

CHAPTER 1

Free variation, unexplained variation?Thilo Weber¹ & Kristin Kopf^{1,2}¹ IDS Mannheim (Leibniz Institute for the German Language) |² Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

As Labov (e.g. 1972: 188) notes, “[i]t is common for a language to have many alternate ways of saying ‘the same’ thing”. Such alternants can be found at the level of pronunciation (e.g. *working* vs *workin’*), they occur in lexis (*car* vs *automobile*), and they exist in morphology and syntax (*Who is he talking to?* vs *To whom is he talking?*) (all examples from Labov). Over the last two decades, grammatical – in particular, syntactic – variation has been investigated in numerous studies (see e.g. the contributions in Cornips & Corrigan 2005; Dufter et al. 2009; Dammel & Schallert 2019; Werth et al. 2021), with linguists such as Adger & Trousdale (2007: 274) or Kortmann (2010: 841) going so far as to call variation the ‘core explanandum’ of grammatical theory. The present volume explores questions that are fundamental to this line of research: the question of whether variation can always and completely be explained, or whether there remains a certain amount of unpredictable – or ‘free’ – variation, and the question of what implications the (non-)existence of this type of variation would hold for the empirical study and our theoretical models of grammar.

Linguistic variation may occur across different speakers (‘inter-individual variation’) as well as within an individual speaker (‘intra-individual variation’) (see Werth et al. 2021). Traditionally, the factors impacting variation have been separated into ‘internal’ and ‘external’ ones. Typical examples of ‘external’ factors include style/register, the speaker’s regional or social background and the planning conditions under which an utterance takes place. Internal factors, on the other hand, may include the phonological context, length or complexity of the structure under investigation, the animacy of its referent and many others. The present volume deals with the question of whether *all* variation can, at least in principle, be explained with reference to such internal or external factors. It does so on the basis of empirically well-grounded case studies from a wide range of languages and language varieties.

On the history of ‘free variation’

The notion of free variation goes back to the Prague school of structuralism (Trubetzkoy 1969[1939]), introduced with reference to phonology. Discussing different types of ‘optional phonetic variants’ (i.e. sounds that can occur in exactly the same environment without a change in the lexical meaning of the word), Trubetzkoy (1969: 47–48) distinguishes a ‘stylistically relevant’ type from a ‘stylistically irrelevant’ one. Stylistically relevant variants convey emotional or social meaning. They can differentiate, for example, between an ‘excited emotional’ and a ‘careless familiar’ style, or between an ‘uneducated’, a ‘cultured’ and a ‘neutral’ style. One of Trubetzkoy’s examples is the spirantisation of intervocalic *b* in German (as in words such as *aber* ‘but’) in “careless, familiar or tired speech”. Stylistically irrelevant variants, on the other hand, are considered to have “no function whatever. They replace one another quite arbitrarily, without any change in the expressive or the conative function of speech” (1969: 48). Trubetzkoy’s example is the pronunciation of palatal occlusives in Kabardian, which may be realised “as *k* sounds” or “as *tsh* sounds”, “without noticing any difference and without thereby producing any stylistic or emotional coloration” (1969: 48). Crucially, both types of variants are considered ‘optional’ from a narrow, phonological perspective, as neither leads to a difference in lexical meaning, but only the ‘stylistically irrelevant’ variants are truly interchangeable even beyond that.

Not much later, sociolinguistics (e.g. Fischer 1958; Labov 1966a, 1966b, 1972) showed that much of what had previously been considered free variation in the sense of Trubetzkoy’s ‘stylistically irrelevant’ type was, in fact, determined by regional, social and/or situational factors, i.e. could more appropriately be re-assigned to Trubetzkoy’s ‘stylistically relevant’ type. A famous example is the pronunciation of final and pre-consonantal *r* in New York City. Previous accounts, such as that by Hubbell (1950: 14), had described the use of *r* along the following lines:

The pronunciation of a very large number of New Yorkers exhibits a pattern in these words that might most accurately be described as the complete absence of any pattern. Such speakers sometimes pronounce /r/ before consonant or a pause and sometimes omit it, in a thoroughly haphazard fashion.

