

Syntactic variation, the linguistic variable, and sociolinguistic theory¹

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Abstract

Twenty-five years ago, Labov's variationist framework was seen as a breakthrough for linguistics. Since then, however, sociolinguistics has been overtly preoccupied with the problems involved in using the linguistic variable to analyze nonphonological variation. This has prevented any real progress being made in our understanding of syntactic variation. Analogies are drawn with the structuralists' preoccupation withemic concepts. The paper proposes a definition of 'syntactic variation' and the 'linguistic variable' and considers the type of perspective needed for a coherent sociolinguistic theory. It also considers the analytical frameworks that are needed to advance our understanding of the role of syntactic and pragmatic variation in everyday communication.

1. Introduction

Several writers have drawn attention recently to the lack of a coherent theory of language as it is used in its social context (see, for example, Romaine 1980; Muijsken 1984; Van de Craen 1985). It would probably not be exaggerating too much to say that there is a feeling of despondency among linguists and sociolinguists alike, because sociolinguistics has failed to provide us with a coherent model of language use. This is in stark contrast to the excitement of the 1960s and 1970s and the promise that seemed to lie in variationist studies. Labov's quantitative framework of analysis seemed at that time to be a breakthrough for linguistics, showing that fluctuation in language use that had traditionally been considered as free variation was in fact not free at all, but systematically constrained by linguistic and other factors. Furthermore, his framework offered some degree of explanation for systematic variation, seeing it as governed by two opposing systems of social norms — overt norms, governing the use of prestige variants and shared by all members of a

speech community (in fact, defining the speech community), and covert norms, governing the use of nonprestige variants.

Twenty years on, we can take stock of what has been achieved from this approach. A great deal of research has been carried out using Labovian methods: some of this research has led us to question the original model and, in the process, to discover more about the subtle interrelationships between language and society (see, for example, the papers in Labov 1980 and Romaine 1982b). Variationist methods have also enabled us to describe the way in which language changes in a society over time; these methods have also been used to analyze the changing language of learners of a second and foreign language (see Fasold 1984). There is no shortage of data on systematic variation.

Explanations, however, are less plentiful. Labov's original model has been questioned, but as yet there is little to take its place. Furthermore, the analytic procedures which once seemed such a breakthrough no longer appear so exciting. As Dittmar (1983) points out, investigating the way that linguistic structure fits onto social structure no longer seems the most useful way forward for sociolinguistics. It can be revealing to analyze the covariation of particular linguistic variables in societies that are very different from each other (see, for example, Jahangiri and Hudson 1982; Sahgal 1983) but we could go on for ever correlating linguistic items with predetermined social categories, without necessarily ever achieving any real insights into the nature of language as a social phenomenon, nor, indeed, into the nature of the social categories themselves (see, for discussion, Dittmar 1983; Smith 1984).

Explanations, however, can be served by description, and the Labovian quantitative framework is undoubtedly a convenient and effective method of analyzing and describing linguistic variation. It has the disadvantage of being a static framework of analysis, but it is possible to interpret the quantitative data that are obtained from the analysis within a potentially more dynamic theory of language behavior. For example, some recent explanations have been suggested within the framework of Giles's (1980, 1984) speech-accommodation theory (including Trudgill 1981; Cheshire 1982a; and especially Bell 1984).

Identifying linguistic variables, then, as well as the linguistic and social constraints that govern their use, can still be a useful preliminary stage in attempting to explain linguistic behavior, even if this should not necessarily be seen as an end in itself. If we accept the quantitative framework as a method of analysis, however, we have to come to a decision about the level of language for which it is appropriate to be used.

In his early work Labov pointed out that if we are to understand language structure and the evolution of language within a social context, we must

move beyond the analysis of phonetic and phonological variables (Labov 1972). In spite of this, however, the majority of studies that have been carried out within a Labovian framework have been confined to these levels of language. More importantly, there is a large literature debating the question of whether it is methodologically and theoretically justifiable to use this framework for the analysis of variation in syntax and in discourse (see, for example, Labov 1978; Lavandera 1978; Romaine 1980; Dines 1980; Winford 1984); and there has been some discussion of the methodological refinements that would be required in order to do so (see, in particular, Dines 1980). There is considerable inconsistency in the terms that are used in this literature, and a great deal of disagreement between individual writers, with the result that the debate has tended to focus on individual disagreements rather than on the larger, more important issues that need to be resolved if we are to make progress in our understanding of sociolinguistic behavior.

