

Variation is not noise: From genetics to language change and diversity

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The existence and multi-level patterning of variation in language is obviously old news to typologists, but what might be still under-appreciated is the non-trivial and structured diversity that characterises language's broader environment. More precisely, the physical, biological, social and cultural environments in which language is acquired and used differ in non-random ways, and it has been suggested that aspects of this variation might nudge language change affecting the observed patterns of linguistic diversity. I will focus here on the distribution of variation between individuals within groups as well as between groups and argue that, far from being just a source of noise better ignored by linguists or a slippery slope towards racism, embracing the amazing variety at the core of humanity is the only viable approach to a full understanding of language and its evolution. As such, I will argue that speaker diversity ultimately not only drives linguistic diversity, but also other core properties of language including its robustness, redundancy and complexity, using as an example my current work attempting to connect the development and structure of the vocal tract to phonetic and phonological cross-linguistic diversity.