

What goes with what? The problem of intra-speaker variation for parametric theory

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Any theory of parametric variation should not only be able to account for single points of variation between two languages (e.g., grammar A has wh-movement; grammar B has wh in-situ), but also for the correlation of two (or more) grammatical phenomena which might not seem, at first glance, that they would emerge from a single abstract grammatical property. But if the theory of parameters has, as one of its goals, the desire to account for the correlation between two (or more) syntactic phenomena, we need to be able to determine, independent of theory internal motivation, which syntactic phenomena are linked to one another, or, “what goes with what.” This might seem like a relatively straightforward task for a variety used by mono-lingual/dialectal speakers. So, for example, our theory might say that the appearance of lexical verbs to the right of adverbs like *never* (*Mary never smokes*) derives from the same abstract property which gives rise to *do*-support in interrogatives (*Does Mary smoke?*); the fact that native speakers of Modern English reject both appearance of the verb to the left of *never* (**Mary smokes never*) and movement of lexical verbs to C⁰ (**Smokes Mary?*) gives us a way of confirming, theory-externally, that these two phenomena go together. However, the picture is not at all straightforward once we confront the problem of intra-speaker variation. The problem becomes apparent if one imagines a speaker who allows all four possibilities noted above (i.e., appearance of the lexical verb both to the right and to the left of the adverb, and both *do*-support and movement of the lexical verb to C⁰ in interrogatives). While this particular case may not be found with speakers of Modern English, in this talk I discuss analogous cases of intra-speaker variation from Appalachian English. While there may be theory internal reasons to claim that phenomenon A goes with phenomenon B in Appalachian (while phenomenon A' goes with phenomenon B'), we cannot independently support this claim via native speaker judgments, if native speakers accept A, A', B, and B', and have no intuitions about what goes with what. I address the question of how to reconcile the problem of intra-speaker variation with the desire to understand which syntactic phenomena are linked to one another. Specifically, I look to work by Kroch (e.g., 1989; 1994), who shows that although mixing of phenomena (in fact, exactly of the type noted above for English) was historically possible, syntactic analysis of corpora from different time periods reveals that certain grammatical phenomena change in lock-step (the “constant rate” phenomenon); this in turn reveals which phenomena go together, and as such, which must be the surface reflexes of a single abstract property. Thus, even in the face of variability and lack of native speaker intuitions, we can tease apart mixed phenomena. I argue that Kroch’s (*inter alia*) diachronic studies are relevant to the question of synchronic intra-speaker variability, in that we can use the same methodology to tease apart mixing of syntactic phenomena within a single speaker. This may seem like a contradiction: how can we plot diachronic change in a synchronic situation? To address the contradiction, I bring to bear the observation (e.g., Wolfram 1984) that closely related dialects represent different stages of change. So, if we compare corpora from such dialects (e.g., different dialects/speakers from within the Appalachian region), we can simulate the constant rate phenomenon, and synchronically uncover the kinds of correlations that are like the lock-step changes found in the diachronic studies. This in turn would allow us to determine, for current cases where we find intra-speaker variation, what goes with what.