

What can we learn from syntax geography? Evidence from the *Syntactic Atlas of Swiss German Dialects*

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The material of a dialect atlas is, following Moulton (1962: 25), a "laboratory" for linguistic theory. Dialect *syntax* has largely been neglected by dialectologists (who focused on phonetic/phonological and lexical variation mainly) as well as by syntacticians (who focused on standard languages mainly). Only recently, the interest on dialect syntax has dramatically increased in the contexts of syntactic theory (cf. e.g. Kayne 1996) and language typology (Kortmann 2002). However, most of our knowledge has been only punctual so far, but completely new evidence is brought by several current research projects in different European countries, investigating the geographical structure of syntax (England, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Switzerland).

In the first part of the present paper, I will demonstrate how the data for the *Syntactic Atlas of Swiss German Dialects* (Syntaktischer Atlas der deutschen Schweiz SADS) are collected and sampled into geographical maps. 2700 informants from 380 measuring points were sent four questionnaires containing 118 questions in total, covering all areas of syntax (noun phrase structure, clitics, tense/aspect, infinitives, constituent order, subordination). We worked with translation tests, fill-in tests and multiple choice tests, where informants were asked for acceptable variants as well as for the preferred variant. The data are fed into a Geographical Information System (Esri ArcView[®]8). Punctually, the data were evaluated in the course of direct interviews taken at the informants' homes.

In the second part, I will point on some consequences of our findings for dialectology as well as for syntactic theory. It turned out that syntax, too, displays a remarkable amount of geographical variation. Many syntactic isoglosses can be isolated even within an area as small as German-speaking Switzerland. Furthermore, our experimental design allows more precise statements about the nature of isoglosses in general, (i) since we work together with several informants at each measuring point, and (ii) since we explicitly encouraged the informants to distinguish between acceptable and preferred variants. Interestingly, it is often the case that transitions from one to another option of a geographical variable are gradual, as I will demonstrate on the basis of purposive infinitives. Graduality follows a certain geometry, and it is reflected along different dimensions: the density of affected measuring points, the relative number of speakers at one measuring point, the preference for one or another pattern, and the power of syntactic, semantic or contextual factors constraining the use of a pattern. Since the same types of intra-individual variation occur in the same areas, it is part of a speaker's competence to prefer a pattern under certain e.g. contextual circumstances whereas speakers from other areas do not. I conclude from these facts that the internal architecture of a grammar must systematically predict optionality and preferential asymmetries between acceptable variants (Bresnan, Dingare & Manning 2001). However, if optionality is treated as a random mixture of two (or more) 'consistent' grammars, the fact cannot adequately be mirrored that different dialects show specific systematic arrangements between options. Instead, I propose that at each point on the areal continuum a grammar exists which is acquired by the local speakers.

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