Why is there variation rather than nothing?

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Although variation and heterogeneity are generally recognized as a characteristic of linguistic usage, they are hardly conceived as a fundamental dimension of grammar. Introducing a distinction between an exemplum linguistics and a datum linguistics, we show that the history of the language sciences, both conceptually and descriptively, is organized around opposing conceptions of what a linguistic fact is. While Generative Grammar and its practitioners are clearly examples of the first, corpus linguistics illustrates the second conception. The upsurge of datum linguistics and of usage based models since the beginning of the 21st century allows for a fundamental reassessment of the functional role of variation in language. We show that while the biolinguistic program rests on the negation of the sociocultural framing of the language faculty and denies any functional impact of communicational competence in shaping language and grammars, constructional approaches and usage-based linguistics make room for a Darwinian sociocultural conception. In such a conception, communication is a leading force in the emergence and stabilization of human linguistic competence, both diachronically and synchronically. In this approach, variation and heterogeneity are to be seen as core factors in shaping language. Thus, as argued some 50 years ago by Weinreich, variation and heterogeneity are to be regarded as structurally functional, and as fundamental dimensions of language.

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Everyone knows that language is variable. Two individuals of the same generation and locality, speaking precisely the same dialect and moving in the same social circles, are never absolutely at one in their speech habits. Sapir (1921, p. 147)

1. Approaches to variation: historical perspectives

In the recent history of linguistics, Weinreich et al.'s publication (1968) was a historical turning point. For many young linguists of the moment, this seminal paper marked the birth of modern sociolinguistics and was a decisive influence on their intellectual career. Of course, in 1968 the term "sociolinguistics" had already been around for several years.[1] Currie created it in the 1950s in order to explain, among other things, the relation between languages and castes in India (Currie, 1952). Though sociolinguistics and the sociology of language progressively shaped their identity during the 1960s through a series of major international conferences which marked the field,[2] the sociolinguistic perspective really came to the fore in 1968, combining in an original way a structural dialectology, in particular urban structural dialectology, and research in the field of contacts between languages and pidgins on the one hand and historical linguistics on the other.[3]

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[1] Currie (1952) presents the term sociolinguistics as a personal lexical creation. He strongly claimed its paternity in 1981 (Currie, 1981).

[2] *Cf.* Koerner (1991) for a historical analysis (*caveat* the initial reference to Currie is misdated in it).

[3] On the influences on sociolinguistics, *Cf.* Weinreich for structural dialectology (1954), Labov for urban dialectology (1966), to Weinreich for language contacts and pidgins (1951, 1953), to Lehman for historical linguistics (1962).

Such convergence is hardly surprising. Meillet had announced it half a century earlier in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (Meillet, 1921), where he argued that all the dimensions of linguistic change (in the geographical, social, stylistic or historical area) stem from a single source, the social institution character of language. He thus reminded linguists that all observable phenomena of mixing, evolution and fragmentation, in short everything that brings language to life according to Whitney (1875), always comes from an external source. That is the reason why linguists, as long as they adopt the internal point of view only, can indeed describe these phenomena, but only in terms of what they are: they definitely fail to explain them.[4] Meillet also emphasized that in order to reach a causal explanation, it is necessary to adopt an external and social point of view. Relating linguistic facts to their cause and thus explaining them, requires recognition of the driving role played by variation in linguistic phenomenology. Such variation is linked to the intrinsic social dimension of language.[5] Such was Meillet's lesson, which was taken up by Weinreich half a century later. The objective of the present paper is to show that the lesson was on the whole ignored by 20th century linguistics, but that it is currently making its way back to the foreground with a renewed acuteness.

