

## Introduction: Analysing and Explaining Syntactic Variation

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Studies of syntactic variation have formed part of variationist sociolinguistics at least since Labov (1969), and so have discussions of why and how the field should include syntactic variables. Within the past few decades, other linguistic traditions have begun embracing variation as an incontrovertible fact of natural language, and have thus introduced new theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of syntactic variation; see, for example, Anttila and Cho (1998), Bresnan, Deo and Sharma (2007) and Sharma, Bresnan and Deo (2008), who explain variable output as the effect of a stochastic optimality theory grammar; Cornips and Corrigan (2005a), who present different generative approaches to variation; Kristiansen and Dirven (2008) and Geeraerts, Kristiansen and Peirsman (2010), who present cognitive sociolinguistics as a new field of study; Harder (2010), who discusses cognitive-functional developments towards a more socially cognisant theory of language; and Bybee (2006), who argues for an exemplar-based model (e.g. Pierrehumbert 2001) of the cognitive representation of grammar within the so-called usage-based approach to language.

One of the fascinating aspects of syntactic variation as an object of study is that it continues to raise fundamental questions pertaining to (socio)linguistic theory and methodology. These are questions such as: How do we define the linguistic variable to encompass more than phonological variation? How do we delimit what counts as variants in terms of overlapping meaning and variable form? To what extent are different levels of variation (e.g. morphology, syntax, semantics and lexis) determined by linguistic versus social (including stylistic) factors?

This volume offers six different studies of syntactic variation, representing different research traditions and different research designs, all presented with the aim of elucidating some of the theoretical and methodological considerations underlying studies of linguistic variation ‘above and beyond phonology’ (cf. Sankoff 1973). While the chapters do not uniformly point in the same direction or draw upon the same linguistic tenets or even schools, we hope that the detailed reasoning provided by their authors will alter readers’ perspectives on what is to be counted as syntactic variation and on how to study it.

### How to ‘Say the Same Thing’ Syntactically

The notion of the linguistic variable as introduced by Labov (1966) is fundamental to determining whether a set of syntactic constructions can be considered variants in any technical sense, and thereby may be covered by the umbrella of variationist sociolinguistics. The oft-cited Labovian definition that a variable comprises ‘alternate ways of saying “the same” thing’ (e.g. Labov 1972, 188) has been debated from the early years of variationist sociolinguistics. This criterion is sometimes referred to as the ‘synonymy principle’ (e.g. Pütz, Robinson and Reif 2014, 248; Cornips and Gregersen 2016, 507), which reflects the general understanding that ‘saying the same thing’ entails some sort of semantic equivalence. A long line of studies, starting with Lavandera (1978), has since taken up the discussion of what semantic equivalence amounts to, to what extent it applies to syntactic variation and, crucially, whether it can be replaced with a broader notion of ‘sameness’.

While early explorations into syntactic variation were mainly concerned with demonstrating that syntax does in fact exhibit variable features (e.g. Labov 1969; Sankoff 1973; Rickford 1975), Lavandera (1978) urged sociolinguists to consider the requirement of semantic equivalence when the object of study moves from phonology to morphology, lexicon or syntax: ‘Notice where the source of the difficulty lies: units beyond phonology, let us say a morpheme, or a lexical item, or a syntactic construction, each have by definition a meaning’ (Lavandera 1978, 175).

Obviously, the point is not just that each unit has a meaning, but that they are *different* meanings. If one syntactic construction, for example the active construction in English, means ‘the referent of the grammatical subject is the agent of the activity denoted by the verb’, and another, for example the passive, means ‘the referent of the grammatical subject is the patient of the activity denoted by the verb’, then they are not semantically equivalent (although two sentences using each of these constructions may ultimately refer to the same state of affairs, as in ‘They broke into the closet’ vs. ‘The closet was broken into’; cf. Weiner and Labov (1983, 36) and the discussion in Lavandera (1978)).

