If Malayalam is becoming less flexible, then younger speakers should show a greater difference between older individuals have been shown to be less tolerant of complexity, so age could correspond with higher ratings word-minimality, restructuring of the lexicon), so syntactic change would not be surprising Malayalam is non-canonical grammatical orders are associated with lower acceptability (Westcott & Fanselow 2011) and processing difficulty (Kwon et al. 2009) Languages which allow and use many orders are often called flexible, and language contact is associated with decreased or increased flexibility (Heine 2008 and Fortescue 1993 respectively)

**Acceptability Judgments and Variation**

Formal acceptability judgment tasks yield gradient results and can measure potentially small differences between sentence types or speakers. Apparent-time studies track change in a linguistic variable by comparing speakers of different ages within a single community (Labov 1972 et seq.)

Assumption: differences between age-based cohorts reflect diachronic change in linguistic systems

Proposal: combine formal acceptability tasks with the apparent-time construct to look for change in constituent order systems

**VARIABILITY IN CONSTITUENT ORDER**

**Languages differ in term of:**
- which order is canonical (unmarked, discourse-neutral)
- which orders are grammatical
- what functions are associated with non-canonical grammatical orders
- ...and languages change in these respects as well.

Non-canonical grammatical orders are associated with lower acceptability (Westcott & Fanselow 2011) and processing difficulty (Kwon et al. 2009)

Languages which allow and use many orders are often called flexible, and language contact is associated with decreased or increased flexibility (Heine 2008 and Fortescue 1993 respectively)

**EXPERIMENT: VARIABILITY AND VARIATION IN MALAYALAM CONSTITUENT ORDER**

All 6 logical constituent orders are grammatical in Malayalam, with different object marking

SOV is the canonical order. OSV is associated with topicalization, and verb-medial and verb-final orders are associated with anti-topic and anti-epithetic functions

Malayalam is undergoing changes in other areas of the grammar (borrowing of phonemes, violations of word-minimality, restructuring of the lexicon), so syntactic change would not be surprising

Audio stimuli, conducted in Praat. 43 participants heard 5 examples of each of 6 conditions; transitive sentences with animate subjects and inanimate objects (no overt case-marking)

30 experimental items + 40 fillers of varying acceptability, counterbalanced; 1-7 Likert scale

**Older individuals have been shown to be less tolerant of complexity, so age could correspond with higher ratings for canonical orders and lower ratings for non-canonical orders.**

If Malayalam is becoming less flexible, then younger speakers should show a greater difference between canonical and non-canonical orders.

**Older individuals have been shown to be less tolerant of complexity, so age could correspond with higher ratings for canonical orders and lower ratings for non-canonical orders.**

**REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**FIGS 1-3: OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF FLEXIBILITY: RELATIVE ACCEPTABILITY OF CANONICAL ORDER**

**Fig. 1: English**

**Fig. 2: Korean**

**Fig. 3: Malayalam**

**INCREASED FLEXIBILITY IN OLDER SPEAKERS IS LIKELY TO BE DUE TO DIFFERENCES IN LINGUISTIC SYSTEMS, AS OPPOSED TO COGNITIVE DECLINE**

**WHAT EXPLAINS THIS DIFFERENCE?**

Ageing? unlikely as age is associated with reduced acceptability and increased processing difficulty for complex constructions

Experience? If increased experience with non-canonical orders is leading to increased acceptability, all non-canonical orders should be affected

Contact? Language contact is associated with reduced flexibility; younger speakers have increased and earlier experience with English