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Linguistic Insights

Studies in Language and Communication

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Style in syntax

Investigating variation in
Spanish pronoun subjects

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1. Advancing the study of syntactic variation

Human language is inherently variable and multi-faceted; any linguistic theory intending to be comprehensive and explanatory should take facts of variation into account. Nevertheless, it is well known that their study has generally remained a peripheral concern for mainstream linguistic science, usually devoted to the search for categorical, axiomatic principles of language structure. In turn, particular variants and statistical tendencies have most often been disregarded as anecdotal features of usage and not really worthy of scientific consideration. But, of course, not all the blame is to be put on ‘theoretical’ linguistics and its traditionally scarce interest in language as actual communication. On the other hand, analytical approaches that do acknowledge the relevance of variation and diversity – mainly (socio)linguistic variationism, but also other lines within sociolinguistics and pragmatics, such as anthropological-ethnographic linguistics or interactional linguistics – have not been able to define systematic connections between their empirical findings and any general linguistic theories, much less to develop their own explanatory models. This has resulted in variation studies remaining confined to the description and comparison of linguistic features, varieties and speech communities, with little intent to formulate general principles of the relationship between variation, communication and the human mind.

The aim of this book is indeed to take a step towards the construction of a theoretical model of linguistic variation as communicative choice. The focus will be put on morphosyntax, due to its centrality as the level of language structure where all others converge. We shall start from the assumption that no theory of variation can be feasible or useful if conceived as a ‘new’ or distinct paradigm within linguistics. Quite to the contrary, a multidisciplinary approach is needed in order to make the most of the findings contributed by a variety of approaches to language and communication during the last decades. Specifically, the main theoretical and analytical principles of the model proposed will come from three different research trends:

- Correlational studies on morphosyntactic variation, initially modeled on the Labovian approach to variation in phonology and later incorporating considerations from discourse analysis and pragmatics.
- Theoretical cognitive linguistics, based on a consideration of language as undetachable from other mental processes and capabilities, and of language structure as grounded on the human experience of the world.
- Current research on socio-communicative style and situated identities, drawing mainly on ethnographic and interactional – in other words, qualitative – sociolinguistic approaches.

These lines can be said to respectively deal with the three basic elements of linguistic communication, namely language itself, the human mind and the social context. A comprehensive, explanatory theory could hardly do away with any of them, so it is quite natural that our model of variation should be intended to harmonize them all. Each section of this first chapter will be devoted to the discussion of one of these research traditions, in order to abstract the principles on which the empirical investigation carried out in this book is to be grounded.

In Section 1.1 the history of syntactic variation analysis will be briefly reviewed, addressing the problems posed by traditional assumptions on grammatical meaning and how these studies have evolved by taking discursive and pragmatic factors into account, even if this alone has proved insufficient to reach theoretical adequacy. Section 1.2 will show how the basic principles of cognitive linguistics, and particularly the indissoluble link they assume between form and meaning, offer the most logical and fruitful path towards the essential understanding of variation in syntax. In Section 1.3 we will discuss the concept of *socio-communicative style*, showing its over-arching value for the characterization of any semiotic choice in any interactional context. In our view, connecting the management of style through syntax to the cognitive foundations of the latter is what can set variation studies on the road to theoretical explanation. More specifically, it will make it possible to reformulate the concept of *variation* as one of *meaningful choice*, and to view any contextualized linguistic feature as an act of creative construction at the multiple, interrelated levels of meaning. Finally, Section 1.4 offers a

programmatic summary of five basic principles that will guide the subsequent analysis.

1.1 Beyond synonymy in syntactic variation. Meaning, discourse and pragmatics

1.1.1 Linguistic diversity, the variationist approach and its application to the study of morphosyntax

Any common person is probably aware of the existence not only of different languages, but also of different ways of talking within one language – that is, of groups of forms that could be used with roughly similar meanings and functions in a given context. Speakers also tend to have some intuition of such alternatives as being related to different historical periods, geographical regions, social groups or communicative situations. Natural languages are hardly homogeneous, even if the long-dominant structural and generative paradigms have tended to discard heterogeneity as irrelevant in the quest for general principles of language structure. The realization of the scientific interest of linguistic diversity, together with the intent to study it empirically, promote the rise of a number of disciplines appearing around the 60s of the last century and intending to counter such formalism. From that moment on, the goal of linguistic research would be not just to describe language structure or to formulate its abstract, universal rules, but also to answer questions such as “Who speaks what language to whom and when?” (Fishman 1965: 67) or “Why did this speaker say it this way on this occasion?” (Bell 2001: 139).¹

Among these various approaches, variationist (socio)linguistics is notable for having developed a highly systematic and statistically

1 García (1983: 181) goes perhaps farther, seeing the whole linguistic enterprise as a quest for the explanation of contextual choice among forms: “What is, after all, the object of linguistic analysis? The recent emphasis on formalization seems to have deflected attention from a fundamental fact: namely, that in a given context form *X*, rather than *Y* or *Z*, is used”.

sophisticated approach to facts of variation in human communities. Being focused on the specifically linguistic side of communicative diversity, it usually pays attention to closed sets of formal alternatives whose relative rates of occurrence can be assessed and correlated with *internal*, *social* and *stylistic* factor groups. With the important precedent of Fischer (1958), Labov (1963, 1966) produced the first relevant insights into facts of phonological variation in American English, analyzing their demographic correlations as well as some social evaluations attached to them – resulting, e.g., in Martha’s Vineyard youngsters showing different rates of dialectal traits in their speech according to their attitudes towards the local community. Labov’s studies and others following his approach have demonstrated that linguistic variation is not hazardous, but rather follows ordered patterns across social groups and situations in a community, and it is also often subject to processes of change over time.

The interest of extending this kind of analysis to the grammatical level was soon perceived, Labov’s (1969) paper being itself an inquiry into variation of the copula in African American English. Not long after, the study of variation at non-phonological levels was somehow made official by Gillian Sankoff, who stated that “The extension of probabilistic considerations from phonology to syntax is not a conceptually difficult jump” (1973: 58), illustrating this assertion with the analysis of two supposed facts of ‘syntactic’ variation – placement of the future marker *bai* or *bambai* in Guinea tok pisin creole and variable deletion of *que* in Canadian French – as well as one of ‘semantic’ variation – the alternation between *on* and address forms *tu* and *vous* as indefinite subjects in the latter variety. Other early studies following this line were those of Rickford (1975) again on the English copula, Laberge & Sankoff (1979) again on variation between French subject pronouns, and Weiner & Labov (1983) on active clauses vs. agentless passive ones.

Investigations such as these would seem to have established morphosyntactic variation studies as a subfield of general variationism, sharing all of its main premises. Variation in syntax should entail the existence of a syntactic *variable*, that is, a set of two or more alternative formal realizations or *variants* of a sole grammatical structure. More crucially, for the study of the variable to have scientific interest it will be necessary to assume that the plausible statisti-