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ON TEACHING MARKEDNESS

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Markedness is a concept in linguistic theory which often puzzles beginning students when they first encounter it. The basic notion of a feature (or sound or construction or whatever) being more likely to occur than another either cross-linguistically or within a particular language is relatively easy to grasp. However, actual examples of markedness often obscure this notion because the same feature can be marked in one context but unmarked in another. Students would be much happier if, for example, they could rely on voicing being always marked or unmarked. This, unfortunately, is not the case. Voicing is marked for nonsonorants but unmarked for sonorants, marked for word-final obstruents but unmarked for (single) intervocalic obstruents, and so forth.

I have found that the following 'real-world' analogy is a useful device not only for introducing the concept of markedness to undergraduates initially, but also for de-mystifying the variation one finds in the markeness of an element depending on its context. The analogy is based on the conditions under which right turns on a red light are permitted in New York state.

In all parts of New York state except New York City (and in most other states as well), right turns at a red traffic signal light are permitted unless a sign specifically prohibits them. Thus one's normal expectations, upon reaching a red light in suburban White Plains, New York, for instance, would be that it should be legal to make a right turn. Being permitted to make a right turn at a red light therefore is UNMARKED for most of New York state. In New York City, however, right turns on a red light are PROHIBITED unless a sign specifically PERMITS them. The markedness of right turns on a red light in New York City, thus, is opposite to that found in the rest of the state—'right-on-red' is the marked situation in New York City and no 'right-on-red' is the unmarked case.

This example shows a real-world context in which markedness, i.e. expectations as to what constitutes the 'normal' state of affairs, plays a role. It thus takes linguistic theory 'out of the classroom' by giving a concrete, non-linguistic example of an important but somewhat abstract theoretical notion. Also, since many states or localities have laws like New York's for right-on-red or a similar traffic maneuver (e.g. U-turns), it is often possible to make the point in terms of local laws.

More importantly, perhaps, this analogy emphasizes the fact that mar-

kedness is relative and depends on the contextual field in which the feature in question occurs. This analogy also shows that the difference in context need not be a large one in order to effect a difference in markedness value—just as the (small) geographical difference between suburban White Plains and New York City is enough to effect a difference in the markedness of right-on-red, so also is a small difference such as word-final position versus word-medial position enough to effect a difference in the markedness of voicing.