Such a conception of meaning as a grammatical rather than merely a lexical or a referential phenomenon is well known throughout most of the history of linguistics. We can trace it from Saussure’s bipartite sign, connecting a ‘sound-image’ (*signifiant*) with a ‘concept’ (*signifié*) in the linguistic sign (Saussure 1916), through Bolinger’s (1977, x) proclamation that ‘[t]he natural condition of language is to preserve one form for one meaning, and one meaning for one form’ to current cognitive-functional frameworks. With few exceptions, functionalists and cognitive linguists alike will posit at least a correspondence between form and meaning to explain why speakers use one sign or

construction rather than another, in a specific context (Diver 2011[1975]; Goldberg 1995; Engberg-Pedersen 1996; Croft 2001; Langacker 2001). This holds not only for single words and morphemes but also for multiple-word constructions, including those that are purely syntactically defined, such as the active and passive discussed earlier in this section.

The question of whether and how to extend variation studies to syntax thus inevitably touches upon discussions about the traditional delimitation of linguistic disciplines. If grammarians (at least of a cognitive-functional bend) deal with form–meaning pairings, whether called ‘signs’ or ‘constructions’ or something else, and sociolinguists (at least of a variationist bend) deal with differences in form that do not result in a difference in meaning, then the domains of linguistic enquiry are easily apportioned and each group of scholars can carry on focusing on their own theories, research questions, methods and data types.

However, if we aim for a more comprehensive theory of language, one that accounts for the systematic correspondences between form and meaning, whether conditioned mainly by linguistic or social contexts, such a division of labour is untenable. It may be practical, but it lacks in both descriptive and explanatory adequacy, since a strict divide between categorial meaning and variable form does not match the data and provides little explanation for how language works as a communicative tool or how it changes and adapts to external and internal pressures. We thus return to a place where we have to contemplate the consequences of syntactic alternations as instances of variation proper, that is, as linguistic units that are interchangeable and co-vary with other linguistic and/or social factors. Restating the argument in simple terms: If all syntactic alternations express different meanings, none of them are covered by the concept of the linguistic variable as originally expounded by Labov and taken up in half a century of sociolinguistic research.

Basically, there are three ways to proceed from that framing of the problem. One is to restrict sociolinguistic variation studies to phonology and perhaps the few morphological and syntactic features that the scholarly community may agree are in fact truly synonymous. However, this would deprive us of a lot of valuable information about language use, language as a system and language as it changes over time, and it is obviously not the solution we recommend. Another way forward builds upon Sankoff and Thibault’s (1981) method of identifying syntactic variables through ‘weak complementarity’, which refers to social groups having inverse proportions of (even formally dissimilar) constructions, such that ‘where one variant is used less, the other is used more’ (1981, 207). Where Sankoff and Thibault (1981, 211) assumed that weak complementarity was proof that a purported semantic difference was ‘irrelevant’ or ‘neutralized’ for speakers, current variationist methodology acknowledges that a semantic distinction may obtain in some cases but, as a

countermeasure, requires researchers to locate and count only those contexts where occurrences effectively mean the same thing (but see Aaron 2010 for a challenge to this principle). Identifying the contexts where possible semantic differences between variants are ‘neutralized’ and serve as functional alternates for speakers is part of the methodological step called ‘circumscribing the variable context’ or ‘envelope of variation’ (Labov 1969, 728–9; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989, 60; Blake 1997). According to this criterion, only contexts in which the syntactic alternants can be exchanged *without* changing the overall ‘discourse function’ should form part of a variationist study. Of course, this requirement does not dispense with the equivalence problem, but rather transforms it into a question of what counts as the same discourse function. Since discourse functions are multidimensional, proposals are wide-ranging and often open-ended (important discussions are raised in Dines 1980; Romaine 1984; Dubois 1992; Cheshire 2007; Pichler 2010; Terkourafi 2011; and others).

This leads us to the third way of dealing with the problem, namely abandoning the quest for semantic equivalence in favour of studying the meaningful distribution of semantically dissimilar variants. This approach departs from the previous one in focusing on hypotheses about the semantic distinctions assumed to underlie the varied use of syntactic, or other, alternants. Whereas a traditional circumscription of the variable context typically leads to a reporting of results with little or no discussion of the semantic differences between variants (because they are assumed to be irrelevant within the examined contexts), this third approach has semantic distinctions as an integral part of the research design and the conclusions reached.

