1 Expanding the Canon

Minoritization in the World and in Linguistic Theory

Narrowness in observation protects narrowness in theory.
– Wolfgang Köhler

You are about to begin reading a new book with a less evocative title than *If on a Winter’s Night, a Traveler*. But as that book’s author Calvino would tell you: Just the same, Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; it’s been said before, the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, “No, I don’t want to watch TV!” Raise your voice – they won’t hear you otherwise – “I’m reading! I don’t want to be disturbed!” Maybe they haven’t heard you, with all that racket. Speak louder, yell: “I’m beginning to read about minoritized languages and linguistic theory!” Or if you prefer, don’t say anything. Make sure the page isn’t in shadow.

What follows is written with the starting viewpoint that the field of linguistics is closely related to the science of psychology. As such, to understand the human mind, we must understand language. And to understand language, we must adopt the same methodology successfully applied to other faculties of the human mind. The title of this book reflects the fact that, far beyond the well-studied set including English, German, Dutch, Russian, Japanese, Italian, and Spanish that formed the original basis for linguistic theory, minoritized languages (see below on this term and how it differs from ‘minority’ languages) – languages spoken by smaller populations, or languages that are not even official national languages – nonetheless have transformative effects on our understanding of the human language faculty. Instead of merely demonstrating that contemporary syntactic, semantic, phonological, and morphological theory can ‘handle’ phenomena found in lesser-studied languages, this book brings forth cases in which data from such languages actually change linguistic theory, creating discomfort and a reshuffling of assumptions that eventually leads to modifications of the theory itself. The twin goals of this book, aimed at a broad readership, are to showcase specific developments in linguistic theory based on minoritized languages that are of inherent interest to researchers across domains, as well as to establish the overarching argument that just because a given language is not an official national language does not make it any less interesting in terms of its potential contributions to science – and often quite the contrary.
2 When Minoritized Languages Change Linguistic Theory

Why have I written such a book? In many corners of the world one can hear uttered the lament that “generative grammar was invented only for English” (given that Chomsky’s [1957] Syntactic Structures did focus almost exclusively on English). Even so, in the following four decades, languages such as Russian, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, and Japanese contributed greatly to the development of syntactic theory, and even early developments within generative grammar, such as Matthews (1965) and Postal (1963), were based on indigenous North American languages. Hale (1967) evaluated these works as providing “indication of the extent to which a linguist working in the generative transformational framework can succeed in making interesting and significant statements about the grammatical structure of a language not his own” (p. 332). Nonetheless, the supposition persists that when generative linguistic theory is ‘applied’ to understudied minoritized languages, researchers might simply be paying lip-service to such languages or attempting to shoehorn them into existing molds so as to preserve the outlines of the theory. To choose just one citation, Foley and Valin (1984) assert, “We do not regard the structure of one language type as prototypical and other types as deviations from this prototype, a position often associated with current alternative models of grammatical description such as Government and Binding Theory,” and that “much current and recent theorizing has depended too heavily on English and familiar European languages, with the result that this theorizing has been biased in favor of languages of essentially one grammatical type” (p. xii). The aim of this book is to thoroughly debunk this conception and to showcase over a dozen well-entrenched moments in the recent history of the field in which generative linguistic theory has actively reformulated the notion of possible and representative linguistic structure based on compelling findings from non-familiar, and indeed minoritized, languages.

Right from the first case study presented in the book, Zazaki Kurdish, it is shown that a type of reported-speech structure so unfamiliar to philosophers of language that David Kaplan called it a ‘monster’ is nonetheless robustly attested and requires serious modifications to our notions of what a possible language is and how languages syntactically achieve clausal embedding of attitude reports. Reported speech in Zazaki Kurdish represents the kind of ‘monstrous’ construction in natural language that has not gone ignored but rather has spurred a wealth of further research in a range of typologically diverse languages to understand the limits of and variation in such kinds of reported speech constructions. This is truly a case in which a minoritized language has

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1 I have selected this citation as one proposition that can be clearly evaluated, chosen among a wide spectrum of claims with similar sentiment, from the meek questions by students in St. Petersburg (whom I thank in the acknowledgements) to hyperbolistic affirmations such as Olson (1977) who claims that “Chomsky’s theory is not a theory of language generally … It is a model for the structure of autonomous written prose” (p. 272).
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completely reshaped our theory of the way that speech reports are mentally represented, which would not have occurred without taking the contribution of minoritized languages seriously. This book showcases seven chapters of such case studies, drawn from around the globe and contributing to all subareas of linguistic theory.

These choices very much reflect my own attempts to answer the question of when minoritized languages have wrought the most compelling changes in linguistic theory. These chapters can be read in essentially any order. They may be taken like one of those lists of great films that your friends might recommend for you, which usually come in no prescribed sequence but resonate with aspects of their own biographies. (After all, the reason I was born in Santa Fe was because my parents had just moved to New Mexico to work with the Navajo.) I harbor no doubt that somebody else, were they to attempt to answer the same question of when minoritized languages steered linguistic theory in wholly new directions, might come up with an entirely different and equally valid set of case studies. (At least, this is what I take away from the answer to the question posed about “Life, the Universe, and Everything” in The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy — where “42” was one of many equally valid possible answers.) Like all such answers, they reflect in part my own biases, expertise, and familiarity. As for me, I have often found myself more fulfilled in thatched dwellings than ivory towers. My greatest moments of connection with language enthusiasts have not necessarily been the ones at All Souls’ College, the Institut Jean Nicod, Johns Hopkins University, or Goethe University Frankfurt but rather the ones with a group of whistling shepherds in a darkened local mayor’s office on a Greek isle, an isolated group of deaf homesigners in the desert backlands of northeast Brazil, or an audience of all-African academics in Mozambique struggling to cast off a still-colonial tongue. Some of the case studies in this book reflect my personal experiences in attempting to highlight the scientific relevance of minoritized languages to the speakers of these languages, valorizing the pertinence of their linguistic identities even when the details may sit uncomfortably with existing theories and require dialogue and revision. Other case studies involve what might be considered by-now canonical, ‘greatest hits’ of successful marriages between minoritized languages and linguistic theory. The goal is to provide a representative smattering of what has been done, more than anything else, as a means of continuing to invite and point towards what I consider to be healthy futures for continued linguistic work.

We must acknowledge that it is cavalier to pose and respond to questions of human nature on the basis of data drawn from thin and rather unusual slices of humanity (Henrich et al., 2010) as they are not really representative of how the numerical majority of humans do, have, or will live, and they may have been influenced – or I daresay corrupted – by systems that don’t apply
Figure 1.1 The Müller-Lyer illusion, in which the right line appears longer to some populations

Why did the San foragers not perceive the illusion the same way as the humans who were tested in North America and Europe? The explanation is a matter of interest in itself. As Henrich et al. (2010) discuss, one interpretation of these results is that “carpentered corners of modern environments favor optical calibrations and visual habits that create and perpetuate this illusion” (p. 4). But the broader finding, regardless of the explanation, is that one cannot use the Müller-Lyer illusion to make broad claims about the way the human visual system works based on the assumption that the illusory results for European populations represent the default and the others a deviation from the baseline. Perhaps quite the contrary is true; across psychology, and our subsequent understanding of many social sciences as well, the results observed with people who do experiments in Europe might be unrepresentative of many aspects of human nature if we wish to make claims about human tendencies, past, present, and future.

In much more subtle ways, the same may be true for the very formulation of indexical shift in pronouns, as found in Zazaki Kurdish, as a ‘deviation’ from the expected maintenance of references in indirect discourse – particular versions of written texts and written registers are products of particular cultural trajectories in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and/or democratic (WEIRD) societies and not part of most environments for most of human history. Kiparsky (1995) suggests that the particular syntactic structures for finite embedding in what we might call European WEIRD languages (and...
which have determined the baseline for syntactic theories about the complementizer layer in syntax) may reflect one particular historical outcome of the lottery – and this outcome happened to be spoken in and around the same country as where the printing press originated. As but one more potential example of how it may be that Western European languages are ‘weird’ compared to others, consider Dahl’s (1990) observation that “inversion as a device for marking yes–no questions seems to be rather infrequent outside Europe” (p. 4). I should stress that I do not necessarily subscribe to Henrich et al.’s (2010) classification of what they call WEIRD cultures or languages as holding a typological cluster of common properties – in fact, linguistic structure has so many distinct levels that I would consider it impossible to cluster any large group of languages in terms of similarity metrics (do we privilege morphosyntax and ignore the stark differences between, say, the vowel systems of French and Spanish?). But I fully embrace Henrich et al.’s (2010) methodological point that we cannot rely on the convenience of samples of students and languages in our university classrooms as broadly representative of humanity and must be aware that an all-too-easy “lack of epistemic vigilance underscores the prevalent, though implicit, assumption that the findings one derives from a particular sample will generalize broadly” (p. 3).