This paper will not repeat the arguments that have been made for and against the extension of the linguistic variable to the analysis of syntax. The arguments have already been debated at some length, and there seems no point in reproducing them. Instead, it will focus on two of the more fundamental issues that are involved, on which there appears to be a surprising amount of confusion: the nature of syntactic variation, and the nature of the linguistic variable. If we can resolve the two related questions of what constitutes syntactic variation and how it can be analyzed, we can turn our attention to more profitable areas of sociolinguistic inquiry, such as informing ourselves about how people make use of syntactic and pragmatic variation in language as they go about their daily lives. If our aim is a coherent theory of language as it is used in its social context (and this aim, of course, is questionable — see Romaine 1982a), then we need to acquire some data against which such a theory could be tested. Even without this aim, however, we need to discover more about the nature and the use of syntactic variation, in order to better understand the role of language in human interaction.

This paper will address first the question of what constitutes syntactic variation, and then the question of what constitutes a linguistic variable. It will then consider some ways in which we can move beyond the current disputes about these matters and increase our understanding of the nature and the function of syntactic variation.

2. Some areas of confusion

The insight that linguistic variation is not necessarily free, but is systematically constrained by linguistic and social factors (or both), was

achieved using the analytic construct of the linguistic variable. As originally conceived by Labov, this was a linguistic unit with two or more variants that covary with other linguistic and/or social variables. For example, Labov (1966) found that the (ng) variable in New York has the variants /ŋ/ and /n/, whose occurrence is correlated with both the socioeconomic class of speakers and their speech style (defined as the amount of attention paid to speech). The variants can be considered as socially and stylistically different but linguistically equivalent ways of 'saying the same thing'. This last characteristic is rephrased by Labov (1978: 2), in his discussion of the extension of the variable to syntax, as 'having the same truth-value' and by Weiner and Labov (1983: 32-33) as being 'truth-conditionally equivalent and used on the whole to refer to the same states of affairs'. This most recent view considers that the analyst could claim to be using 'rough semantic equivalence' in order to set up the variants of a specific variable.

The main criticisms that have been made against extending the linguistic variable to syntax concern the problems involved in establishing 'semantic equivalence', though there is also some concern about the question of whether variables must carry social and stylistic meaning. The discussion is complicated, however, by the fact that it is not always clear what exactly has been meant by terms such as 'semantic equivalence' (see, for example, the discussion in Romaine 1980 and in Winford 1984). More confusing still is that there is considerable inconsistency among different writers in their use of the term 'syntactic variation'. These are clearly fundamental questions, which need to be resolved: if we cannot agree on the definition of syntactic variation, then there is little hope that we will be able to reach an agreement on how best to analyze it; similarly, if we cannot agree on a definition of the linguistic variable, then it is unlikely that we will be able to agree on whether it can be used to analyze syntactic variation and variation in discourse. Each of these questions will be discussed in turn, in the following two sections.

3. What is syntactic variation?

Several analyses of nonphonological variation have avoided the problem of defining syntactic variation, either by referring loosely to 'grammatical variation' (for example, Wolfram 1969) or by referring to 'morphological and syntactic variation' without specifying which features are considered morphological variables and which are considered syntactic variables (for example, Cheshire 1982b). Others, as Winford (1984) points out, differ in the criteria that they use to identify instances of 'syntactic' variables.

Some have been identified on the basis of grammatical function (for example, complementizer *que* in Montreal French), others in relation to a grammatical category, such as 'past tense' (for example, English /d/ deletion in bimorphemic clusters), and still others in terms of cognitive meaning (for example, *tu/vous/on* as variants of the 'marked indefinite' pronoun of Montreal French).

To add to the confusion, some writers disagree with others on the classification of specific linguistic features as 'syntactic' variables. Labov (1972, 1978) appears to consider multiple negation in English as a syntactic variant, while for Romaine (1980) this is a morphosyntactic or morpholexical variant. In fact, Romaine considers none of the items mentioned in the paragraph above to be examples of syntactic variation; she proposes instead that 'pure' syntactic variation should involve a 'whole construction or arrangement of items which alternate', giving as an example Weiner and Labov's (1983) analysis of variation between active sentences with [—specific] subjects and the agentless passive in English (that is, sentences such as *they broke into the liquor closet/the liquor closet was broken into*). However, she is subsequently taken to task by Winford (1984) for failing to observe this definition herself.

To this can be added Downes's (1984: 210) list of nine examples which he terms 'syntactic variables'. These include left and right dislocation, topicalization, cleft and pseudocleft sentences, and other constructions that have been analyzed within the framework of a Chomskyan transformational-generative grammar as resulting from transformations involving addition, deletion, or rearrangement of items.

Both Romaine and Winford present typologies of linguistic variables that have been discussed in the literature. Both their typologies range from 'pure' phonological variables to 'pure' syntactic variables, but they differ in the number of intervening categories. Both writers base their typologies on the nature of the alternating variants (phonological, morphophonemic, morpholexical, morphosyntactic, or syntactic) and on

Table 1. *Romaine's typology of linguistic variables*

Type of variable	Conditioning factors			Example
	linguistic	social	stylistic	
1. 'Pure' phonological	phonological	yes	yes	postvocalic (r)
2. Morphophonemic	phonological	yes	yes	/d/ deletion
3. Morphosyntactic or morpholexical	/grammatical syntactic(?)	yes	yes	complementizer <i>que</i> deletion
4. 'Pure' syntactic	syntactic(?)	no(?)	no(?)	agentless passive

Source: Romaine 1980.