In 1968, in their manifesto encouraging an empirical analysis of linguistic change, Weinreich and his two PhD students,[6] thus placed variation at the heart of linguistic phenomena. To this end, they combined several questions. Working on the various models of linguistic change put forward since the Neogrammarians, they notably discussed the phenomena of gradual or sudden evolution, the comparative role of phonetic rules and of lexical scattering, the existence of residues and mutation exceptions, etc.[7] This led them to analyse the intergenerational transmission models as a source of change. Paul's suggestions (1909), like those of Chomsky and Halle (1968), were criticised in the light of the internal variability of grammars and the social embedding of language in speech communities and peer groups where linguistic identity is forged. As underlined in the third point of their conclusion, while all internal variation and heterogeneity within a given language does not necessarily lead to a change in the said language, all processes of change necessarily stem from socially marked, assessed and promoted internal variation and heterogeneity. Languages are thus considered as systems which are unstable, open, plastic, deformable and porous. Related to the question of the contact between languages, the notions of mixing and interlanguage, which at the very least since Schuchardt (1909, 1922) have established creolisation as a principle in the evolution of all languages, are thus reasserted.

Overall, it is in the intrinsic social character of language, by way of the intimacy of the link between language and the socially qualified speech community, that Weinreich et al. (1968) locate the initial source and driving force of linguistic change. They highlight the fact that a speech community is a concrete social organisation. It is therefore, *ex definitio*, deeply heterogeneous, divided, hierarchical and structured by an antagonistic social dynamics. In such case, the implication is that linguistic variation and heterogeneity on the one hand and social heterogeneity on the other are simply the two aspects of the same social reality. It is because no perfectly stable homogeneous community can ever exist that no perfectly stable and invariant homogeneous language can exist.

Thus, the intimate link between language and social structure, affirmed by all the Masters of 20th century modern linguistics is here apprehended through the prism of change. However, Weinreich, Labov and Herzog drew from this a series of very general linguistic conclusions, which, through the foundation of variationist (socio)linguistics would profoundly mark the theoretical landscape. They wrote that in order to progress and achieve a comprehension of linguistic phenomena, linguistics must break the link between structure and homogeneity and systemic organisation and invariance. All societies, all cultures and all human organisations show strong internal differentiations, structured hierarchies and more or less conflicting heterogeneities, and the very essence of the social resides in the organisation of these differences in what are constantly changing dynamic systems.[8] Social heterogeneity and variability cannot therefore be considered as parasitic, accessory or abnormal dimensions. They are the very dimensions of the social. As I will show in this paper, it follows that variation and heterogeneity must be located at the very heart of linguistic systems of which they constitute the organising and functional principle.

Variationist linguistics thus places variation at the very heart of the linguistic model. It thus relegates the invariant approaches to the category of homogeneous grammars. A homogeneous and invariant grammar is merely a grammatical system which has been standardised by the very same social it claims to ignore. Thus, if all languages are heterogeneous and variable, the grammar which claims to describe and model it must also be so. But above all, variation systemicity and heterogeneity organisation are to be seen as the very source of what creates the structure and the system of languages. It is indeed the existence of various communication modes and systems which leads us to grammaticalise and systematise them, as we will see below. This is precisely what the Master of Geneva was saying when he declared that language as a system is the result of various forms of speech being simultaneously perceived by the same collective consciousness. It follows from

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[4] One can appreciate at its fair value Meillet's condemnation of internal grammar founded on the formal categories of logic alone. "L'ancienne grammaire générale est tombée dans un juste décri parce qu'elle n'était qu'une application maladroite de la logique formelle à la linguistique où les catégories logiques n'ont rien à faire" (Meillet, 1921, p. 15).

[5] "Le seul élément variable auquel on puisse recourir pour rendre compte du changement linguistique est le changement social dont les variations du langage ne sont que les conséquences parfois immédiates et directes, et le plus souvent médiates et indirectes" (Meillet, 1921, p. 17).

[6] William Labov and Marvin Herzog both defended a PhD in Columbia under the direction of Uriel Weinreich in 1964.

[7] For a more recent detailed discussion *Cf.* Labov (1981, 1994, 2001).

[8] Without entering here a post-Hegelian debate over history, its dynamics and rationalities, as, for instance, Fukuyama (1992) thought he could synthetize, we shall oppose this dynamic conception of the social to the perfectly sterilised, ideal and static approach which Chomsky (1965, p. 12) thinks he can adopt for purely heuristic purposes by choosing an ideal speaker–listener (*Cf. infra*). For a criticism of such a claim to be able to extract oneself from history, societies, their dynamics and the very *hubris* of the social, *Cf.* Bourdieu (1997).