Introduction

The locus of linguistic variation

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Early accounts of generative grammar (e.g., Chomsky 1965) postulated a firm separation between the variability present in language production and the grammar itself. Performance was regarded as extraneous to the key object of study, competence. Around the same time, early researchers in sociolinguistics moved to explicitly integrate variation into the grammar, developing such concepts as inherent variability (Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968) and variable rules (Cedergren and Sankoff 1974). Decades of study and three major "waves" of sociolinguistic scholarship later (Eckert 2012), the study of variation has grown from a marginalized topic to a substantial linguistic discipline. This volume revisits the two early perspectives sketched here, asks what we have learned in the intervening decades, and puts forward for consideration new views on the relationship between variation and the grammar.

The papers in this volume address both intra- and inter-dialectal variation. They draw on several sources of data, including corpora of naturally-occurring speech and judgment studies, and in many cases they base their conclusions on lesser-studied varieties of familiar languages, such as Northwest British Englishes and varieties of Canadian French. The consistent thread running through these papers is that they all address how the patterning of surface variation can shed light on the grammatical representation of variable phenomena.

The papers by Biggs and Comeau take up this theme through cross-dialectal comparison. Each of these authors compares the behavior of multiple regional varieties with regard to a particular variable, and each argues that observed differences between those regional varieties have an abstract syntactic source. **Biggs** investigates theme passives of ditransitive verbs (e.g. *It was given her*) in varieties of Northwest British English. She shows that, although theme passives are present in a number of different regional varieties (Liverpool, Manchester, Ormskirk), these varieties differ in several related phenomena, including whether they can allow

theme passives with a definite DP subject, the extent to which they allow preposition drop, and the types of verbs and goal arguments that may occur with their theme passives. Biggs argues that these differences can be explained if theme passives have a different abstract representation in Liverpool than in other Northwest Englishes. **Comeau** examines variation in the structure of yes-no questions and the realization of future temporal reference in Acadian and Laurentian French. He finds that a single constraint, sentential polarity, operates in dramatically different ways between the two varieties. Specifically, in Laurentian French, polarity is a strongly conditioning factor on each of these two variables, to the extent that negative contexts effectively allow only one variant of each variable. By contrast, in Acadian French, polarity does not play a role: all variants of each linguistic variable under study are allowed in both positive and negative contexts. Comeau argues that this difference between the two varieties has a structural source, namely, a negative head present in Laurentian French but absent in Acadian French, which blocks the occurrence of particular variants in the former variety. The take-home message from both of these papers is that patterns of surface variation can provide evidence for abstract structure.

Two other papers investigate the construct of the sociolinguistic variable and the relationship of its variants to one another. **Dinkin** provides a case study of the variant *like* across several distinct variables: as a discourse marker, as a sentence-medial discourse particle, as an approximative, and as part of the verb of quotation *be like*. Surveying the literature, he demonstrates that *like* in all of these variables bears similar social evaluation and is increasing in apparent time. He argues that speakers have targeted *like*, irrespective of the variable it belongs to, for a situation of variant-centered change. In light of this, Dinkin advocates for the traditional variable-centric sociolinguistic analysis to be complemented by renewed focus on the social evaluation and behavior of individual variants. **Haddican, Johnson, and Hilton** similarly find evidence for the independent behavior of variants, in this case through a series of judgment tasks in English and Norwegian. They find that speaker acceptability judgments do not necessarily show inverse patterning for the two variants of a variable: for instance, in the case of the English particle verb alternation, the acceptability of verb–object–particle order has increased in apparent time, while the acceptability of verb–particle–object order has remained stable, rather than decreasing in a complementary manner. However, they argue that there is nevertheless support for a single abstract operation uniting the variants of this and other variables; this can account for what they describe as a synchronic Constant Rate Effect (Kroch 1989), whereby speakers show constant constraints on the alternation between the two variants even when they differ in their baseline rate of application. Both papers, then, demonstrate that the

relationship of variants to their variables is more complex than has traditionally been recognized, and thus open up new questions concerning the representation of items in competition.

The final two papers in the volume relate variable to categorical patterns in language and use them to draw conclusions about how alternations of either type may be abstractly represented. **Burnett** starts from the observation that those factors which determine grammaticality contrasts in some languages often determine probabilistic patterns in others. She then provides novel data showing that this holds true for negative concord patterns: an existing model of categorical negative concord in languages like Spanish (couched in an Optimality Theoretic framework) can be extended to capture patterns of variable negative concord in Montreal French, when constraints are made stochastic. An important point of her paper is that, because constraints on categorical behavior are part of grammar, when we see those same constraints affecting variable behavior too, this must be because variation, and the conditions that govern it, are part of grammar. The issue of overlap between constraints on categorical alternations and constraints on variable ones is raised in the paper by **Tamminga, MacKenzie, and Embick** as well. Tamminga et al., calling for a new focus in sociolinguistic research on the dynamics of variation in individuals, outline a theory in which language production is shaped by three types of factors: internal linguistic, sociostylistic, and psychophysiological. They demonstrate that zeroing in on the individual as the source of surface variability can uncover new types of quantitative patterns, and that internal linguistic and psychophysiological factors must be architecturally distinct. This last point takes the line of reasoning from Burnett's paper cited above – that where conditions on variable and categorical alternations overlap, variation is in the grammar – and articulates its converse: in the many documented cases where variable alternations are conditioned by factors which are *not* found to condition categorical ones, a grammar-external system must be at play. A model of language production that separates domain-general psychophysiological processes from grammatical computations can account for the operation of certain factors on variable but not categorical alternations. Both papers thus provide insights into how variable surface patterns may be generated by the many systems involved in language production.

In sum, the papers in this volume go beyond simply documenting patterns of surface variation to seeking explanations for their existence in the nature of mental representation and abstract processes. They underscore the fact that, though the question of how variation could be incorporated into grammar was first raised decades ago, there is still much to be learned on this front. We hope that this volume can help bring renewed attention to this important line of inquiry.

References

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