Table 2. *Winford's typology of linguistic variables*

Type of variable	Conditioning factors		Example
	linguistic	social/stylistic	
Phonological	surface-structural (phonological) deep-structural	yes/yes yes/yes	postvocalic (r); /d/ deletion in monomorphemic clusters Guyanese singular pronouns
Morphological	(semantic)		
Morphosyntactic (a)	surface-structural (phonological)	yes/yes	complementizer <i>que</i> deletion in Montreal French
Morphosyntactic (b)	surface-structural (syntactic)	yes/yes	complementizer <i>that</i> deletion in English
Morphosyntactic (c)	(1) deep-structural (categorical)	yes/yes	alternation of creole pre-verbal particles and SE tense markers; /d/ deletion in bimorphemic clusters
	(1i) (phonological constraints also possible)	yes/yes	
Morphosyntactic (d)	deep-structural (syntactic)	(1) yes/yes	alternation of creole and SE complementizers <i>fu</i> and <i>in</i>
	deep-structural (syntactic)	(1i) ?/?	relative <i>that</i> deletion
Syntactic	deep-structural	(1) yes/yes	alternation of creole and SE syntactic structures active vs. agentless passive in English
	deep-structural	(1i) no/no	

Source: Winford 1984: 272.

the type of linguistic and social constraints that affect their occurrence. They each construct their typologies in an attempt to clear up previous inconsistencies in the categorization of different variables. Inevitably, however, new inconsistencies arise. Romaine, for example, has two categories between 'pure' phonological variables and 'pure' syntactic variables, whereas Winford has five. Romaine concludes that 'pure' syntactic variables, as she defines them, intersect with social and stylistic factors in a different way from other types of linguistic variables — or, perhaps, do not intersect with them at all. She gives as a 'seemingly simple and straightforward illustration' sentences (1) and (2) below:

- (1) Because it was cold, I closed the door.
 (2) I closed the door, because it was cold.

suggesting that the conditioning factor in this illustration is likely to be a 'pragmatic constraint' of foregrounding versus backgrounding rather than the usual Labovian external constraints of sex, age, or socioeconomic class. (This point will be discussed further in section 5.)

Winford, on the other hand, points out that there are cases of 'pure' syntactic variables which do intersect with external parameters in very similar ways to phonological and morphological variables. Creole continua are 'replete with instances of such syntactic variation' (1984: 272), and his typology takes account of this.

Other writers would doubtless want to make further additions to these typologies and would make further criticisms. My own criticism is that we have not yet reached a stage in our inquiries into linguistic variation where constructing a typology of variables is a profitable enterprise. Since the majority of our analyses of linguistic variation have focused on phonetic and phonological variation, we still know relatively little about syntactic variation. It is true that more is known about syntactic variation in Creole continua; a great deal of this research, however, has been carried out within an implicational framework of analysis (see Rickford 1980), and it is not clear to what extent results obtained from one framework of analysis can — or should — be transferred to another.

It is far too early, then, to be able to draw any firm conclusions about the factors that may or may not condition syntactic variation. Attempting to do so at this stage in our inquiries only clouds the issues and opens the way to further arguments about terminology, which cannot be properly resolved until more information is available.

A further, more important criticism is that there are not necessarily any clear grounds for distinguishing between phonological and morphophonemic variables on the one hand and between morphophonemic, morphosyntactic, and 'pure' syntactic variables on the other. To some extent the divisions that it is useful to make depend on the language concerned, as Romaine (1980) points out. For inflectional languages the division between morphosyntax and 'pure' syntax may be relatively clearcut, though even here there are likely to be borderline cases. Language does not fit neatly into predetermined clearcut categories, and although it can be useful for the purposes of theoretical linguistics to abstract from reality and pretend that it does, this is surely counterproductive for sociolinguistics. The discipline has prided itself on analyzing 'real' language as it is spoken in everyday life, and on attempting to analyze variation rather than pretending that it does not exist. Coates (1983: 3), in her discussion of the analysis of corpus data, makes a comment that is appropriate here. She points out that working with a corpus of language data, as she does, prevents linguists from relying on their own invented examples (which tend to be clearcut, 'central' examples) and from arriving at an unrealistically 'tidy' view of their subject. Corpus data bring us face to face with apparently indeterminate examples, which must be recognized if our models are to reflect reality.

