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“GRAMMATICAL DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN ENGLISH:
A WINDOW INTO THE STRUCTURE OF GRAMMAR”

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2015 @ 5:30 PM



BU KCB (565 COMMONWEALTH AVE.), ROOM 101

Linguists seek to understand both the properties that characterize individual languages and those that are distinctive of human language more generally. In this talk, I will focus on one subfield of linguistics, syntax, and show how comparing linguistic varieties, both very different and very similar to one another, leads researchers to the discovery of patterns, and to the development and testing of hypotheses about linguistic structure.

I will do so by discussing the work we do within the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project, where we study morpho-syntactic differences across varieties of English spoken in North America. We find that the presence of minimally different syntactic patterns in some cases correlates with extra-linguistic factors (like geographical region, ethnicity or age). For example, speakers who accept sentences with double modals, as in (1), tend to be from the South; speakers who accept sentences with *like* immediately followed by a passive participle, as in (2), tend to be from the Midlands; speakers who accept sentences with *so* followed by a negative auxiliary, as in (3), tend to be from New England; and speakers who are likely to say a sentence like (4) belong to the younger generation, regardless of their geographical area. However, we also find syntactic variation that doesn't obviously correlate with any such factors. For example, the use of *rather* as a verb (5) reflects the grammatical system of a diverse set of North American speakers:

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| (1) | I <i>might could</i> go to the store for you. | (Hasty 2014) |
| (2) | Most babies <i>like cuddled</i> . | (Murray and Simon 2002) |
| (3) | Sure it's trendy, but <i>so aren't</i> most NY clubs. | (Wood 2014) |
| (4) | Jamie has <i>SO</i> dated that type of guy before. | (Irwin 2014) |
| (5) | I would have <i>rathered</i> go to a small school. | (Wood 2013) |

I will show that the study of syntactic variation across varieties of American English, in addition to having social and educational implications, also furthers our understanding of the syntax of human language.

Facebook event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/889604564456075/>

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