One of the few sociolinguists to consistently pursue semantic variation as a research topic is Ruqaiya Hasan. Starting from the early critique of Labovian sociolinguistics in ‘Semantic Variation and Sociolinguistics’ (Hasan 2009 [1989]) and culminating in the collection of her works in the volume *Semantic Variation: Meaning in Society and in Sociolinguistics* (Hasan 2009), Hasan’s research pushed the boundaries of sociolinguistics in ways that have received far too little recognition (but see, e.g., Cloran 2000; Bowcher and Liang 2016). One reason may be that she presented her project as intertwined with one specific theory of language, namely systemic functional linguistics (SFL; e.g. Halliday and Matthiessen 2013)<sup>1</sup>. With its set of metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal and textual), SFL provides an excellent theoretical framework for locating a commonality between variants that includes their meaning variations, but we want to point out that this is not the only way to conceptualize the relation between semantics and variation. In

<sup>1</sup> Another could be the oft-recognized fear of attributing some cognitive deficit to a social group based on their diminished use of a particular meaning, likely from a misconception of the relationship between mind and language (see Dines 1980; Hasan 2009 [1989]; Terkourafi 2011).

Chapter 3 of this volume, Otheguy and Shin argue that an updated understanding of the bipartite sign also satisfies the need to study how different, but connected, meanings vary systematically (a similar perspective underlies the study presented by Christensen and Jensen in Chapter 6 of this volume).

Such an extension of what counts as the ‘same thing’ paves the way for using variationist methods to examine grammatical categories (paradigms) as well. Members of grammatical paradigms, such as the verbal paradigms of tense or voice and the nominal paradigms of number or definiteness, share a certain semantic domain (a ‘conceptual zone’, Danish: *begrebszone*, in the words of Hjelmslev 1972 [1934]) within which they occupy separate or to some extent overlapping sections. In other words, separate morphological or (morpho-) syntactic units are already recognized by tradition to be connected by a common aspect of meaning – if they belong to the same paradigm. Tradition would argue that the distribution of such units is determined by what people want to say, not by who they are or how they present themselves to the world. Ultimately, this is an empirical question, and Hasan, among others, has proven that contention false. There are meanings that are distributed in a way that co-varies with social groups. Hasan and Cloran (1990), for example, show how middle-class mothers differ significantly from working-class mothers in the way they interact with their children when asking and responding to questions. For instance, middle-class children, and especially girls, ask more open *how/why* questions than closed *who/what/where* questions and, correspondingly, their mother provide more elaborate answers (Hasan and Cloran 1990, 89).

Many scholars have called for a theory of language that can account for both the categorical and the variable domains of language, and both the ‘internal’, that is, linguistic, and the ‘external’, that is, social, conditions for using one form rather than another (e.g. Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968; Hasan 2009 [1989]; Guy 1997; Cornips and Corrigan 2005a; Kristiansen and Dirven 2008; Geeraerts, Kristiansen and Peirsman 2010; Harder 2010; Otheguy and Zentella 2012; Pütz, Robinson and Reif 2014). As both generative and cognitive-functional linguistics have moved from analysing carefully selected (and sometimes constructed) utterances to exploring large volumes of data with corpus-linguistic methods, results have become messier and more difficult to explain in simple, categorical terms. Variation is therefore increasingly examined as an empirical fact of naturally occurring language use, even within approaches to language that traditionally have ignored or dismissed variable language use.

At the same time, variationist sociolinguistics affords a considerable role to language-internal predictors. The relevant predictors are often drawn from both previous variationist studies and the grammatical literature on a specific alternation. In fact, there is a whole strain of studies that examine language variation

