

If *ain't* ain't a word, isn't *isn't*?
Variable Impoverishment as a mechanism of intra-individual variation

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Our first step toward locating mechanisms of intra-individual variation is to develop a consensus definition of this phenomenon. Parrott (2007) describes variation as the non-deterministic use of multiple variant morphophonological forms in the same morphosyntactic environment (in contrast to allomorphy), where the variant forms express no difference in lexical/truth-conditional semantics or morphosyntactic function, but typically (perhaps always?) convey different social meanings. Assuming this description is adequate, our next step is to identify mechanisms of intra-individual variation within a coherent theory of morphosyntax. In other words, what kind of objects are the variant forms? How do we characterize the environments where variant forms can (or cannot) occur? And why do the variants occur in non-deterministic rather than complementary distribution—what is the difference between variation and allomorphy?

Evaluating mechanistic theories of variation requires empirical evidence that can be gleaned only from investigating attested cases, necessarily utilizing observational and quantitative sociolinguistic methods. This presentation will discuss one proposal resulting from such a collaborative research strategy (cf. Adger and Smith 2005, Adger 2006). Nevins and Parrott (2007) hypothesize that variable post-syntactic Impoverishment operations in Distributed Morphology (DM, Halle and Marantz 1993, Embick and Noyer 2007) are among the mechanisms of intra-individual variation in morphosyntax. After summarizing the Impoverishment treatment of Smith Island, MD leveling to *weren't* (= BE_[+past]) and *ain't* (= BE_[-past], HAVE_[-past]), the analysis is extended to account for *ain't* in African American English, which additionally levels both DO_[-past] and DO_[+past]. Though admittedly incomplete, the Impoverishment analysis brings us closer to understanding the many puzzling properties of English *-n't* (Zwicky and Pullum 1983), which have yet to be captured in DM or any theory of morphosyntax. This attempt thus further affirms Adger and Trousdale's point that even general "theoretical modelling can be enriched by taking variation as a core explanandum" (2007: 274).