As is well known, however, Labov’s (1966) department store study showed that the pronunciation of *r* depended on social class and degree of formality. Nonetheless, even multivariate studies such as Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi (2007), which, in addition to internal factors, also consider sociolinguistic factors such as genre and variety as well as usage-related factors such as priming, are faced with a certain residue of unexplained variation (2007: 460). This raises the question of whether this is just random noise, which, given the appropriate methodological adjust-

ments, could be eliminated at least in principle, or whether it is something systematic and, thus, something to be considered in our methodological approaches and to be accounted for in our respective models of grammar. Labov (1966b: 5) himself did not dismiss the existence of free variation entirely. He did, however, only attribute a fairly minor role to it, considering it merely to exist “in the sense of irreducible fluctuations in the sounds of a language”.

Many functionally oriented linguists have been critical of the idea of free variation, as it violates the principle of isomorphism, according to which a difference in form is always connected to a difference in meaning. Bolinger’s 1977 book *Meaning and Form*, for example, explicitly sets out to “reaffirm the old principle that the natural condition of a language is to preserve one form for one meaning and one meaning for one form” (1977: x). Similarly, Haiman (1980: 515) states that “[i]somorphism is so nearly universal that deviations from it require explanation”. Goldberg’s model of construction grammar (1995: 67), too, rejects the idea that forms could be interchangeable without any difference in meaning: according to her ‘Principle of No Synonymy’, “if two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct [...]”.

The important role attributed to isomorphism as expressed by many functionalists is, at least in part, to be seen as a reaction to what Bolinger (1977: 125) refers to as the ‘usual notions’ of then-current generative linguistics. Early transformational approaches had assumed that certain syntactic alternants, such as active and passive sentences, were derived from the same deep structure (Chomsky 1957: 77–78) and thus shared the same truth value. Bolinger (1977: ix) took issue with the idea that “an abstract structure could be converted into x number of surface structures – in either case without gain or loss of meaning. The resulting structures were the same; only the guise was different”. As noted by Newmeyer (1983: 116), however, it is questionable whether such a position had truly been advocated in the first place (“Did Bolinger’s generativist ever exist?”). Newmeyer suspects that the debate was more likely due to the fact that Bolinger’s and most generativists’ definitions of ‘meaning’ were considerably different from one another: while generativists usually focused on truth-conditional equivalence, “for Bolinger, anything that can make a conceivable contribution to understanding a sentence or the appropriateness of its use is considered part of its ‘meaning’” (Newmeyer 1983: 116).¹

1. Relatedly, Newmeyer (1983: 76) also notes a certain amount of confusion with respect to the term ‘optional rule’. Newmeyer points out that, within the generative tradition, the ‘optionality of a transformational or phonological rule is simply a formal device for expressing the possibility that two derived structures originate from one underlying structure’. Thus, even if one were to accept that, e.g. active and passive sentences were transformationally related, this would not mean that they were in free variation.

As it appears, many generativists have, in fact, been just as critical of the idea of free variation as Bolinger has. According to one approach, free variation is instead explained away as diglossia/bilingualism ('competing grammars', e.g. Kroch 1989, 1994, 2001; Zwart 1996: 245; Lightfoot 1999: 94; Moser this volume). According to another, the variants in question are being re-evaluated as not being interchangeable after all ('pseudo-optionality'; on this notion, see, e.g. Müller 2003; Anttila 2002: 218–219). As for the competing grammars approach, Kroch (2001), for example, discusses the well-known fact that many instances of syntactic change are gradual. One of his examples is the rise of periphrastic *do* in English interrogatives and negative declaratives, a pattern that went through a 300-year-phase of variable use before it eventually became obligatory. Kroch traces the variation in question back to different parameter settings,² which, in turn, "must reflect the co-presence in a speaker or speech community of mutually incompatible grammars" (2001: 720). In other words, there may well be free variation in the sense of the existence of interchangeable forms, but they are not considered to exist within the same grammatical system. The same view is expressed, e.g. by Zwart (1996: 245) with reference to word order variation in West Germanic verb clusters ("it cannot be excluded that the optionality [...] in fact reflects a limited form of bilingualism") and by Lightfoot (1999: 94) with regard to the variation between VO and OV order in earlier stages of English: "In general, individual grammars do not manifest optional alternations of this type. [...] Where a language has such an alternation, we say that this manifests diglossia, and that speakers have access to two grammars".

