The logistics of meta-megastudies

Speaker: Prof. James Myers, National Chung Cheng University
Date: 13 Oct 2016 (Thursday)
Time: 2pm – 4pm
Venue: OEM708 (the lab)

Megastudies are the latest fad among psycholinguists who work on the mental lexicon: large-scale studies, with many test items and participants, designed to make it possible to tease apart the many partially confounded variables that beset lexical research, which resist being forced into the crossed categorical factors of traditional experiments. My lab has run some too, focusing on wordlikeness judgments (what non-psycholinguists often call phonological acceptability judgments or wug tests); results from some of our Mandarin wordlikeness megastudies are freely available at http://lngproc.ccu.edu.tw/MWP/.

But megastudies still miss a crucial variable: cross-linguistic differences. Suppose we observe that the wordlikeness judgments of English speakers are far more sensitive to phonotactics than those of Mandarin speakers (as we have in fact observed). What might explain this? Is it because English has too many syllables to memorize, forcing English speakers to decompose them into smaller segments, as compared to the mere 1400 or so lexical syllables in Mandarin? Or is it because Mandarin is written with a morphemic/syllabic orthographic system, whereas English orthography explicitly decomposes syllables into smaller segments? There are several other confounded variables as well, making it impossible to figure out which variable(s) is/are crucial if we compare only English and Mandarin.

What we need are meta-megastudies, super-experiments that include not just many test items and speakers, but many languages as well. My lab has made some efforts along these lines, running experiments on bilingual speakers of Mandarin and Southern Min (which differ in syllable inventory size and speaker experience with orthographical encodings), but even adding a third language to our set is far from sufficient for true typological analysis. The tricky thing is that typological experimentation is far more difficult than traditional typological linguistics. We do not have the luxury of simply compiling experimental results from grammar books, but must instead hope that native speakers of hundreds of diverse languages will independently decide to run experiments and share their results, all while maintaining methods consistent enough to permit cross-language comparisons.

As a step towards overcoming the enormous logistical challenges of meta-megastudies, my postdoc Tsung-Ying Chen and I have created a free, open-source web app called **Worldlikeness** (http://lngproc-4083.nitrouspro.com:3000/), designed for independent research groups, working across the world, to collect and share wordlikeness judgments.

My presentation will include a hands-on demonstration of Worldlikeness, to inspire all who attend to exploit it for their own selfish purposes (classwork, conference talks, journal submissions, theses), and hopefully also to encourage a few to share their data through the web app as well, and help us help bring together the now-separate worlds of experimental and typological phonology.

Speaker autobiography
I received my Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Arizona in 1993, and in 2006 somehow became distinguished professor at National Chung Cheng University in Taiwan, where I've been teaching since 1997. My dissertation took a psycholinguistic approach to theoretical phonology, and that's mostly what I still do, with side trips into morphology, syntax, computational linguistics, and the philosophy and methodology of linguistics. I've published in *Journal of Phonetics*, *Language & Linguistics Compass*, *Lingua* (are we still allowed to admit that?), *Journal of Memory and Language*, *Journal of Child Language*, *Cognition*, *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, *Language and Linguistics*, and a bunch of more obscure venues, and am co-editor on Brill's *Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics* (order your copy today!). My homepage (a real one, not LinkedIn or Academia.edu or something) is easy to google, since I'm the most famous James Myers in Taiwan.