It’s still an empirical question and one that requires not only stronger empirical foundations of the language sciences but stronger connections between observations and theory – including theories of social dynamics and interaction, where relevant. Lupyan and Dale (2010), based on a statistical analysis of more than 2,000 languages, suggest that the overall traits of individual languages, such as their level of morphological complexity, may be related to demographic and sociohistorical factors: Languages spoken by large groups have morphological structures with fewer case distinctions and less verbal inflection for grammatical categories such as negation, evidentiality, and aspect, than languages spoken by smaller groups. Why should this be? Languages spoken by large groups (often ones that minoritize others) are more likely to include adult learners of the language (this has certainly been historically true for English, Spanish, French, German, and so on), and as a result, features of language structure that are harder for adults to learn are more likely to disappear over generations of language use. Similarly, Wray and Grace (2007) suggest that certain types of compositionality in the structures of many of the more familiar languages today are the gradual result of the ‘exoteric’ nature (larger speaker populations, greater geographical coverage, and greater degree of contact with other languages) of most modern languages, rather than being a defining characteristic of human language per se. They liken making conclusions about the human language faculty disproportionally on the basis of the languages most easily and most often studied today to trying to work out how humans jump
over horizontal obstacles on the sole basis of watching the high jump event at the Olympic Games.2

Let’s take one more example from cognitive psychology. Classic studies on construals of others’ dispositions and cognitive strategies, originally based on Western participants, argued that ‘people’ (i.e., humans in general) tend to make strong attributions about the core dispositions of an individual and ignore compelling situational constraints specific to certain moments. This led to a cognitive theory called the fundamental attribution error (Ross et al., 1977), whereby, say if Alice, a driver, is cut off in traffic by Bob, she attributes Bob’s behavior to his fundamental personality (e.g., he thinks only of himself, he is selfish, he is a jerk, or he is an unskilled driver), instead of considering it as situational (e.g., he is going to miss his flight, his wife is giving birth at the hospital, and so on). This became enshrined as a cornerstone of psychology, until, in subsequent comparative ethnography (e.g., Choi et al., [1999]), it was discovered that non-Western populations found contextual beliefs more strongly endorsed than personality in experimental scenarios. This work changed the theory according to which the fundamental attribution error was such a fundamental and constant aspect of the model of what people tend to think – in essence, the status of this claim about pan-human psychology was an artifact of having done the experiments with North Americans first.

Could the semantic formalization of contextual parameters governing indexical expressions like I, now in embedded speech reports have started on the foot it did because of having started with English? Where might we be by now if philosophers had started writing things down with Zazaki’s linguistic patterns at hand in 1977?

To take one more instructive case from the behavioral sciences, Nowak et al. (2000) construct an evolutionary-theoretic analysis for the ‘Ultimatum Game’ in decision and game theory. In the Ultimatum Game, two players are offered a chance to win a certain sum of money. All they must do is divide it. The proposer suggests how to split the sum. The responder can accept or reject the deal. If the deal is rejected, neither player gets anything. Obviously, rational responders should accept even the smallest positive offer, since the alternative is getting nothing. Nonetheless, in experiments, the observed bias is towards cooperation only in fair splits of the sum. Nowak et al. (2000) ultimately argue that a mathematical model of the results will show change over time, mimicking evolution and moving away from this ‘rational’ solution and towards a pattern of fairness, if the proposer can obtain some information on what deals the responder has accepted in the past. In other words, they

2 In a similar vein, Ladefoged (1975) suggests that the alphabet now “standard” on all keyboards – which went viral after the Phoenicians and through the Romans and their descendents – is a kind of linguistic aberration that happened to originate in a particularly influential slice of geohistorical time.
needed to add a mathematical coefficient based on ‘reputation knowledge’ of the collaborator in the game in order to account for deviations from the expected model. This coefficient became a necessary cornerstone in their theory of the evolution of universal cognitive biases in social interaction and decision-making. Nonetheless, in replications with 23 societies of foragers, horticulturalists, pastoralists, and subsistence farmers, Henrich et al. (2010) report that most of these small-scale societies, such as the Tsimane of Bolivia, show patterns that involve no need at all for this reputation coefficient as a basic part of the model. What’s the takeaway message? If the mathematical research had been done first with participants who were Tsimane foragers instead of mid-Atlantic undergraduates, the unadorned original mathematical model would have been taken as more representative of humanity at large. The same concerns of generalizability would have been there – and perhaps even more sharply, in the opposite direction – but such vigilance about generalizability should actually be there when going in any direction, no matter which population one starts out with. Thus, could it have been the case that if the fervent syntactic theorizing of North America that happened in the 1970s had instead taken place within institutions with speakers of Kamaiurá – which embeds only nominalized clauses (Seki & Nevins, 2018) – that the theory of the complementizers may have started on a different foot? Of course, starting with Kamaiurá and later getting to English, as opposed to starting with English and turning to Kamaiurá later, it may (and ideally will!) still end up as the same complete theory when all is said and done – if Kamaiurá is still around then, that is. Minoritized languages may not always be there to work on later, as we know.