As for pseudo-optionality (Anttila 2002: 218–219; Müller 2003: 293–296), the idea is here that the interchangeability of two or more forms is only apparent, whereas on closer inspection, there is, in fact, a difference in meaning between them. According to Anttila (2002: 218), "this seems to be the favoured solution to optionality in optimality-theoretic syntax", for example. Thus, for instance, if two sentences such as *John gave a book to Mary* and *John gave Mary a book* (from Müller 2003: 289) differ in meaning after all (Müller 2003: 294 refers to accounts claiming "that dative shift can somehow create 'affectedness' of the indirect object"), this would mean that they are not alternative 'outputs' of the same 'input' and, thus, not in competition with one another. Rather, they would belong

2. Kroch views the rise of *do*-support in connection with the V-to-I-parameter (or, in more recent terminology, V-to-T), which determines whether or not lexical verbs can undergo movement from their base position to the higher, functional I position. In a nutshell, English main verbs gradually lost their ability to move to I (and higher), and the insertion of the empty auxiliary *do* in that position is seen as a strategy to compensate for that loss.

to different candidate sets, and each could be optimal among their respective competitors.

On the other hand, there are also views more readily compatible with, or even explicitly in favour of, the notion of free variation, and they, too, can be found across functional and formal orientations. From a functional perspective, Uhrig (2015: 323), for example, does agree that Bolinger's (1977) defence of isomorphism against (what he took to be) the early generative view was "justified and necessary in a cognitive linguistic approach". At the same time, however, Uhrig (2015: 335) warns that the principle of no synonymy, "if used as a hard-and-fast rule [as the corollaries in Goldberg (1995) suggest] or even as a dogma, causes more problems than it solves and – if taken at face value by researchers, will stop them from observing exceptions to this general rule". An example of a construction grammar approach that challenges Goldberg's principle is Cappelle (2009). Investigating variation in the placement of verb particles in English (e.g. *Don't just throw away that wrapper* vs *Don't just throw that wrapper away*), Cappelle (2009: 187) argues against "an extreme constructionist treatment like Gries's (2003), where the two word order patterns are treated as so unique and distinct (*sui generis*) that their commonality is disregarded and even denied". Instead, he introduces the concept of 'allostructions', viz. truth-semantically equivalent but formally distinct manifestations of the same construction.

Within the generative tradition, too, there are approaches that do recognise a need for variation to be modelled within a single grammar ('variable-output-grammar', in the terminology of Seiler 2004). An example from minimalism is Adger (2006). He investigates variation in subject–copula agreement (e.g. *you was* vs *you were*) in a Scottish dialect of English, which he considers to be 'non-deterministic' (2006: 505). He traces it back to the forms of the copula being underspecified for certain values of their agreement features, which allows some pronouns to combine with either form. Similarly, in contrast to its classical version, later variants of optimality theory began to allow for the same input to be mapped onto multiple, equally grammatical outputs (e.g. Müller 2003; Seiler 2004: 385–394). This can be achieved, for example, by free (or unspecified) ranking of constraints (cf. Kager 1999: 406). An example used by Kager is vowel reduction, as in the English word *sentimentality* (sentim[en]tality vs sentim[ɪ]tality). If we assume that the variation between the non-reduced and the reduced variant is governed by the two constraints IDENT-IO ('identity of input and output'), which favours non-reduction, and REDUCE ('vowels lack quality'), free ranking of them will lead to both variants being optimal and, thus, equally grammatical.

The status of free variation and isomorphism is evaluated differently for the different levels of language structure. As described above, the idea of free variation was introduced with reference to phonology, and it was only later that it

started to be discussed in relation to morphology and syntax. An early example is Bolinger's (1956) study of the *-ra* and *-se* forms of the Spanish subjunctive (see also Rosemeyer, this volume), which – in contrast to previous descriptions – Bolinger concludes are not in free variation. Bolinger's (1977) vindication of isomorphism is largely directed at syntax. At the level of phonology, Bolinger acknowledges what appears reminiscent of Trubetzkoy's 'stylistically relevant' type of free variation, recognising differences that may mark a speaker "as an individual or as a speaker of a different dialect, but with each unit still having the same communicative value" (1977: 3). As regards morphology, Bolinger refers to different ways of marking the plural on English nouns (*geese* vs *hens*) to show that there can be difference in form without difference in meaning (1977: 3) (which, in this particular case, is of course not free but lexically determined). What Bolinger considers problematic, however, is that "[d]ifferences in the arrangement of words and in the presence or absence of certain elements are often assumed not to count", i.e. "[w]here the mischief begins is in syntax" (1977: 3).

