Multiple Grammars Theory and Language Acquisition

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This course presents a general introduction to the theory of Multiple Grammars (MG) and some of its consequences to work on language representation, and first and second language acquisition. One of the theoretical underpinnings of MG is the idea that monolingual, bilingual, L2 and code-switching dialect speakers of any language must have more than just one (complex) grammar that encompasses all rules relevant to their linguistic representation. Instead they may have narrow grammatical representations that provide, at times, alternative analyses of the same sentence. Given multiple possible (sub)grammars that might exit in someone’s mind, it is an interesting theoretical question to ask how far they share or avoid connections in formal representation. The theoretical basis of these questions flows from the idea that rules should be minimal and “avoid complexity”. Therefore we expect a speaker to form a separate rule (a separate sub-grammar) rather than complicate an existing rule to capture divergent features of the language.

An example of this issue is V2 in English, which is restricted to quotation (a) or stylistic inversion (b), compared to German, where it is completely general.

(a) “Nothing” said Bill.
(b) In the room ran Bill.
(c) What can I do?

A complex version of the V2 rule (see Collins and Branigan) would create a description that expresses main verb movement as a subcase inside the general rule for inversion in order to capture English questions (c). MG theory would prefer a solution where the lexicon (quotation verbs) or the rule-type (stylistic) has a diacritic on it linking it to the German V2 rule (which has a historical source) rather than a description that uses a complex rule with a heavy use of “optionality” notation. If every language contains multiple grammars, the critical question then becomes the scope or degree of productivity of each individual sub-grammar in a language and the potential for unconscious projection of ambiguities in comprehension that may not exist in production.

In this course we will examine the origins of Multiple Grammars (Kroch, Roeper, Yang), recent extensions (Amaral and Roeper), and their implications for a variety of theories of first and second language acquisition.
Program:

Class 1: The foundations of Multiple Grammars.
Class 2: MG and its latest developments in L1.
Class 3: MG and its latest developments in L2.

Background readings:


