

Grammar or lexicon. Or: Grammar and lexicon? Rule-based and usage-based approaches to phonological variation

Abstract

After a brief discussion of the concept of language variation, some of the main characteristics of ‘rule-based’ and usage-based paradigms are sketched, confined to the domain of phonological variation and its relation with syntax, morphology and the lexicon. Given the large number of different perspectives from which both approaches and their relationships have recently been addressed in the literature, these outlines cannot be exhaustive. Both paradigms will be compared on the basis of research of the variable deletion of word-final /t/ or /d/ in modern varieties of English, Dutch and German. Several strengths and weaknesses of both approaches are succinctly discussed. The contours of some recent hybrid models, including those advanced in the five contributions to the present thematic issue, will be briefly described. Subsequently, two quantitative studies of variable reduction processes in specific varieties of modern Dutch will be summarized. Following a reflection on the potential implications of one of the outcomes of the latter of the two studies, a few thoughts regarding the potential and desiderata for further research conclude this contribution.

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Mit dem Wissen wächst der Zweifel – Goethe

1. Introduction

Although usage-based and ‘rule-based’ approaches to natural language share a number of constituent properties as a result of the fact that both look at language as a cognitive object, they differ in many respects. In essence, usage-based approaches contrast with ‘rule-based’, formal theory in that they do not assume language users to have abstract grammatical knowledge at their disposal. Instead, they postulate a close, organic connection between linguistic structure and language usage.

With respect to the phonetic/phonological part of language, usage-based models assume that language users store detailed phonetic information about the words of their language each time that they are exposed to them. These models stipulate redundant mental storage of bundles of maximally concrete articulatory, acoustic, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic information concerning single occurrences (‘tokens’ or ‘exemplars’) of lexical items, along with characteristics of both the speaker and the situation, organized in ‘clouds’. The items are interconnected in multi-tiered networks, in which aspects of form, meaning and usage are the organizing dimensions. Formal theory, on the other hand, conceives linguistic competence as a computational capacity based on internalized representations, rules, processes, constraints, principles and related abstract devices, which are usually categorical and generalize across many cases. The latter traits characterize several generations of models of generative phonology, including Optimality Theory, even though (classic) Optimality Theory is non-derivational, hence not literally rule-based, but rather declarative in nature. The designation ‘formal’ to refer to these various approaches goes back to De Saussure’s definition of *langue* as “une forme, non une substance” (1916, Cours, Ch. III); where De Saussure’s notion of ‘forme’ referred to the structure of the relations holding between linguistic elements.

Undoubtedly, the best-known usage-based model of phonology (and morphology) is Bybee (2001, 2002, 2006). Bybee's views are closely connected to proposals that have been made within the framework of Exemplar Theory in phonetics (Johnson, 1997; Pierrehumbert, 2002). For syntax, Construction Grammar and Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 2008; Goldberg, 2006) are relatively closely related. Cognitive grammar, Exemplar Theory and other usage-based approaches are all inspired by connectionism and one of the central themes in this family of theories is that language structure emerges from language use.

This thematic issue of *Lingua* will focus on the area of language variation in the sound components, with brief excursions on morphology and the lexicon. The present contribution will therefore add a variationist perspective, which was originally connected to, although by no means exclusive to, rule-based models.

After a concise discussion of the notion of language variation (Section 2), we will give rough outlines of rule-based and usage-based accounts (in Sections 3 and 4, respectively). Given the multitude of disciplinary and theoretical angles from which both paradigms and the relationship between them have been tackled in the literature of the past one or two decades, these sketches can only be incomplete. Both approaches will be compared on the basis of studies of the variable deletion of word-final /t/ or /d/ in specific varieties of several Germanic languages. Next, some strengths and weaknesses of both approaches will be briefly discussed (Section 5). In recent years, several hybrid models have been proposed; in Section 6, the contours of some hybrid models, including those advanced in the five contributions to this thematic issue, will be succinctly described. This is followed by a presentation of two quantitative studies of variable reduction processes in certain varieties of modern Dutch (Section 7). After a discussion of the possible relevance of some of the findings from the latter of the two studies, a few reflections regarding the possibilities and desiderata for further research conclude this contribution (Section 8).

2. Language variation

Diversity and variation occur both across and within languages. In this special issue no attention will be paid to language variation in the typological sense (cross-linguistic diversity or macro-variation), but rather in the sense of variation between (micro-variation) and within varieties of a given language. This distinction is sometimes referred to as one between inter- and intrasystemic variation, respectively; the latter type is sometimes called quantitative variation, i.e. Labov's (1972a:188) "alternate ways of saying 'the same' thing". Study after study has made clear that this type of language variation usually shows systematic, probabilistically constrained, quantitative regularities – hence 'orderly heterogeneity' (Weinreich et al., 1968).

In generative theory quantitative variation is traditionally referred to as optionality, although the notion of 'optionality' is sometimes also used to refer to choices which are indeed completely free, in the sense of linguistically entirely unconstrained (or not sufficiently understood). The label 'optional' or 'facultative', for example, has been used to refer to the fact that certain verbs (such as many equivalents of 'give') require two arguments, although there may be a third one, and also to cases of allophony which are not subject to complementary distribution (cf. Müller, 2003).

Both usage-based and rule-based paradigms conceive language as a cognitive object rather than a social one. They thus operate in a fundamentally different dimension than the sociolinguistic approach to language variation, since, as Labov (2010:7) put it, "the central dogma of sociolinguistics is that the community is prior to the individual. [...] [L]anguage is seen as an abstract pattern located in the speech community and exterior to the individual. The human language faculty [...] is then viewed as the capacity to perceive, reproduce and employ this pattern."

Apart from dialectology and sociolinguistics, until recently only few subdisciplines of linguistics were interested in inter- and intrasystemic variation. Differences between languages and especially between dialects or style levels were typically considered of marginal interest. This is rapidly changing. In the rule-based camp, there is a growing number of scholars who try to understand the smallest differences between dialects as manifestations of universal principles underlying the organization of language systems; the smallest difference (at the level of language as a system shared by the members of a community; cf. Chomsky's 1995 *E-language*) is thus explained on the basis of the highest common divisor (*I-language*, language as a cognitive commodity). Thus dialect features are sometimes explained as different instantiations of language universals or as instantiations of different language universals.

In the wake of developments in usage-based approaches to language, a subfield called Cognitive sociolinguistics has recently developed. It proposes a corpus-based method of describing and accounting for language variation which builds on the assumption that the clouds emanating from information stored in the mental lexicon contain, among other things, information regarding characteristics of both the speakers and the situations associated with specific variants. According to Hudson (2012, which contains some essential references) this approach to sociolinguistics differs from other approaches in that it focuses on individuals, their knowledge and behaviour, rather than on groups.

In this issue usage-based and rule-based paradigms of linguistic theory will be discussed from the point of view of variation in the sound components. The emphasis will be first and foremost on the answers that are typically given to two core questions regarding language variation: why does variation exist at all in a particular language system and how does it work?

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