Not only, then, is it premature to attempt to classify nonphonological

variables into clearcut typological categories; but in any case this procedure must surely be inappropriate for the analysis of spoken language in its social context. We would do better to acknowledge the gradience and indeterminacy that exists and to look for ways of incorporating these into our analyses, rather than to try to construct an intellectually 'tidy' but unilluminating typology of clearcut categories, into which we then try to force our data.

A more realistic approach is to make no attempt at imposing clearcut divisions on those nonphonological variables that have been identified so far, but instead to view variation that is not phonological as forming a continuum, ranging from morphological variation to syntactic variation. It is often difficult to clearly delimit the domains of morphology and syntax, and a continuum approach enables us to take this into account. Accepting this view allows us to avoid unprofitable arguments about whether specific examples of variation should be seen as morpholexical variation, as morphosyntactic variation, or as some other kind of variation. Furthermore, while we may well disagree on the organization of variables into clearcut typological categories, it is very likely that we will be able to agree on whether alternating items should be considered as nearer to one end of the continuum than to the other.

Some examples of variation that seem to me to be unquestionably morphological in kind rather than syntactic are the following:

- (i) variable deletion of the /d/ past tense suffix in American Black English, as in *they missed the bus* (Fasold 1972);
- (ii) the variable use of the -s suffix with third person singular present tense verbs, as in *she love*, which occurs in Norwich English (Trudgill 1974);
- (iii) the variable use of conditional or imperfect subjunctive verb forms in the protasis of conditional clauses in some varieties of Spanish spoken in Old Castile and the Basque country, as in *Donde vas con cinquenta anos? Unicamente si las hijas emigraran y harian alli fortuna...* (from Silva-Corvalan 1984: 594).

In order to class these examples as clear cases of morphological variation we need to accept the traditional view that morphology deals with the internal structure of words and syntax with the rules governing the way that words are combined to form sentences (see, for example, Crystal 1980a). Since in all these examples the variation is between individual word forms (*love* versus *loves*, for example) they can all be situated at, or at least near to, the morphological end of the syntactic continuum. It might be useful to adopt a structuralist conception of language, seeing the morphological end of the continuum as shading off into phonology, with morphophonemic variation at the most extreme end of the continuum, as shown below:

morpho-phonemics ← morphology → syntax

Variable /t/d deletion, for example, could then be placed toward the morphophonemic end of the continuum, since it is affected by a phonological constraint (whether the following segment is a consonant or a vowel).

Variation involving more than one item in a construction can then be considered as a relatively clearcut example of syntactic variation. An example is the alternation between English *never* and *didn't* in preterite constructions, as in

- (3) She hit my brother over the head, and he *never* even went down.
- (4) He hit my brother over the head, and he *didn't* even go down.

(From Cheshire 1982b.)

Still more clearcut examples would be variation involving a change in word order, such as Romaine's *because* sentences (examples 1 and 2 above). Weiner and Labov's (1983) agentless passive/active constructions would also be clear examples of syntactic variation.

As with all continua, it is what lies between the two poles that provides the more interesting examples, but these are also the more difficult to analyze. Some of the variables that lie in this middle ground can be placed nearer to one end of the continuum than the other. For example, the *on/vous/tu* alternation of the 'indefinite marked' pronoun reported by Laberge and discussed in Sankoff (1973) can be considered as nearer to the morphological end of the continuum than to the syntactic end, since this involves alternation between single items:

- (5) *Tu* as beau parler de l'éléphant, du serpent, mais si *on* peut pas le décrire, hein? (Sankoff 1973: 55).

Many other alternating items and constructions, however, will be left in the fuzzy middle area. The alternation between simple past verb forms and periphrastic verb forms that is discussed in Thalminen (1976), for example, seems to belong in this middle ground. Periphrastic forms such as

- (6) She did go to Taunton on Fridays.

express 'distributive' or habitual aspect, whereas the simple past verb form usually carries specific time reference:

- (7) She went to Taunton yesterday.

I will argue in the next sections that it is extremely misguided to attempt to analyze alternating grammatical forms that cannot be clearly situated at the morphological end of the continuum in terms of the linguistic variable.²

4. What is meant by the linguistic variable?

This is another fundamental issue: yet this, too, is one on which there is considerable disagreement.

First, there is the question of whether the variable is simply an analytical tool (see Hudson 1980: 157) which does not need to be part of a general theory of language, or whether our analytical devices are necessarily part of our theoretical assumptions (see Romaine 1980). Winford (1984) thinks a clear distinction can be made between purely analytical devices on the one hand, and theoretical models which attempt to explain the results of the analyses on the other. For him, linguistic variables are purely heuristic devices, and he accepts Labov's statement that linguistic theory has profited from the analysis of variable ways of saying the same thing, and that quantitative studies provide 'powerful methods of proof'.

There can be no doubt, surely, that Romaine's view is correct. There can be no 'proof' in linguistics, for we are constructing theories of language behavior, not looking for the Holy Grail. Linguistic theory can indeed profit from the analysis of variable ways of saying the same thing, but if we assume that items 'say the same thing' when in fact there is an important difference between them, our linguistic theory will be based on very shaky empirical foundations. The original conception of the linguistic variable was based on a very narrow idea of what 'saying the same thing' involved. If we do not keep to this narrow definition, we run the risk of failing to take account of the important pragmatic and communicative effects of using items that do not quite 'say the same thing', and any theory that rests on such an approach will be correspondingly weaker.

If we accept Romaine's position, then, we have to accept that our choice of analytic 'device' involves assumptions about the nature of the problem that we are dealing with and about the methods that are relevant to its description and explanation (see also Popper 1963). In the case of the linguistic variable as it was originally conceived, the implications are that where there are social and stylistic conditioning factors, stylistic variation directly reflects social structure: as Bell (1984) points out, there are some examples in the literature of variables that are socially but not stylistically conditioned, but none that are stylistically conditioned without being socially conditioned also. Quantitative stylistic variation derives from, and mirrors, social variation. This imbrication with social and stylistic factors is inextricably linked with the other defining characteristics of the variable: as Romaine (1980) puts it, 'social and stylistic variation presuppose the option of saying the same thing in different ways'.

This leads to the next question, that of whether the different realizations of a variable should have strict semantic equivalence. As we saw

earlier, Labov (1978) and Weiner and Labov (1983) modify the original criterion that variants must be alternative ways of 'saying the same thing', such that variants need be only 'truth-conditionally equivalent and used on the whole to refer to the same state of affairs' (Weiner and Labov 1983: 31-32). Dines (1980) suggests refining the concept of the variable still further, in order to apply it to 'discourse variables'. The discourse variable that she analyzes by way of illustration is 'set-marking tags' such as *and stuff like that*, *and that*, or *and that sort of thing*, as in

- (8) She could always pronounce her words properly an' stuff like that an' talk properly (Dines 1980: 28).

She proposes that variables be determined on the basis of variants having a 'common function in discourse', stating that this 'does not preclude the possibility of a semantic tie existing between variants, but it removes the necessity of one' (1980: 15-16). They must simply be 'in some way the same'.

This may well seem to be a reasonable and even useful extension of the concept. However, if we accept, as I argued above, that our analytic tools have theoretical implications, then it is not at all clear what kind of theory is now implied by this refinement of the definition. The analytic tool has been refined, but there has been no corresponding refinement of theory: in fact, it is difficult to see what kind of theoretical model could accompany a concept which has now become so loosely defined.

Labov's early attempts at incorporating systematic variability into a grammatical model were in terms of variable rules, which were conceived within a framework that owed much to the early Chomskyan model of generative grammar. It is not surprising that his attempts to formalize systematic variation were within this framework, given the intellectual climate of the time in linguistics circles in the USA. His original insistence on semantic equivalence reflects, perhaps, the insistence of many generativists that transformations should preserve meaning; and the discussions that have taken place in the sociolinguistic literature about whether or not variants of a given variable should be semantically equivalent are reminiscent of the debates that took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s about the place of semantic distinctions within a model of grammar. As Romaine (1981: 94-97) points out, however, Labov's early views are in fact not easily compatible with generative grammar. There are problems with his rejection of the competence/performance dichotomy and with the incorporation of probabilistic rules into a generative grammar (though this last point, of course, has been the subject of considerable debate). There are further problems involved in Labov's locus of variation in the community rather than in the individual (see, for discussion, Romaine 1981: 97; Romaine 1982a); again, this viewpoint can be traced, it seems, to a Chomskyan model of grammar.

A generative framework does not seem the best way of formalizing the variability that is always found when we analyze language in its social context, for the framework derives from an approach that explicitly divorces language from its social context. Whatever decisions we come to concerning the incorporation of variability in a model of grammar, however, it is important to remember that the analytic concept of the variable was tied to a framework that insisted on semantic equivalence. I have argued that our analytic devices cannot be separated from our theoretical assumptions; it follows from this that if our theoretical framework changes, then so must our analytic tools.

