



Discourse-pragmatic variation across situations, varieties, ages: I DON'T KNOW in sociolinguistic and medical interviews



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 14 May 2016

Keywords:

I DON'T KNOW

Discourse-pragmatic variation

Situational context

Doctor-patient communication

British and American English

ABSTRACT

Our analysis of I DON'T KNOW (IDK) variability in four sub-corpora of sociolinguistic and mental health interviews clarifies the context-dependency of discourse-pragmatic variation, and demonstrates the translational potential of socially responsible, linguistic research. Systematic and accountable analysis of over 700 tokens of IDK in these data reveals that while IDK variants, functions and syntactic configurations are differentially distributed across situation, variety and age, form-function correlations in IDK use are robust across these parameters. These results demonstrate that discourse-pragmatic variables such as IDK retain some probabilistic relationships that aid in consistent interpretation across contexts of use, while other aspects of variability are used in stylistically distinct ways across e.g. situations and social groups. Moreover, our analysis of IDK in mental health interviews shows how the variationist analysis of site-particular communicative practices can uncover language variation patterns that have the potential to affect practice, research and teaching outside of the sociolinguistics community.

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1. Introduction

The sociolinguistic interview is a mainstay of variationist methodology and continues to constitute the primary data source for studies of language variation and change.¹ However, some variationists have successfully utilized other data sources and demonstrated how their analyses allow investigation of contextual effects on language use not readily observable in sociolinguistic interview data. Coupland (1980), for example, recorded interactions at a travel agency to characterize the effect on linguistic variation of situational factors that are invariable in (one-to-one) sociolinguistic interviews: participant and channel. Other scholars ventured to playgrounds and schools (Cheshire, 1982) or barbecues and hospitals (Podesva, 2007) to observe the impact of situational context on language use; moreover, recent research has made use of diverse corpora to compare language use across workplace and classroom settings (Holmes and Schnurr, 2006; Schlee, 2008a; see also Chaemsaithong (2012) for a theoretical discussion of situational linguistic variation). In this paper, we support both the

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¹ Becker (2013) draws attention to the inconsistent use of the term 'sociolinguistic interview': some use it broadly to refer to any face-to-face interaction between members of a speech community and a linguistic researcher that is recorded for the analysis of sociolinguistic variation and change; others use it more narrowly to refer to the techniques developed by Labov (1966, 1984) for the systematic elicitation of different contextual speech styles from individual speakers. In this paper, we apply the label 'sociolinguistic interview data' to any naturalistic speech data obtained for variation analysis in an informal interview setting and involving a linguistic fieldworker, regardless of whether the interview protocol is structured to elicit different contextual styles.

extension of variationist analyses beyond the sociolinguistic interview and the cross-situational analysis of language variation patterns (e.g. [Finegan and Biber, 1994, 2001](#)) while also attending to the effects of more widely studied social predictors such as variety and age.

Our investigation focuses on the construction I DON'T KNOW (IDK)² in two situationally distinct yet structurally comparable settings: sociolinguistic and mental health interviews. It is motivated by our aims to: (i) clarify the role of situational factors in linguistic variation and advance our understanding of the nature of discourse-pragmatic variability (see [Pichler, 2010](#), p. 586); (ii) explore new impact strategies for variationist research that, if developed in close collaboration with medical practitioners, may benefit mental health patients (PTs) of different dialects and ages. To meet these objectives, our data are differentiated not just by situational context; the medical interview data are further differentiated by variety (British vs. American English) and broadly construed age groups (adolescent vs. young adult vs. adult). Our variationist analysis of the variable functional, morpho-phonological and syntactic properties of IDK in these data allows us to explore both inter- and intra-situational differences in IDK use, and establish to what extent different dimensions of discourse-pragmatic variability are generalizable beyond the immediate contexts, varieties and/or social groups in/by which they were produced. Moreover, the analysis of mental health data affords us the opportunity to identify situation-specific patterns of IDK use and propose ways in which health-care practitioners' (DRs') knowledge of these patterns could affect diagnosis and treatment decisions.