On the whole, despite the fact that the concept of free variation has been around for decades and despite its centrality and controversial status, the discussion has, so far, been fairly fragmented: thoughts on free variation have often been embedded in publications with a different or more general overall focus; contributions with an explicit focus on free variation have been limited to individual article-length items (e.g. Bolinger 1956; Ellis 1999; Cappelle 2009). Moreover, explicitly or implicitly, the term is used differently by different linguists, particularly with respect to the question of what, exactly, the variation in question should be independent of. While probably all linguists would agree that, in order to speak of free variation, there should be no difference in 'meaning', it has already become apparent that a problem lies in the fact that the term 'meaning' itself is used differently, sometimes excluding and sometimes including factors such as, e.g. style/register or information pertaining to the speaker's regional or social background. As for the term 'free variation' specifically, Kager (1999: 404), for example, uses it in the sense that "no *grammatical* principles govern the distribution of variants" (emphasis in the original), while the distribution may still well be predictable on the basis of 'sociolinguistic' and 'performance' factors. Ellis (1999: 464), on the other hand, proposes that in order to qualify as 'free', the variation in question should be independent of those types of factors, too:

Free variation can be held to exist when two or more variants of the same linguistic variable are seen to be used randomly by individuals with regard to all of the following: 1. the same situational context(s) 2. the same illocutionary meanings 3. the same linguistic context(s) 4. the same discourse context(s) 5. the same planning conditions.

Our volume provides the first dedicated book-length treatment of this long-standing topic, providing the opportunity to compare and contrast different definitions of and approaches to free variation in morphology and syntax, based on empirically well-grounded case studies.

Free variation: Fact or fiction?

Whether free variation actually does exist has been debated from the beginning. An explicit early opponent is Joos (1968[1959]: 185–186):

The terms ‘free variation’ and ‘free alternation’ have been misunderstood by taking the word ‘free’ in the sense that it has in the romantic theory of ‘free will’. Actually, the word ‘free’ is used in linguistics to mean merely ‘not yet accounted for’. It is the technical label for whatever clearly does not need to be accounted for during the current operation in analysis; and to assume that it will never need to be accounted for in later operations would be a serious misunderstanding. A certain phenomenon might never be accounted for in your lifetime or mine, but the label ‘free’ does not excuse us from trying. The descriptive linguist is committed to a deterministic philosophy; without determinism, he could never have gotten started, and having put his hand to the plow he can never turn back.

The overall existence of free variation in human language is not falsifiable: even if we could account for the governing factors in all the alternating structures that have been debated up to now, there might still be phenomena that have not been studied yet, especially in under- or non-documented languages, and phenomena that may never be studied in a satisfying way because the language in which they appeared has gone extinct or has evolved into a new stage (e.g. Old English) and the surviving data from the period under consideration lack crucial contexts. We can, however, assume that, if it exists, free variation is a language-independent phenomenon and, therefore, use known phenomena as a proxy to estimate the likelihood that it exists at all. Preston (1996: 25), a decided skeptic, acknowledges that for him, a careful but fruitless search for influencing factors would be enough to assume that free variation does exist:

I am suspicious that language variation which is influenced by nothing at all is a chimera, but I would be happy to admit to such variability if I were shown that a careful search of the environment had been made and that no such influencing factors had been found.

How careful such a search has to be is, however, up to debate. On the other hand, even if an alternation phenomenon could be completely explained by a number of factors, this simply eliminates a single phenomenon from the almost endless list of phenomena in human languages where it could be manifested; it does not show that free variation doesn't exist, which makes this assumption an equally non-falsifiable point of view, as Ellis (1999: 476) observes:

[A]re not such researchers operating from a theoretical position that does not permit falsification? They believe that systematicity exists and that if we look hard enough we will always find it. Such a position is, I think, untenable both theoretically and methodologically.

Investigating free variation

No matter what direction linguists are coming from, free variation provides an interesting focus that demands not to be satisfied with a handful of clear influencing factors but encourages the rigorous study of the unexplained residue. We should not readily assume its existence or its nonexistence because both are an excuse to stop looking, as criticised by Fischer (1958: 48):

'Free variation' is of course a label, not an explanation. It does not tell us where the variants came from nor why the speakers use them in different proportions, but is rather a way of excluding such questions from the scope of immediate inquiry.

Instead, the search for free variation provides a lens that focuses on those parts of language use that are especially hard to study. This can be done with a number of empirical approaches.

Studies on grammatical variation mostly try to identify governing factors. In recent years, the predominant approach in variationist studies has been to gather potential factors and hypotheses based on previous studies and grammatical descriptions; collect a large data set of alternating variants, usually from a corpus; and analyse it with multifactorial statistical models (e.g. Sutter 2009; Szmrecsanyi et al. 2014; Röthlisberger 2018; De Cock 2020). However, such models never explain all of the variation (measured as goodness of fit). This might be due to the fact that some factors are hard to operationalise (e.g. degree of formality), due to the fact that crucial factors have been overlooked and maybe even do not exist. This last case would be the residue that we call free variation in the narrow sense.