It is worth recalling at this point the efforts that were made earlier this century by linguists working within the structuralist framework, who tried to extend emic concepts beyond the phonological level of language. The phoneme was extremely useful as an analytical concept for the sound systems of languages, and in the intellectual excitement of the time a plethora of other emic units were set up. Some even attempted to analyze nonlinguistic material in this way: Birdwhistell (1952), for example, set up the kineme as a unit of gestural expression, and there was talk, too, of the 'gusteme' as a unit of taste. Within language, the morpheme was set up as a minimal distinctive grammatical unit, which was analogous in many ways to the phoneme (for example, morphemes could have phonologically conditioned allomorphs, similar to the allophones of a given phoneme). The morpheme was of some help in analyzing the internal structure of word forms, but attempts to establish similar emic units for syntax were doomed to failure.³

The problem with extending the linguistic variable to syntax is exactly parallel to the problems that were encountered in extending emic units to syntax. Analogies can sometimes be drawn between phonology and morphology, but syntax and phonology are subject to different, albeit overlapping, organizing principles and require different analytic frameworks. Just as an emic unit could be used to analyze some aspects of morphological structure,⁴ so the linguistic variable can be used to analyze some aspects of variation in morphology, as we will see in the following section. It is pointless, however, to try to extend the use of the variable to the analysis of syntax, and still more so to attempt to apply it to discourse. We may not exactly have reinvented the wheel in sociolinguistics, but we have certainly failed to learn from the experience of our predecessors.

5. The syntactic continuum and the linguistic variable

If the arguments of the previous sections are accepted, it follows that in order to be able to establish alternating forms as realizations of a

linguistic variable, the forms must be semantically equivalent, and they must be constrained by social or stylistic factors (or both). Both these criteria can apply to variation that occurs at the extreme morphological end of the syntactic continuum, but not to variation that occurs further along the continuum.

Let us consider first the criterion that variants should have 'semantic equivalence'. I have argued that this criterion needs to be interpreted in its strictest sense, to avoid overlooking important nuances in meaning. At the morphological end of the continuum, where variants may involve simply the presence or absence of a grammatical inflection, it is relatively simple to define the grammatical meaning that is involved and to ensure that variants are semantically equivalent. The items given as clearest examples of morphological variation in section 3 can serve as examples of this.

As we move further along the continuum, however, the grammatical meaning that is involved becomes more complex. This can be seen if we consider a specific example in some detail. In Cheshire (1982b) I analyzed constructions containing *never* and a simple past verb as a variant negative preterite form, alternating with constructions containing *didn't* and an uninflected verb, as in

- (9) I never went to school today.
 (10) I didn't go to school.

However, if we consider this use of *never* simply in terms of its alternation with *didn't*, we overlook a more general aspect of negation in English.

Never sometimes occurs as the universal temporal negator, with the meaning 'not on any occasion', or 'not ever':

- (11) I never lose my temper.

With a simple past verb form, optionally accompanied by a time adverbial, the scope of the negation can be restricted to a particular period of past time:

- (12) I never lost my temper (when I was younger).

or to a particular point of past time:

- (13) I never lost my temper (when you shouted at me).

Never also occurs with reference to the future:

- (14) I will never lose my temper again.

In all these examples there is a corresponding usage that contains the negator *not* in place of *never*:

- (11) a. I don't lose my temper.
 (12) a. I didn't lose my temper (when I was younger).

- (13) a. I didn't lose my temper (when you shouted at me).
 (14) a. I won't lose my temper again.

We can now see, then, that the use of *never* to express negation in English is a general strategy which allows an emphatic expression of negation. This is discussed in more detail in Cheshire (1985); the point that is relevant here is that the variation that occurs between the negative preterite forms (*never* + simple past tense verb and *didn't* + uninflected verb) is part of the system of negation in English, in which *never* is the emphatic, marked negator and *not* is the neutral, unmarked negator. Analyzing this variation in terms of a simple alternation in the forms of the negative preterite, therefore, overlooks the way in which these forms fit into the system of negation in English.

Similar problems arise with the variation that occurs between simple and periphrastic verb forms in Somerset English, mentioned in section 3. Forms such as *I did go/I went* alternate, but they express differences in aspect, so that to analyze the variation in terms of simple alternation would overlook the way in which the forms fit into the subsystem of tense and aspect in the grammar. Harris (1984) has argued this point with reference to the involvement of BE and DO forms in the tense and aspect system of Hiberno-English.

It might seem that these problems are less likely to occur when the variation that is involved is nearer to the syntactic end of the continuum, where variants can be isolated that are not necessarily, perhaps, part of a wider subsystem. As examples we can consider the alternation between cleft and noncleft sentences, as in (15) and (16) below:

- (15) What I want is some peace and quiet to write this paper.
 (16) I want some peace and quiet to write this paper.

or between constructions involving a simple change in word order, such as Romaine's (1980) *give it me* and *give me it* examples. There is, however, an aspect of meaning involved here which is not involved in a simple morphological alternation of forms (as in *she loves/she love*, for example). Constructions such as these differ in focus, or emphasis, or in what can loosely be termed 'pragmatic meaning' (see Romaine 1980). In order to properly appreciate the difference between sentences (15) and (16), for example, it would be necessary to set them in the context of the surrounding discourse, and of the interaction between the participants in the conversation.