Previous (largely non-variationist) studies of IDK in non-medical discourse, including media, courtroom and sociolinguistic interviews as well as casual conversations, have shown that the function, form and syntax of IDK are highly variable.³ IDK functions as a cognitive claim of insufficient knowledge and a non-cognitive interactional device with interpersonal, face-saving functions as well as textual, turn-exchange or topic-development functions (e.g. [Beach and Metzger, 1997](#); [Pichler, 2009, 2013](#); [Potter, 1996](#); [Tsui, 1991](#); [Weatherall, 2011](#); [Wooffitt, 2005](#)). The construction's form is variable in terms of the vowel quality in *don't* (full vs. reduced) and the morpheme boundary between *don't* and *know* (audible vs. non-audible), locating variants on a continuum of articulatory reduction ([Bybee and Scheibman, 1999](#); [Pichler, 2009, 2013](#); [Scheibman, 2000](#)). In terms of syntax, IDK variably occurs without overt complementation, with a dependent *wh*-word, or with a dependent phrasal or clausal complement ([Pichler, 2013](#), p. 77–78). Example (1) from our mental health interview data shows that the variability of IDK with respect to its function, form and syntax extends to talk in this situational context.⁴ When questioned about his recent mental wellbeing, the adolescent PT in (1) uses IDK with non-cognitive (*I dunno-1*) and cognitive functions (*I don't know-2*, *I don't know-3*), in its reduced and full forms (*I dunno*, *I don't know*) as well as without (*I dunno-1*) and with dependent complements (*I don't know-2*, *I don't know-3*).

(1) DR: So how has the depression been?

(..)

PT: **I dunno-1.**

(..)

DR: Like, um (..) say on a scale of zero to ten. Zero is

PT: == I don't know when (.) **I don't know-2** when I feel depressed. **I don't know-3** the feeling of depressed.

(Verilogue 34993, AmE youth PT aged ≤17)

In this paper, we build on previous studies of IDK to explore whether and to what degree the construction's linguistic variability illustrated above is constrained by the extra-linguistic factors situation, variety and age. A wealth of studies have documented that the frequency, function, form and positioning of discourse-pragmatic variables is affected by: (i) a range of social factors, including: age, sex, ethnicity, socio-economic background, community of practice membership, locality (e.g.

² The term 'construction' is used here and throughout in a pre-theoretical way to refer to syntagmatic strings.

³ Throughout this paper, we follow the terminological conventions established in [Pichler \(2013\)](#) and use 'form' to refer to the variable morpho-phonology of IDK as described below and in more detail in Section 2.2. The 'form-function' correlations discussed in the paper thus refer to correlations between the function of IDK and its variable degree of articulatory reduction. We do not use 'form' to refer to other variable linguistic properties of IDK such as its syntactic configuration.

⁴ All examples are reproduced *verbatim* from the Verilogue or Berwick English corpora introduced in Section 2.1. The variable orthographic presentations of IDK (*I don't know*, *I dono*, *I dunno*) represent different variants whose phonetic, phonological and morphemic properties are introduced in Section 2.2. In examples (1)–(4) and (6)–(18), the following transcription conventions are used.

[]	overlap	:::;:::	syllable lengthening
==	latching	(.), (..), (...)	short, medium, long pause
=	turn continuation	.	final intonation contour
-	false start, truncation	,	continuing intonation contour
(h)	inbreath	?	rising intonation contour
@	laughter	(text)	uncertain transcription
> <	reduced tempo	(?)	indecipherable words
CAPITALS	louder than surrounding talk	[text]	extra-linguistic information
<u>underlining</u>	emphatic stress	[...]	text omitted
o o	soft speech	bold type	highlighting of variable or otherwise important text
superscript font	higher than usual pitch		

In the examples in (5), underlining is used to highlight distinctions made in data coding.

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