Such an approach, however, is only possible if there are large corpora of the language under study. When working with lesser-documented languages, variation is harder to determine and often not the main focus of a study. Meyerhoff (2019: 230) puts it in the following way:

Linguists working in the field of language documentation, too, are necessarily engaged with language variation, but from a somewhat different perspective. Instead of starting from a well-understood and well-documented language grammar, documentary linguists are using their skills to (first) extrapolate away from the inter-individual variation that characterises all speakers and every speech community in order to adequately describe the structure of a lesser-known or poorly-documented language.

This leads to the question of how variation (including free variation) can be studied in the case of poorly documented languages, varieties or historical stages of languages. In the case of living languages, we can make up for the lack of pre-existing corpus data by carefully collecting our own data of different kinds, ideally tailored to the phenomenon under study, but it is much harder to get at potential cases of free variation (in this volume, Niinemägi and Yu both do this).

There are also approaches that rely on acceptability, not usage: if speakers of a language reject a certain use, they assume that there is no free variation; if they accept both variants, there might be. Such acceptability tests can range from few examples rated by a single speaker (e.g. Yu, this volume) to a large number of carefully constructed potential minimal pairs judged by a bigger group (e.g. Bader and Symanczyk Joppe, this volume). This approach tries to exclude all potential influencing factors from the start, so that the existence of free variation does not stem from a 'failure' of the statistical model to account for all of the variation. If speakers accept both forms in the same context, the only remaining conditioning influence may lie in the speakers themselves, which can, in turn, be controlled for by selecting a homogeneous group. An example of such a study can be found in Campe (1999), a comparison between the use of adnominal genitives and prepositional phrases in present-day German (genitive NP: *die traurige Nachricht seines Todes* / PP: *die traurige Nachricht von seinem Tod* 'the sad news of his death'). Her survey was answered by 70 university students who ranked the phrases in direct comparison on a four-point scale from 'very bad' to 'very good'. In a number of cases, one construction was rated as good or very good by an overwhelming majority of participants while the other was rated as bad or very bad by a similar proportion. There were, however, other cases in which both constructions were rated as good or very good (e.g. in the example given above, 60% rated the genitive as good or very good, and 80% did the same for the PP). Still, Campe does not conclude that (almost) equally acceptable genitives and PPs are

in free variation but, rather, that the participants saw the two constructions as non-equivalents with a slight difference in meaning: the genitive creates a holistic relationship between the head and its modifier, and the PP makes the relationship looser (Campe 1999: 287). However, this assumption cannot be tested empirically in her framework.

This is a crucial problem not only in acceptability studies but also in corpus studies, and not only when looking at free variation but also when looking at conditioned variation. If the two constructions are not functionally equivalent (including semantics, style and social meaning in the sense of Silverstein 2003), the search for free variation is moot, but functional equivalence is notoriously hard to determine. In addition, some studies include variation between a form and its absence (i.e. optional use of a construction) as potential free variation and, consequently, have to show that the addition of linguistic material does not add anything to the functional side of things, as this is the only way the presence and the absence of something can be fully equivalent (for example, in this volume, Symanczyk Joppe deals with the absence of phrases, Yu with the absence of morphemes and Hasse with the addition of a suffix to a fully inflected form). Other problems arising from using quantitative empirical data are, e.g. how to deal with the fact that in a large enough corpus, some structures will always be attested, while many linguists would be hesitant to say that they form part of the language (Rudnicka & Klégr encounter a similar problem in this volume). The separation of infrequent variants from errors has to be a gradual one, but the aim of accounting for all variation in the data demands a binary approach.

This volume

The contributions to this volume form three thematic sections. The papers of the first section, 'Identifying and measuring free variation', focus on the question of what it actually means for two (or more) forms to be in free variation, how to distinguish free variation from related phenomena and/or how to investigate it empirically. The second section, 'Free variation and language change', focuses on diachronic aspects of free variation, such as the question of how and why it may come into being as well as the question of its (in)stability over time. The third group of papers, 'Free variation? Look harder!' approaches the topic from a more skeptical perspective. It shows that certain seemingly free phenomena can, in fact, be explained by identifiable factors after all.

