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Boylston 105

Deep Universals in Reflexive Syntax

Superficially, languages vary dramatically in their systems of expressing reflexive meaning (via, e.g., special pronouns, verbal markers, agreement morphemes, syntactic configurations, etc). Moreover, languages tend to have multiple surface patterns for expressing reflexivity, often depending on the linguistic context. In contrast, languages like English appear to be relatively simple: reflexivity is expressed with a single set of reflexive pronouns across contexts.

In this talk, I show that heterogeneity in reflexive expressions across languages (and the apparent simplicity of English) can obscure deep similarities between languages in reflexive syntax. In particular, I show that a typologically diverse set of languages use the **same syntactic base** in cases of Local Subject-Oriented Reflexivity (LSOR). To motivate this, I show that LSOR expressions are subject to the same syntactic constraints, regardless of how LSOR structures are realized at the surface in a particular language.

Even English makes use of this LSOR syntax, and this is observable when attending to prosodic properties of reflexive pronouns. For example, reflexive pronouns in LSOR contexts regularly avoid being marked with phrasal stress, while reflexive pronouns in other contexts regularly bear phrasal stress.

Given that a shared syntactic base for LSOR is so common, across a typologically diverse set of languages (including recently emerging sign languages), I argue that this LSOR structure must naturally arise as a result of the shape of our shared linguistic competence, as humans – that is, it appears to be the result of deep universals of the human language faculty.