

Sources of variability relevant to the cognitive sociolinguist, and corpus- as well as psycholinguistic methods and notions to handle them

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Abstract

This paper is a plea for sociolinguistics to integrate both theoretical and methodological developments from cognitive linguistics and, even more importantly, psycholinguistics. More specifically, I argue that theoretical advances involving exemplar-based models and new methodological tools from psycholinguistics (regressions, in particular mixed-effects models) and corpus linguistics (in particular, more bottom-up studies) would help further sociolinguistics to a considerable degree. To exemplify at least some ways what such developments would look like, I then discuss three small case studies of instances of constructional variation in usage/corpus data, which showcase how contextual as well as cognitive-/psycholinguistic language-internal and sociolinguistic language-external factors interact and can be explored.

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The overarching objective of this study is to explore the gradient interaction between language-internal and language external factors as a cognitive and cultural phenomenon that comes within the remit of cognitive sociolinguistics. Szmrecsanyi (2010:143f.)

1. Introduction

The linguist's life is a hard one. Language, especially when studied not on the basis of decontextualized and made-up sentences, is one of the most openly manifest forms of human behavior, but also one of the most complex and multi-faceted domains of scientific inquiry. This is because linguistic behavior is influenced by

- specific aspects of the linguistic system having to do with *linguistic form/structure*, potentially ambiguous and polysemous meanings/functions, and their interrelation;
- *within-individual aspects of cognition* having to do with attention, working memory, perception and learning, general intelligence and linguistic as well as academic attainment, and a variety of 'performance'-related factors; these can be subsumed under the notion of cognitive and/or psychological/psycholinguistic determinants;
- *between-individual aspects of interaction* having to do with social, interactional, and cultural forces; these can be subsumed under the notion of sociocultural/sociolinguistic determinants.

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To make matters worse, all these factors influence linguistic behavior only probabilistically and to different extents at different times, and we have no direct access to the interactions of these probabilistic systems. Much of the data we do have comes from corpora or other data elicited in largely authentic settings, but often these data are

- spotty: we only have samples of the ‘population’ of a language that are, typically, tiny, unbalanced, and unrepresentative;
- hard to use: corpora only contain distributional data – frequencies of occurrence and of co-occurrence and dispersion – so whatever one wants to study needs to be operationalized in a quantitative/distributional fashion, and not all cognitive/psycholinguistic or sociolinguistic variables of interest are easy to operationalize;
- hard to obtain: linguistic patterns are often fuzzy and, thus, hard to define exhaustively, and corpora and their annotation often contain errors and are often difficult to search.

Against this background, it is easy to understand that the two disciplines of cognitive- and psycholinguistic approaches on the one hand and sociolinguistic approaches on the other hand have so far mainly concerned themselves with exploring ‘their’ sources of variation – cognitive sociolinguistics as its own dedicated field is a young discipline. The inaugural collections that marked the emergence of the discipline are Kristiansen and Dirven (2008), and Geeraerts et al. (2010). In terms of explicitly marking the birth of a new discipline – or a new merger of existing disciplines – both collections define, motivate, and set the stage for a new fruitful and interdisciplinary endeavor by pointing out correctly, for example, how cognitive linguistics can benefit from a (more) sociolinguistically informed perspective: (i) cognitive linguistics would benefit from recognizing the sociolinguistically time-honored fact that it is useful to study more diverse data than the written production of some standard variety of a language; (ii) contextual features of language use are particularly indispensable for an approach that wants to do justice to calling itself usage-based; (iii) usage in turn takes place in social settings, with social goals, and under social constraints, etc. (cf. the introductory chapter in Geeraerts et al., 2010). At the same time, a convincing case is also made for how sociolinguistics would benefit from a (more) cognitive perspective, and I will in fact be more inclusive and say a more *cognitive/psycholinguistic* perspective, since, in fact, semantic or more general cognitive and psycholinguistic considerations are at the core of sociolinguistics, if only for how they affect choices speakers make in discourse.

I agree with nearly all of the assessments to a degree that I would ask, how could one not agree? I have a few minor qualifications and/or additional thoughts, however. One very general point that bears on the argumentation to follow is concerned with the fact that, using Eckert’s (submitted for publication) terminology, it seems to me that the kind of sociolinguistics so far most prominently represented in cognitive sociolinguistics belongs to the first wave of variation study, the one concerned with establishing “broad correlations between linguistic variables and the macro-sociological categories of socioeconomic class, sex class, ethnicity and age” (p. 11), which is why my discussion below will focus on this wave, too.

Another point is concerned with the (bi)directionality of the exchange between the fields, (bi)directionality in the sense of who offers whom how much. To be quite honest, and to the limited degree that anyone in general and I myself in particular can evaluate two such huge and diverse fields in their entirety, I think that the main direction of knowledge transfer is, and should be, more – though not exclusively, see below – from cognitive linguistics/psycholinguistics to sociolinguistics than the other way round. Why is that?

One reason for this is concerned with theoretical aspects. While a field called *cognitive sociolinguistics* was not explicitly recognized until very recently, it should be acknowledged that at least some areas of what is called *cognitive linguistics* have for quite some time recognized that factors that can fairly uncontroversially be considered sociolinguistic can play an important role and should be integrated theoretically. For example, as early as 1995, Goldberg discusses the meaning component of constructions in her Construction Grammar as follows:

“Meaning” is to be construed broadly enough so as include contexts of use, as well as traditional notions of semantics. That is, a construction is posited when some aspect of the way in which it is conventionally used is not strictly predictable. It would alternatively be possible to define constructions as ordered triples of form, meaning, and context, as is done by Zdrozny and Manaster-Ramer, 1993. (Goldberg, 1995:229, n. 6)

Similarly, in her 2003 overview article, she states that “the function pole in the definition of a construction indeed allows for the incorporation of factors pertaining to social situation, such as e.g., register” (Goldberg, 2003:221). Thus, even though cognitive sociolinguistics was not yet ‘officially’ recognized as a new discipline, some areas of cognitive linguistics’ awareness of, and compatibility with, what are now foundational assumptions of cognitive sociolinguistics predate the discipline by approximately 10 years. Thus, to my mind, the field of cognitive linguistics has recognized that sociolinguistic factors are important for the development of a cognitively and psycholinguistically grounded framework and has, developed its main framework in a way so as to accommodate that recognition, even if there were not yet many concrete studies following this thread. On the other hand, it has always been my impression that sociolinguistics has not yet had much of a similar epiphany and has until very recently been mostly content to focus on language-external

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