I contend that it is appropriate to use the verbal participle ‘minoritized’ (or marginalized) as opposed to the adjective ‘minority’ (which is simply inaccurate for languages such as Xhosa or Zulu in South Africa, which have never been numerically minority but have indeed been minoritized). Moreover, the term ‘minority languages’ potentially suggests an inherent quality as opposed to what is actually the case: Languages become minoritized as the contingent result of active choices and resultant actions carried out by agents ranging from political leaders to members of the scientific community, with intentions that may range from sinister to negligent. As England (2007) points out, the Mayan languages have an unparalleled number of speaker-linguists and academic research output among all indigenous languages within the Americas, even though “the current state of linguistics in Guatemala must be understood against the background of a country that has been profoundly racist at every level” (p. 3). She adds that “programs in linguistics in Guatemala have been tacitly understood as programs in the linguistics of indigenous languages and as such have been difficult to establish, in spite of the fact that 50% or more of the national population is Maya.” Reconsideration and subsequent
replacement of the term ‘minority’ by ‘minoritized’ has been forcefully argued for not only in linguistics (e.g., Kasbarian [1997] but in disciplines ranging from education (Stewart, 2013) to medicine (Sotto-Santiago, 2019), where the latter observes, “Minoritization recognizes that systemic inequalities, oppression, and marginalization place individuals into ‘minority’ status rather than their own characteristics” (p. 73). The term minoritized language (or its equivalents in Romance languages, such as French minorisation) has been firmly established for at least 30 years within linguistics (Py & Jeanneret, 1989); it has a full entry in Wikipedia, where it is succinctly reported that “Minoritized languages are typically restricted to a smaller range of domains than dominant languages, and frequently one-way bilingualism develops when speakers of minoritized languages learn the dominant language, but not vice versa.” This sociolinguistic minoritization is a process (hence its verbal aspect, as opposed to static ‘minority’), with dynamics that change for a range of reasons in communities of different types throughout the world (see, for example, Léglise & Alby [2006]), resulting from the ideologies or policies of nation-states to establish a single language as part of a national culture (as in Franco’s Spain, as in nineteenth-century Bretagne, as in Vargas’ dictatorship in Brazil, as in the Stolen Generation in Australia, and innumerable examples beyond). A minoritized language is a language that, as a result of purely social constructs, has less power than other languages (e.g., dominant languages, official languages, written languages, or language of schooling, as backed by regulating and prescriptive norms) and less overall representation in the scientific and cultural landscape. As my ten year-old son Arturo observed at the time of writing this paragraph, “A minoritized language must be one that you don’t see many street signs written in.” This constant state of diglossia (and one-way bilingualism) with dominant languages mean that, while signers of Black ASL must learn two other dominant languages within a larger sociolinguistic interactional scene (white ASL and American English), the reverse does not hold. Minoritized languages, when historically excluded from use in government and in formal education, sometimes end up being used only at home and in social situations. An immediate consequence is that they aren’t spoken in class at universities, exactly where academics are doing their work.

Actions of minoritization of languages through violence, criminalization, or imposition have been countless over the centuries, with the imperial juggernauts and their descendants (e.g., Brazil, Australia, South Africa, North America) as some of the worst perpetrators. Even on a smaller scale within educational sectors, minoritization continues. Speakers of minoritized languages in many parts of the world have grown up hearing that their languages have no grammar. As England (2007) points out, Mayan languages are not called ‘languages’ in Guatemala but instead “tongues” (lenguas, with a pejorative connotation) or ‘dialects’. I have heard pejorative equivalents around the globe, often uttered...
by ‘innocent’ and even seemingly well-meaning people. If there is one broad message this book can translate towards a greater sector of the public, it is that not only are minoritized languages, as a matter of fact, languages that have grammars, but their grammars show complex and challenging phenomena, the understanding of which bears the potential to transform our understanding of the manifestations of the human mind.