Identifying and measuring free variation

Markus Bader, in his article ‘How free is the position of German object pronouns?’, proposes that a distinction should be made between free variation ‘in grammatical terms’ vs free variation ‘in an absolute sense’, arguing that forms may be freely variable from a grammatical perspective without necessarily being chosen at random in actual language use. Bader’s case study is word order variation in the so-called middle field of German, more specifically, the order of non-pronominal subjects and pronominal objects. Bader poses the question of whether the subject–object and the object–subject order are equally acceptable, thereby arriving at an empirically testable operationalisation of free variation. The question is answered on the basis of three magnitude estimation experiments investigating potentially influencing factors such as the position of an additional adverbial, the animacy of the subject referent and the length of the subject. The results show that where an adverbial occurs between subject and object, acceptability for the object–subject order is significantly lower than for the subject–object order, which is in line with the assumption that object pronouns may be preceded by *nothing but* a subject. Once this requirement is met, there still remain some differences in acceptability depending on the animacy and length of the subject, but they are only small and fleeting in nature. Bader therefore concludes that grammar only requires object pronouns to occur at the left edge of the middle field or, when preceded by a subject, directly thereafter, whereas the order of subject and pronominal object is left open by it. The (comparatively weak) effects caused by animacy and length are instead attributed to processing mechanisms. Consequently, the order of subject and pronominal object is concluded to be a matter of ‘free but not random’ variation.

Ann-Marie Moser, in her article ‘Optionality in the syntax of Germanic traditional dialects: on (at least) two types of intra-individual variation’, develops a typology of different kinds of ‘optionality’ and illustrates them using examples from non-standard varieties of West and North Germanic. ‘Optionality’, which thus serves as an umbrella term for different phenomena, is defined as the availability of two or more forms for the same function that are both grammatical to the speaker’s grammar(s). Moser distinguishes between ‘true optionality’ and ‘non-true optionality’, with the latter, in turn, falling into two subtypes, viz. ‘apparent’ and ‘false’ optionality. Non-true optionality is characterised by preference differences between the variants in question. In the case of apparent optionality, they are sensitive to features of the utterance situation. An example is information-structurally motivated word order variation. In the case of false optionality, the preference differences are due to rules inherent to the construction itself. An example is the use vs non-use of doubly-filled-comp structures in

Upper German, which is sensitive to the length/complexity of the *wh*-phrase. True optionality, finally, is characterised by the absence of any preference differences, thus corresponding to the notion of ‘free variation.’ An example is the variation between simple negation and negative spread in Alemannic. Moser goes on to discuss this particular case of free variation from a diachronic perspective and against the background of the competition between the competing-grammars approach and the variable-outputs approach. She concludes that the variation may reasonably be explained in terms of grammar competition in times of language change.

Karolina Rudnicka and **Aleš Klégr**’s chapter ‘Non-verbal plural number agreement. Between the distributive plural and singular: blocking factors and free variation’ deals with an understudied variation phenomenon in English where one variant is clearly dominating (*Six people lost their lives/life*). The singular is used under certain conditions when a set of (mostly semantic) blocking factors is active. In some of these cases (‘strong blocking factors’), plural is possible but leads to a different interpretation, which precludes us from considering the different forms as alternating. In others (‘weak blocking factors’), singular and plural can vary without meaning change, and this is also the core definition of free variation used by the authors. The separation of strong and weak blocking factors is borne out by corpus frequencies. Rudnicka and Klégr classify factors for which there are only very few counterexamples as strong blocking factors, i.e. even though a handful of plural uses exist, this is not considered a case of free variation. This approach somewhat resembles that of categorising language universals into absolute and statistical (or ‘near’) universals (Greenberg 1966). The study focuses on two lexically filled constructions (*lose one’s life/job*) that are expected to exhibit free variation. The results show that singulars do occur in the case of *job* in British English and in both cases in American English, albeit with single-digit frequencies. There seems to be no influence of genre (as defined by COCA). The authors also note that not all cases are necessarily in free variation, as there may always be additional contextual factors. They suggest that a corpus study in itself cannot make sure of this and that an additional questionnaire using corpus examples would be helpful to further close in on true free variation. Free variation is thus a question of both production and acceptability to Rudnicka and Klégr.

