- ▶ It is universal, regardless of education.
- ▶ Children acquire language early, in comparison with skills that can be considerably simpler.
- ▶ Children produce utterances that are not part of the adult grammar

- (8)
- a. It colds my bottom. *makes my bottom cold*
 - b. Mommy, can you stay this open? *make this stay open*
 - c. I'm gonna just fall this on her. *make this fall on her*
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Takeaway

Language is an innate capacity that every individual of the human species possesses.

Recall the contrast:

(1c) *The dogs seem that ate watermelon.

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the dogs seem that ate watermelon
'The dogs seem to have eaten watermelon.'

- There is some knowledge that is innate and which every human being possesses.
 - ▶ This would explain the universality of language acquisition in the human species.
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This is a tension that linguists are constantly trying to deal with.

- Our theory of the human capacity for language is informed by what we know of particular languages.
 - ▶ But it cannot be a close reproduction of these languages, otherwise we miss generalizations.
- Our analyses of very specific phenomena found in particular languages cannot lose sight of this overarching language faculty.

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More English data:

- (9) a. Rosa believes them to be wonderful.
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- c. i. Rosa believes them that are wonderful.
- ii. *Clearer example:* Rosa believes John that is wonderful.

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- c. i. *Rosa believes them that are wonderful.
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A note on *them* vs. *they*:

- These are 3rd person plural pronouns.
- The choice between *them* and *they* depends on the syntactic position.
 - ▶ Subject:
 - ▶ Object:
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Now consider Mongolian, another language with richer case morphology:

- (10) Bat changaar **nokhoi** gaikhaltai gej khelsen.
Bat loudly dog.NOM wonderful that said
'Bat said loudly that dogs are wonderful.'

- (11) Bat **nokhoi-g** changaar gaikhaltai gej khelsen.
Bat dog-ACC loudly wonderful that said
'Bat said loudly that dogs are wonderful.'

*Almost literally: 'Bat said **them** loudly that are wonderful.'*

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This is another example of the tension between:

- trying to account for specific differences between languages
- but without forgetting that there is an innate overarching knowledge underlying particular languages

(Informal) References

- The causative data in Child English (8) is from:

Clark, Eve V. *First language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

- The Mongolian data is due to my consultants.
- Data from BP is my own, though first documented and analyzed in:

Ferreira, Marcelo Barra. *Argumentos nulos em português brasileiro*. (2000). MA thesis from Universidade de Campinas.

- The absence of sentences like (4) in European Portuguese is reported here:

Martins, Ana Maria, and Jairo Nunes. “Syntactic change as chain reaction: The emergence of hyper-raising in Brazilian Portuguese.” *Historical syntax and linguistic theory* (2009): 144-157.