

Grammatical Variation, Inherent Variability, and Coexistent Systems

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Grammatical variation constitutes a longstanding challenge to linguistic theory. When such variation is acknowledged, it is traditionally relegated to ‘free variation’ or viewed as the product of interacting invariant systems. However, recent work in syntactic theory has begun to explore variation via optionality of parameter setting (Henry 1995), optimality of constraint interaction (Barbosa et al. 1998), lexical selection (Adger 2007), or feature impoverishment (Nevins & Parrott 2007). Over the past 40 years, work in variationist (socio)linguistics has recognized the inherent variability of language and elucidated the language-internal constraints on variation and the probabilistic modeling of grammar (e.g. Labov 1969; Bayley & Lucas 2007). Yet the question remains as to the source of variation: a single (variable) system, the interaction of coexistent systems, or a combination of the two.

In this paper, I address this question by drawing on analyses of grammatical variation in a range of varieties of English (standard and nonstandard) and English-based creole (e.g. Walker 2000, 2007; Walker & Meyerhoff 2006; Walker & Sidnell, in press). Criteria that have been proposed to recognize the presence of coexistent systems (Labov 1998) require a focus on language-internal constraints and the interaction of multiple linguistic variables. In order to determine whether grammatical variation should be modeled along a single dimension or multiple dimensions, I examine an array of interrelated grammatical variables that have been implicated in studies of English, English-based creoles, and African American English.