Social and Environmental Constraints on Sound Inventories

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Abstract

Languages display a wide range of variation when it comes to the constitution of their sound inventories. While some only possess a handful of vowels and consonants, e.g. Rotokas with 5 vowels and 6 consonants according to Maddieson, others such as IXu have very large numbers of segments. Neither very small or very large systems create problems to their users: fully functional lexicons can rest on very few segments, and large inventories can still be learnt and used without much effort.

Where does such a high diversity of segments and systems come from? What are the degrees of freedom and constraints underlying the geographic, genealogical and structural distributions of inventories? We will focus on a range of social and environmental constraints that have been recently put forward in the literature. We will investigate in particular the putative relationship between the size of a linguistic community and the size of the sound inventory of its language, and the impact various natural environments may have on specific sets of segments. While doing so, we will highlight how tools from data science can offer fresh perspectives, and argue in favor of language ecologies in the broadest sense.

Speaker

Dr. Christophe Coupé received a PhD degree in cognitive science in 2003 from the University of Lyon 2. He then worked as a researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), until joining the Department of Linguistics at HKU in September 2018. His research interests in linguistics cover language evolution and language diversity, especially at the phonetic level, and the application of computational and statistical methods to linguistic data. Besides, Dr. Coupé has also conducted research in psycholinguistics, psycho-phenomenology and social psychology.

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