and change as instances of grammatical change that is visible in the changing constraint rankings over time (e.g. Poplack and Malvar 2007; Schwenter and Cacoulios 2008; Aaron 2010; Poplack 2011; Arroyo and Schulte 2017). These synchronic ‘snapshots’ of grammaticalization processes capture shifting configurations of older and younger forms, what is called ‘layering’ in grammaticalization theory (Hopper 1991; Poplack 2011, 210–11). In a diachronic perspective, changes in constraint rankings can point to shifts in the internal structure of grammatical categories that happen as a consequence of the reanalysis of other, but related, categories (see the notion of ‘connecting grammaticalization’ presented in Nørgård-Sørensen, Heltoft and Schøsler 2011). Similarly, comparisons of the significant predictors of linguistic variables, their relative strength and the ranking of levels within each predictor are part of the methodology employed in comparative sociolinguistics for assessing differences and similarities in the underlying grammars of synchronic language varieties (Montgomery 1989; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1999; Meyerhoff 2009; Tagliamonte 2012, 2013; Grafmiller and Szmrecsanyi 2019). Where constraints are sometimes viewed primarily as controls on the variation studied, a richer understanding of the variable is gained for those who see the linguistic factors not only as a means to predict patterns of variation but also as possible explanations for these patterns (see Chapter 3 in this volume for a more detailed functionally based argumentation for this).

### **Delimiting Syntax for Variation Studies**

A basic issue underlying all the studies in this volume relates to defining and delimiting syntax as a domain in which variation may occur. Given that syntax, simply put, concerns relations between words, we can distinguish three basic types of syntactic contexts that allow for systematic alternations. There are other, more complex types as well, as we discuss briefly in this section.

One of the most basic types of syntactic alternation involves the presence or absence of a syntactic item (meaning an item that stands in a fixed relation to other categories of words in a clause or a construction). This type of syntactic alternation has formed part of variationist research since its inception, as seen in Labov’s (1969) examination of the copula in African American vernacular English, Gillian Sankoff’s studies (Sankoff 1973, and later publications) of complementizer *que* in Canadian French, and many more. In this volume, Tagliamonte examines the conditions for use or omission of the English complementizer *that* (Chapter 1), Cornips reports on the social stratification of the Dutch auxiliary *doen* (Chapter 5), and Otheguy and Shin offer a meaning-based explanation for when speakers employ and do not employ Spanish subject pronouns (Chapter 3).

Another type of syntactic alternation concerns alternating word orders, that is, the different sequences in which syntactic items can occur. Word order alternations have for many years seemed more of a concern for grammarians, especially within generative linguistics, where movement of syntactic items is an integral part of how language structure is modelled (e.g. Travis 1984; Joshi 1987; Covington 1990). Sociolinguistic studies of word order have mainly focused on languages other than English, for example Sankoff (1973) on the placement of the Tok Pisin future marker *bai* relative to subject NPs (basically as *bai* [NP] vs. [NP] *bai*), and Ebert (1980) on the extralinguistic conditioning of fourteenth- to seventeenth-century German main and subordinate clause word orders. In this volume, word order variation is studied in Dutch, in the form of the perfective/passive order in subordinate clauses presented in Chapter 5 by Cornips, and in Danish, in the form of verb-adverb order in subordinate clauses presented in Chapter 6 by Christensen and Jensen.

The third basic type of syntactic alternation covers cases where syntax provides one or more slots to be filled with one member of a highly restricted set of alternants. A clear example in this volume is Grondelaers, van Gent and van Hout's study of the Dutch subject pronouns *zij* versus *hun* in Chapter 4 (see also Chapter 5). Likewise, Chapter 2 by Smith and Holmes-Elliott examines English negation expressed with either *never* or *didn't*. Their other variable, negative concord (widely referred to as 'double negatives'), can also be seen as this type of lexical-syntactic alternation, since the 'doubling' occurs when *nothing* is used instead of standard *anything* in constructions like *I haven't done nothing/anything*.

In addition to these simple types of syntactic alternations, there is a variety of more complex ones, where two or more words enter into a fixed, syntactic construction that cannot be reduced to a combination of the three basic ones. A good example is the dative alternation in English, where we find not only two alternating orders of direct and indirect object but also a shift in constituent status from a noun phrase to a prepositional phrase: *She gave him the book* (NP) versus *She gave the book to him* (PP) (e.g. Bresnan, Cueni et al. 2007; Tagliamonte 2014). A similar pattern is evident in the Dutch double object constructions examined in Chapter 5 in this volume. These more complicated syntactic structures come in so many different configurations that it would take us too far to survey them here, but they are the crux of the matter for construction grammars in their varied forms (e.g. Goldberg 1995; Croft 2001).

