

How to define and explain variation?

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The talk presents different types of linguistic variation and discusses their implications for linguistic theory from different perspectives. Linguistic variation – broadly defined as the existence of two or more linguistic forms to express the same content – appears in several forms and can have many sources. Synchronic variation includes inter-speaker variation, that is, (micro-)variation between I-languages or varieties of the same language/dialect, or intra-speaker variation (i.e., when one and the same speaker has more than one linguistic form for the same purpose at one's disposal). The sources of these variants can be very different: they can be the result of diachronic developments, of sociolinguistic factors (e.g., the coexistence of prestige and substandard constructions, stylistic variants), or of language contact (e.g., the coexistence of *bo* and *ke* as relative clause complementizers in Cimbrian, cf. Bidese 2020). In my talk, I will focus on diachronic aspects.

Linguistic variants that are the result of diachronic developments are of special interest because they show how formal (intra-linguistic) and functional (extra-linguistic factors) can contribute to language change. These developments often have the form of cycles: a form A is substituted by a form B which get replaced by a form C that resembles the original form A in some respects. Since the succession of the single forms shows some chronological overlap, original and new forms often co-exist. This is the case with Jespersen's Cycle for which researchers have argued that the second stage does not have existed in MHG (e.g., Breitbarth & Jäger 2018). In my talk I will focus on the Pronominal Cycle as described Weiß (2015) where we lack historical data so we can reconstruct the developmental cycle only on basis of synchronic variation.

However, variation cannot only be the result of language change, it can also trigger diachronic developments. I will present the case of complementizers that emerged through reanalysis from nouns or prepositions (Weiß 2019, 2020, t.a.). In these cases, stylistic variation produced structural ambiguity that triggered reanalysis.

References:

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