

Regression as a referee. A theoretical and practical way out of the syntactic-variation impasse in sociolinguistics

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Since Labov (1969), linguists have analyzed the relationship between language structure and social context in terms of the “sociolinguistic variable”, viz. a linguistic unit with two or more variants which co-vary with other linguistic and/or social variables. Although initial successes in emergent sociolinguistics came from phonetics and phonology, Labov (1972) emphasized the necessity to move beyond these domains in order to be able to fully appreciate the impact of the social context on language structure. Sankoff (1973) was the first to suggest that the application of Labovian methodology to syntax would not be a “conceptually difficult jump” (1973: 58), but many linguists reacted that Labovian methods cannot straightforwardly be applied to syntax (see a.o. Lavandera 1978, Romaine 1984, Cheshire 1987 and Winford 1996). The main objections against the extrapolation of Labovian analysis to the domain of syntax are the problem of semantic equivalence (impossible to guarantee for syntactic variants) and, more importantly, the absence of an integrative (socio)linguistic theory which can coherently deal with this conditioning and, more generally, with variability in syntax.

In this talk, we defend a functional and probabilistic perspective on syntax, whose central tenet is that (narrowly defined) processing strategies determine constructional choice, and pattern internal constraints which (may) correlate with external constraints. Building on previous experimental and corpus-based investigations into the syntax and semantics of existential sentences with *er* “there”, we discuss two new regression analyses of internal and external factors which condition the actual choice of topic-introducing constructions in non-elicited Belgian and Netherlandic formal and informal Dutch. The main outcome of these analyses is that *all* syntactic variation in the domain of existential sentences is pragmatically motivated, but that existential variants can still be used as linguistic variables in the original, Labovian sense, if pragmatic/semantic factors which condition them are *stable* across language varieties.

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