This type of pragmatic meaning, or discourse meaning, is not confined to the 'pure' syntactic end of the continuum, of course. It can also be involved in other types of variation. Multiple negation in English, for example, is considered by some authors to be an emphatic device (see

Edwards et al. 1984). The difference in emphasis between *not* and *never* that was discussed above can also be seen in these terms. Even an apparently straightforward alternation between English *ain't* and BE + *not* and HAVE + *not* forms carries a pragmatic meaning in certain contexts (see Cheshire 1981).

Where syntactic alternants represent differences in focus, or emphasis, there is a further problem relating to methodology. Let us suppose that we decide to analyze variation in the use of cleft or pseudocleft sentences. How do we decide what to count? We can count the number of occurrences of these constructions, but what would we consider to be the set of variants with which they alternate? We would have to include only sentences which also carried focus, or emphasis; and there are any number of ways in which this can be signaled. We can change the placement of stress or the intonation patterns, or we can add intensifiers such as *really*, as in (17) I really want some peace and quiet to write this paper.

It would, surely, be more revealing to consider the use of cleft sentences in the context of the interaction in which they occur, to try to understand why the speaker chose to emphasize part of the sentence, and how this relates to the rest of the discourse that forms part of the interaction.

In some cases a choice of emphasis may be determined by thematic constraints. Weiner and Labov (1983), for example, found that the variation in their study of the agentless passive was constrained by the distribution of given and new information in the preceding discourse. The main constraint that they discovered, however, was one that they describe as 'a cognitively determined tendency to keep talking about the same thing', which is reflected linguistically by the preservation of parallel structure in discourse. It seems likely that other types of syntactic variation are governed by cognitive processes also, and this may well be a fruitful avenue to explore if we are pursuing an explanatory theory of linguistic behavior.

Weiner and Labov, of course, discovered these constraints using the concept of the linguistic variable. It should perhaps be pointed out that of course it is possible, from a purely practical point of view, to use the concept of the linguistic variable to analyze any kind of variation that we like; my argument has been simply that we cannot justify, on ontological grounds, using the concept in ways that are becoming increasingly more loosely defined. But this does not mean that quantitative analyses of syntactic variation are never justifiable, as I will argue below.

There is also the question of social and stylistic constraints on variation, which was another defining criterion of the linguistic variable as it was originally conceived. Not all variables, of course, are necessarily

involved in variation of this kind; where they are, however, stylistic variation mirrors social variation, as we have seen. Here again, this is more likely to apply to variables that are morphological in kind. A consequence of the historical process of standardization is that variation involving grammatical inflections tends to have been consistently codified, with the result that some nonstandard variants are rarely, if ever, used by the educated middle-class sections of society. This accounts for the pattern of sharp stratification that is commonly found with variables such as present tense -s (see, for example, Wolfram 1969). When we consider variables that are more syntactic in kind, however, we often encounter variation that has been inconsistently codified (*never* in negative preterite constructions is a case in point — see Cheshire 1984) or variation that has not been codified at all. This is particularly likely for variation in the spoken language, such as, perhaps, the variable use of tag questions. The social and stylistic distribution of variation of this type has not, as far as I am aware, been systematically investigated (see, however, Kroch and Small 1978). In fact, it has to be admitted that we know relatively little about the types of syntactic structure that are likely to alternate in spontaneous speech, let alone whether or not they are involved in social and stylistic variation. Rather than attempting to fit this type of variation into the same mold as morphological variation, then, we would do better to discover more about the syntactic structure of the spoken language and the type of syntactic variation that occurs there.

As I mentioned above, quantitative analyses can be appropriate, and useful, for doing this: if we can decide what to count, and can isolate the environments in which these forms occur, as Weiner and Labov were able to do, there is no reason why they should not be counted. My point, once more, is simply that it is not appropriate to couch these analyses in terms of the linguistic variable. In a superficial sense, the argument could be seen as a matter of terminology. The implications are deeper than this, however, as I hope I have made clear. Quantitative studies are possible without using the concept of the variable: Quirk's (1957) analysis of the different standard English relative pronoun forms is a good example of this. This type of approach, however, is not necessarily the most illuminating for the analysis of variation in syntax and in discourse, and as Harris (1984) points out, it can obscure important differences where the variation is between standard and vernacular variants.

It is worth noting that Dines (1980), while agreeing in principle with the extension of the variable to the analysis of variation in syntax and in discourse, concluded after her own attempted analysis that this was not, in fact, a profitable framework for research, given our present state of knowledge. She envisaged continuing her enquiry by 'examining style-

shifting within individuals, self-corrections and reformulations and an interactive analysis of continuing discourse as well as considering some psychological and pragmatic factors' (1980: 29).

