Micro-variation in Multilingual Situations: The importance of linguistic proximity and property-by-property acquisition

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In this talk I will first introduce the micro-cue model of L1 acquisition and support it with data from child language, focusing on cases where there is micro-variation in the input (Westergaard 2009, 2014). Findings show that children are sensitive to fine distinctions in syntax and information structure from early on and that they are conservative learners, generally making errors of omission rather than commission (Snyder 2007). I will then sketch a research program investigating to what extent similar processes can be found in L2A and multilingual situations more generally. Considerable data show that adult L2 learners are not conservative, thus happy to make much larger generalizations than L1 children. Nevertheless, transfer/crosslinguistic influence can be argued to be selective, dependent on micro-variation in the L1. This is related to the idea put forward in Amaral & Roeper (2014) that transfer may only affect "simple rules". In my interpretation, this means that transfer is local, applying property-by-property in small domains. This also resonates with recent proposals for L3 acquisition, the Scalpel Model (Slabakova 2016) and the Linguistic Proximity Model (Westergaard et al. 2016). I will then discuss L3A more specifically and argue that it is time for this field to shift the focus from the order of acquisition (L1 vs. L2) to more abstract linguistic structures of the three languages involved. Thus, L3A can be extended to the study of bilingual populations learning a third language, which is an increasingly common situation. I focus on the Linguistic Proximity Model, which argues that all languages remain active at all times and that cross-linguistic influence in L3A could be from either or both of the previously learned languages, provided there is some structural similarity between them. Furthermore, the model argues for incremental step-by-step learning and no special status of the initial stage(s).