Vilma Symanczyk Joppe, in her article ‘“Optional” direct objects: free variation?’, investigates potentially free variation in the domain of argument structure, specifically, the omissibility of direct objects in German. The main claim of the paper is that, with regard to the question of free variation in syntax, the factor of (linguistic or non-linguistic) context has not been considered systematically enough so far. In a first, theoretically-oriented section, Symanczyk Joppe reviews candidates for free variation from phonology and morphology and devel-

ops interpretation and production rules in order to distinguish free variation from other relations that may hold between two (or more) forms (e.g. allo-forms in complementary distribution or forms belonging to different contrastive units). This matrix serves as a basis for the formulation of a set of mapping rules mapping input forms onto (multiple) output forms. In an empirical section, the author carries out an acceptability rating experiment that adapts the minimal-pair method from phonology for use in syntax. Specifically, she investigates the influence of a range of factors (such as event types, verb class, temporal relations, sentence type) on the acceptability of object omission by testing pairs of sentences differing in the feature [+/- accusative object] but occurring in the same context. One of the results is that object omission is accepted in particular with activity readings. With regard to the question of free variation in syntax, Symanczyk Joppe concludes that, in certain contexts, certain forms may appear to be variants due to a partially equivalent distribution, but they do not have the status of systematically provided alternatives.

Free variation and language change

A common interpretation of conditioned variation is that it is a transitional stage in language change: a new variant arises and can be used alongside the old variant but, in the long run, either fails to gain ground or replaces the older variant (or both become independent linguistic units of their own). This is, of course, what happens in phonologisation (e.g. of umlaut variants in Middle High German; see Sonderegger 1979: 306) when conditioned allophones come into being which then turn into phonemes as the conditioning factors are lost. Semantic change exhibits something similar: when an existing word acquires a new meaning, there is always a stage of polysemy in between, where the intended meaning has to be resolved by the context. It seems logical to assume a similar development for variants that are in free variation. It may arise when both or one of two formerly distinct units extend to new contexts that lead to functional overlap, or when one unit splits into two forms which are then used (partially) interchangeably. If speakers do indeed try to avoid synonymy, such free variation should not remain stable. As with phonologisation or meaning change, one of the units is expected to win (Croft 2000), or both are expected to differentiate (as can be seen with the preterite of (former) strong verbs in Germanic languages; see Nowak 2011 for German; De Smet & Van de Velde 2020 for Dutch).

In the present volume, three case studies look at language change with special attention to free variation, one at the level of morphology (Hasse), one at the level of morphosyntax (Niinemägi) and one at the level of syntax (Nijs & Van de Velde).

In 'Variation and change in the Aanaar Saami conditional perfect', **Merit Niinemägi** investigates stability in types but change in tokens: while both Aanaar Saami conditional perfect constructions involved are retained for an extended period of time, one of them becomes much more common than the other. Using conditional inference trees, Niinemägi identifies several influencing factors and concludes that the variation isn't diachronically stable. It thus shows how a newer variant encroaches on the territory of an older variant. While the newer variant might one day replace the older variant entirely, they do coexist at the moment. The study has to contend with several challenges typical for lesser-documented languages, among them the small size of the speech community, their bilingualism involving a closely related language (Finnish), a large number of L2 speakers, the diverse nature of the available corpora and the necessary combination of older corpus data and data from a recent survey. Diverging from other studies, Niinemägi decides to include L2 data and thereby implicitly challenges the notion of the (language use of the) native speaker as the sole locus of 'true' variation.

In 'Stability of inflectional variation: the dative of the indefinite article in Zurich German', **Anja Hasse** looks at a single cell of the inflectional paradigm of the masculine/neuter indefinite article in a Swiss German variety, using the framework of canonical typology. The cell in question, the dative singular, can be filled by two forms and thus exhibits overabundance. The forms are diachronically related. The data used shows once again that lesser-documented varieties, in this case an Upper German dialect, and a diachronic perspective are a challenge for the study of free variation. Hasse combines older written sources with modern spoken data from an oral history project and a talkshow. She identifies factors that do influence the choice between the two forms but only in certain linguistic contexts. She concludes that it is very likely that the forms vary freely in other contexts. Her central argument for free variation hinges on the look at intra-individual variation: by comparing data from one and the same individual, Hasse excludes variation that might have arisen through the emergence of different individual grammars or that may be determined by individual factors that are hard to grasp. Additionally tracing the variation between individuals over a time span of almost 200 years, Hasse finds the phenomenon to be diachronically stable. She is, however, cautious to decide completely in favour of free variation, as more data would be needed to make a confident choice.

