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Patterns of variation in language processing and learning

This talk begins with the premise that everyone speaks with an accent, and that accents naturally vary within and across speech communities. The ability to navigate accent variation is crucial for successful communication. In many parts of the world, children grow up exposed to multiple language varieties, whether regional accents, learner accents, or distinct languages and dialects. Research on such heterogeneous contexts presents mixed findings: while some studies highlight cognitive and linguistic benefits, others emphasize challenges associated with perceived "non-standard" input.

One possible explanation for these mixed findings is that numerous studies have compared monolingual and bilingual children's performance in language tasks, often treating bilingualism as a categorical variable based on criteria like parental native language or percentage of non-dominant language input. However, these criteria are inconsistent across studies, complicating direct comparisons. A more recent trend is to use gradient assessments of exposure to better understand how varying input influences language processing and learning. This can done by quantifying the proportion of input a child receives in a given language or accent, for example, measuring daily interactions with speakers of different varieties.

In this talk, I will explore the extent to which both the quantity and quality of language exposure shape language processing abilities. I will discuss how exposure to accented speech can present both cognitive challenges (e.g., increased processing effort) and benefits (e.g., greater listening flexibility). Additionally, I will examine how listeners evaluate accented speech and the social consequences of these perceptual processes. Ultimately, this talk will demonstrate how input variability serves as a powerful lens for exploring the cognitive architecture of language acquisition, the mechanisms of language processing, and the formation of social preferences.