Even though all these types can be described as syntagmatic relations between a limited set of constituents, the syntactic roles in question are often fulfilled at least in part by lexical words (even in the case of word order variables, as when Danish verb-adverb order has to use a specific verb and a specific adverb, neither of which belong to the class of function words). It can therefore be difficult to distinguish what the effect of the syntactic pattern is and



what the effect of the lexical material is. As we describe in the next section, testing hypotheses about differences between lexical and grammatical/structural variation demands an a priori, or at least theoretically independent, definition of syntax and lexicon. Here, we take our departure in the three-way distinction to identify basic syntactic alternations, namely (i) occurrence or absence of a syntactic item, (ii) word order and (iii) structural slots, and use 'syntactic constructions' as a cover term for the more complex ones.

### Social Conditioning of Syntactic Variation

An empirical question common to most sociolinguistic studies of variation is the extent to which variables are socially stratified and, hence, presumably carry social meaning. Some have argued that grammatical variables, and in particular syntactic variables, are less disposed to social stratification (and even variation altogether) than phonological and lexical variables.

An early and oft-cited example of this kind of generalization is Suzanne Romaine's (1984) proposal of a typology of linguistic variables, organized on a spectrum from 'pure' phonological through morphophonemic, morphosyntactic and morpholexical, to 'pure' syntactic variables. Romaine uses this typology to question whether broad social factors, such as sex, age and social class, condition syntactic variation to any discernible extent, and argues that linguistic factors – including pragmatic factors and serial effects (Sankoff and Laberge 1978; Poplack 1980) – are more relevant as constraints on variant distribution. Similar viewpoints are expressed by, for example, Raumolin-Brunberg (1988), Rydén (1991), Cheshire (1996) and Winford (1996). It is generally acknowledged that most grammatical variables are less frequent in language use than phonological variables, which some scholars suggest makes them less accessible for social assessment (e.g. Raumolin-Brunberg 1988; Cheshire 1996, 1998). Cheshire (1998, 7) sums up the argument like this: 'Because we repeat syntactic structures in speech less often than phonological structures, they are less available for social evaluation and less likely to function as sociolinguistic markers.'

Based on the sparse reporting in the literature on syntactic variation compared to other types of linguistic items, Hudson (1996) even proposes the hypothesis that syntax is generally more resistant to variation altogether than pronunciation, morphology and vocabulary because of a different relation to society: '[S]yntax is the marker of cohesion in society, with individuals trying to eliminate alternatives in syntax from their individual language' (Hudson 1996, 45). From a structuralist viewpoint, Hinskens (Hinskens 1998, 160) similarly argues that the proportion of variable phenomena increases the closer one approaches the 'periphery' of the grammar, following an organization of variables from more to less grammatical: syntax < morphology < phonology



< phonetics (see also Cornips' discussion in Chapter 5 of the similar conceptualization of a cline from inner to outer forms originally framed by Muysken based on insights of von Humboldt).

Even though the general consensus seems to be that social factors are of relatively low importance in syntactic variation, and studies of syntactic variation have typically focused on internal constraints, a number of studies have shown significant differences between social groups, first and foremost between working-class and middle-class speakers (Wolfram 1969, 203–4; Cedergren and Sankoff 1974; Feagin 1979; Cheshire 1998). Chambers expands on these findings with the proposal that 'Grammatical variables tend to mark social stratifications more sharply than phonological ones, and so most grammatical variables function as class markers' (Chambers 2003, 57). In a later paper, he adds that '[t]his is especially true of grammatical features that are stigmatized, that is, features that are subject to overt comment in the community and are "corrected" by teachers and parents when they are used in social settings where standard speech is expected' (Chambers 2013, 300).<sup>2</sup> An obvious explanation for the difference between grammatical and phonological variables with respect to this sharp stratification is that grammatical variation, in contrast to most phonological variation, is represented in the written language and hence more likely to be included in the explicit or implicit curriculum of the educational system. This will typically take the form of elevating one variant as 'correct' and marginalizing others as 'incorrect', 'illogical', 'faulty' or 'poor language', as seen with negative concord in English, for example. Writing norms thus function as a strong conservative force with respect to the evaluation of synchronic variation.<sup>3</sup>