Julie Nijs and **Freek Van de Velde**, in their article 'Resemanticising 'free' variation: the case of V₁ conditionals in Dutch', investigate a pair of syntactic alternants, namely, asyndetic verb-first (V₁) conditionals vs syndetic conditionals introduced by the conjunction *als* 'if', over the course of Late Modern Dutch. The starting point of their study is the observation that the V₁-type once was the default construction but has since lost this status to the conjunctive type. The

new construction gradually extended its contexts, while the older one seems to have retracted to a niche of tentativeness and counterfactuality. The authors investigate this assumption empirically. In the first part, they analyse the distribution of the two constructions using a logistic regression model. As measuring semantic notions such as tentativeness directly is delicate and prone to a subjective bias on the part of the researcher, the authors resort to a number of more 'tangible' factors (such as syntactic integration, presence/absence of an epistemic modal, verb tense and animacy of the subject referent) that can be used as a proxy for the semantic properties of the two alternants. In the second part, the authors focus on lexical effects, i.e. patterns of dissimilarity with respect to the kinds verbs that are typically found in the two constructions. The results are consonant with the assumption that, compared to the conjunctive type, the V1-type is more closely associated with tentative meaning. Even though a diachronic trend is not directly observable in the time span under investigation, the results are thus nonetheless compatible with the scenario in which the V1 is slowly shifting into the epistemically tentative niche.

Free variation? Look harder!

Malte Rosemeyer, in his article 'Syntactic priming and individual preferences: a corpus-based analysis', follows the premise of variationist sociolinguistics that much of what is initially believed to be free variation can be accounted for, after all, if we take into account not only linguistic factors but also social factors and ones pertaining to language use. Under this assumption, 'free variation' in actual language production is, indeed, merely unexplained variation, challenging the linguist to enhance their methodology so as to minimise this residue. Rosemeyer proposes that one way of achieving that goal is by exploring what governs individual preferences in language use. His case study, based on a corpus of semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews, is the variation between the *-ra* and *-se* forms of the Spanish subjunctive. Rosemeyer's results support the assumption that the variation in question can partly be explained by a complex interaction between individual preferences and the difference between self- and other-priming. Specifically, he finds that previous use of a variant by another speaker (other-priming) is more likely to lead to repeated use of the same variant than previous use by the current speaker (self-priming) if the speaker does not usually prefer the variant in question. Where a speaker does prefer it in general, it is the other way round. This suggests that what may seem like free variation does not simply follow from individual preferences but results from a complex interplay of the speaker's previous experience with language and social constraints.








In 'Optionality, variation and categorial properties: the case of plural marking in Yucatec Maya', **Yidong Yu** investigates data from published texts, previous literature and her own fieldwork. The phenomenon under investigation is one of optionality in the narrow sense: Yucatec nouns can be inflected for number using the plural marker *-o'ob*, but they can also be used as plurals in their uninflected form. She argues that the variation is not governed by factors brought forward in preexisting literature, i.e. animacy, argument structure and numerical quantification. The argumentation differs from the other papers in this section in that it is mostly based on contrasting individual examples, not on statistics using a large amount of data. Thus, Yu is not interested in factors that make the use of one or the other form more likely (and thereby less 'free') but in factors that allow only one possibility, completely prohibiting free variation. That none of the three factors does this is, however, not enough for Yu to assume the existence of free variation. She goes on to revisit her data and finally suggests a semantic account: she argues that all Yucatec nouns have a cumulative denotation in their bare form, which can be shown from the behaviour of generic uses. To focus on the granularity of the denoted object, *-o'ob* is added. Yu develops a formalism involving a pseudopartitive operator on the noun that enables plural adjunction. Her look at seemingly free variation thus leads to the identification of a conditioning factor and its inclusion in a formal theory.

Roser Giménez, Sheila Queralt and F. Xavier Vila, in their article 'Variation of deontic constructions in spoken Catalan: an exploratory study', investigate the distribution of five deontic verb constructions in Catalan through the lens of variationist sociolinguistics, using their study to reflect more generally on the merits and limitations of this school of linguistics with respect to the question of free variation. The authors employ decision trees to predict speakers' choices among the five constructions on the basis of a range of linguistic factors (e.g. grammatical person, sentence polarity) and sociolinguistic factors (e.g. identification with and exposure to Catalan). As the authors show, the models predict most of the tokens correctly, with *haver de* and *tenir que* even being predicted correctly up to 100% of the time. As for the variation that remains unexplained, the authors point out that it is not necessarily to be attributed to free variation, as it might well be explained by a complementary set of factors. More generally, then, while the presence of free variation can be ruled out by the variationist approach, its presence can never be demonstrated. However, even though free variation proves to be an unverifiable notion, the authors still consider it an important one (because it may serve to fuel new hypotheses), comparing free variation to the notion of dark matter in cosmology.









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