

Iris Berent (Northeastern University)

Language universals: a view from phonology

All accounts of cross-linguistic universals and variation must be rooted in a cognitive theory of the language faculty. At the heart of the generative tradition are two hypotheses: (a) the grammar encompasses a set of algebraic rules; and (b) some rules are shared across languages. Both hypotheses have been rejected by most contemporary psycholinguistic models in favor of an associative, domain-general alternative. Here, I address the challenge using the unlikely case of phonology. I will first present experimental evidence from spoken and signed languages, suggesting that phonological generalizations rely on algebraic rules, endowed with the principled capacity for discrete infinity—a capacity typically reserved for syntax alone. I will then move to ask whether some phonological rules are shared across languages. Using the case of sonority restrictions, I will demonstrate that speakers of different languages converge on similar preferences concerning syllable structure, these preferences are dissociable from sensorimotor pressures, they are present in the absence of relevant lexical evidence, they are active close to birth and their computation engages Broca's area.