

A Unified Theory of Stable Variation, Syntactic Optionality, and Syntactic Change

Joel C. Wallenberg

Newcastle University (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne)

This paper considers two issues which are so problematic for linguistic theory that they have frequently been brute-force encoded in the grammar with little explanatory content, namely syntactic optionality and diachronically stable sociolinguistic variation. This study shows how we can use what we have learned from the study of diachronic syntax to provide a unified account of both these phenomena in terms of an independently motivated theory of language change: competing grammars (Kroch 1989). Without any complication to our model of the linguistic system beyond competing grammars, I will show the following: first, that stable variation, grammatical optionality, and syntactic change in progress are a single phenomenon in terms of a speaker's internal system, and secondly, that the apparent differences between these phenomena can be fully explained as an effect of the interface between the narrow grammar and language acquisition on the one hand, and general properties of cognitive and social systems, on the other.

Thus, the paper presents a strictly Minimalist proposal, in the sense of Chomsky (1993, 2001, and subsequent); what at first appear to be three different types of variation, optional operations, stable sociolinguistic variation, and unstable competing grammars, are really the effects of a maximally simple derivation interfacing with different types of independent linguistic and extralinguistic structures. The basic proposal is the following: all variation and optionality between categorical variants is a case of competing grammars, or “doublets” in the sense of Kroch (1994). Stable variation or optionality is simply a subcase of competing grammars in which two variants partially overlap in their contexts of use, but are also partly specialized for use, leading to stochastic behavior in the overlapping context(s). This situation of partial specialization is only stable over time under a very special circumstance: when the variants are specialized along a continuous dimension of use.

In the talk I present four case studies, one morphophonological and three morphosyntactic, which have been described either as diachronically stable variation or as optional operations: *-in/-ing* variation, Heavy NP Shift and extraposition, *whether/if* variation in embedded questions (Bailey et al. 2012), and English topicalization. Each case involves a probabilistic alternation between surface variants, and I show that they are all best understood as instances of the “competing grammars” phenomenon, i.e. the same alternation between linguistic variants which is observed during a syntactic change in progress (Kroch 1989). In each case, the potentially competing grammars fail to fully compete because they have been specialized in use for different linguistic or sociolinguistic contexts. However, they also fail to fully specialize due to the mathematical characteristics of the dimension of use along which they are trying to specialize. Furthermore, this result falls out naturally if specialization is understood as the result of a strategy for language acquisition, the “Principle of Contrast” (Clark 1987, 1990). Building on the variational acquisition model in Yang (2000), the Principle of Contrast can be stated in a precise enough way that the different possible outcomes of specialization (full and partial) result automatically from the interaction between the narrow grammar, the acquisition process, and the continuous or categorical nature of the dimension of specialization. Additionally, the extraposition case study will present new data from a diachronic comparison of relative clause extraposition in French, English, and Icelandic, and some consequences for an antisymmetric analysis of extraposition phenomena.

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