Overt evaluation is certainly not always at play, neither for phonological nor grammatical variables, and even where syntactic variables appear sharply stratified, the total picture may be more complicated. In a study of the range of forms by which English adolescents mark discourse-new referents, Cheshire

<sup>2</sup> This point had earlier been advanced by Cheshire, although she differentiates between morphological and syntactic variables in this respect: 'A consequence of the historical process of standardization is that variation involving grammatical inflections tends to have been consistently codified, with the result that some non-standard variants are rarely, if ever, used by the educated middle-class sections of society. This accounts for the pattern of sharp stratification that is commonly found with variables such as present tense *-s* (see, e.g., Wolfram 1969). When we consider variables that are more syntactic in kind, however, we often encounter variation that has been inconsistently codified (*never* in negative preterite constructions is a case in point – see Cheshire 1984) or variation that has not been codified at all' (Cheshire 1987, 272).

<sup>3</sup> From a research perspective, another consequence of the representation in written language is that it is possible to follow the use of the variants in a historical context in a much more direct way than in the case of phonological variation (e.g. Tagliamonte, Chapter 1 in this volume). In historical data, we can trace both the evolution of grammatical variables over long stretches of time and the evaluations ascribed to them in, for example, prescriptive grammars (historical sociolinguistics, or socio-historical linguistics, has developed to account for language change in the long-term perspective (e.g. Romaine 1982; Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1996)).

(2005) finds highly significant gender and social class differences in the use of the syntactic variable bare noun phrases versus non-bare noun phrases. She argues, however, that such syntactic variables are only indirectly involved in sociolinguistic variation, namely by an affiliation of the variants with different ‘interactive styles’, rather than by a social indexicality of the variants themselves. A similar point is made by Moore and Podesva based on a study comparing the use of tag questions between four different communities of practice among girls in an English high school (Moore and Podesva 2009). While tag questions can come to index both group personas at the meso-social level as well as macro-social classifications such as working class and female, this happens through a process they call ‘stance accretion’. At the micro-social level, the tag questions are used to display, for example, independence (of school norms and other communities of practice), experience and authoritativeness, and these stances may then combine into discrete higher-level indexical meanings. Importantly, the higher-level social meanings are not articulated by the syntactic item alone but in combination with the tag questions’ morpho-syntactic and phonetic characteristics as well as their discursive and stylistic context, all the way down to what or who the tag-questioned utterance concerns (Moore and Podesva 2009, 476–9).

In other cases, syntactic variables do not show any significant social stratification at all. Labov (1972, 237–43; 1993; 2001, 196) stresses that linguistic variation is not necessarily socially constrained, and, further, that socially constrained variables are not necessarily subject to social evaluation. In early stages of ‘changes from below’, the new variant is a so-called indicator that is socially stratified but without any social awareness from the speech community. Later the element may evolve into a linguistic marker or stereotype, in which case the (now sharper) social stratification is accompanied by style shifting, reactions in subjective evaluation tests and, in the case of stereotypes, overt commentary. Labov distinguishes between ‘structural’ and ‘surface’ variables to account for the different configurations of social stratification and evaluation: ‘Members of the speech community evaluate the surface forms of language but not more abstract structural features. More specifically, social evaluation bears upon the allophones and lexical stems of the language, but not upon phonemic contrasts, rule ordering, or the direction or order of variable constraints’ (Labov 1993).

Labov (1993) introduces the sociolinguistic monitor as ‘the device responsible for evaluating the social significance of utterances’. More specifically, it is the cognitive apparatus underlying the ability to evaluate language features and imbue them with social meaning, to evaluate speakers on the basis of their speech production, and to control one’s own speech production in the form of style shifting (Labov 1993; Labov et al. 2011; Eckert and Labov 2017). The sociolinguistic monitor is assumed to be sensitive only to surface forms and not