Although quantitative studies are sometimes useful, then, in analyzing variation in syntax, the variation that is involved is likely to reflect too many complex factors for this approach to be of major importance. It is not capable of showing the complex ways in which the syntactic features of spoken language relate to pragmatic, psychological, and cognitive processes, nor how they form part of the structure of conversational interaction. A full analysis would require an interdisciplinary effort involving a very large number of other intellectual disciplines besides sociolinguistics.

6. Some ways forward

In the preceding sections analogies were drawn between the current preoccupations of sociolinguists and the preoccupations of our predecessors. I referred to earlier preoccupations with the place of semantic distinctions in a transformational-generative grammar, and to the use of structural, emic units. The previous section has now ended on a note that appears to echo another of the preoccupations of earlier linguists. I have suggested that a full study of syntactic variation will involve a host of intellectual disciplines besides linguistics. Bloomfield (1935) made a similar, well-known point concerning the analysis of meaning: his argument was that because a study of meaning would involve every intellectual discipline that is known to us, we have to exclude the analysis of meaning from our analyses of language. This time, however, no analogy is intended. I certainly do not mean to imply that syntactic variation should be excluded from our analysis of language.

To recapitulate, the point that I have argued is that in order to analyze variation in syntax and in discourse, we need to rid ourselves of our preoccupation with a concept that was originally conceived for analyzing phonetic and phonological variation, and which turns out to be applicable also, though to a lesser extent, to morphological variation. Rather than arguing about whether or not the linguistic variable should be used for the analysis of syntactic variation, we should simply begin to analyze the syntax and the discourse structure of spoken language. If we do this, we cannot help coming face to face with syntactic variation, semantic variation, and pragmatic variation, since these are inherent characteristics of natural language. We will then need to devise ways of analyzing the variation that we find. We will be forced, in other words, to deal with language in its basic function, as it is used for social communication.

Some of the work that has been done within these broader perspectives offers the prospect of being able to explain some aspects of the relationship between language and society, rather than merely correlating selected aspects of one with selected aspects of the other. Givón's approach to syntax, for example, sets up a dichotomy between two extreme poles of what he terms the 'communicative mode': the pragmatic mode and the syntactic mode (see Givón 1979a, 1979b). The structural properties of these two modes reflect the communicative needs of the speakers that use them. Using this framework, Givón links together syntactic patterns from diachronic data and synchronic data, from different stages of child language, from Pidgin languages, and from different 'register' levels within a single language. This seems a promising avenue for sociolinguistics to explore; it is, perhaps, a move in the direction that Dittmar (1983: 251) called for, in that it is a start in the attempt to give an integrated description and an explanation for the social genesis of variation in language. This approach is a qualitative one rather than a quantitative one, with illustrative examples culled from a wide range of linguistically and culturally diverse languages; and it is hard to see what could be gained from adopting a quantitative framework. In fact, a great deal would be lost by narrowing the focus of the analysis to a few specific linguistic items within a single language variety.

There are other approaches, too, that offer a more dynamic and a more integrative analysis of language: approaches such as the analysis of conversational interaction, analyses in terms of speech-accommodation theory, psychologically oriented analyses that take account of sociolinguistic findings (as in Smith 1984) and, perhaps, of cognitive processes too. These are all giant leaps forward from static analyses that simply correlate linguistic variation with aspects of social structure. For all these approaches a wider perspective is needed than a purely sociolinguistic one — at least, as the sociolinguistic approach has so far been conceived. It is easy to see why Muysken (1984) claims that sociolinguistics has 'escaped' into a number of different research areas (see Van de Craen 1985).

Muysken is led to question the relevance of sociolinguistics; Van de Craen, however, argues against this, pointing out that on the contrary, this 'escape' means that sociolinguistics can both enrich and be enriched by other disciplines. He points out, too, that any sociolinguistic theory will have to be dynamic and interpretive, and that although this will make the construction of a theory 'a long and painful process', it means that it should eventually make an important contribution not only to linguistics but to the social sciences in general.

In the meantime, there is still a place for less ambitious, more 'static' linguistic descriptions. It is all very well to recognize that an analysis of

syntactic variation is likely to involve semantics, pragmatics, and an analysis of discourse function, and that it may also need to be interpreted within an interdisciplinary framework (and that this framework has yet to be constructed). The fact remains that we still know very little about the types of syntactic construction that are involved in sociolinguistic variation. It has been suggested that there is actually less variation in syntax than in phonology (Hudson 1980); Romaine (1980) counters this by pointing out that, apart from anything else, the expansion and elaboration that is part of the standardization process is likely to lead to more syntactic variation rather than less. This is true, but more to the point is the fact that we have hardly even begun to analyze syntactic variation in any systematic way, so that we are in no position to claim that it does or does not exist.

At this stage in our inquiry into sociolinguistic behavior, then, it seems more profitable to examine the types of syntactic variation that exist than to attempt to construct a coherent sociolinguistic theory. It seems reasonable to expect that a theory of language as it is used in its social context should be informed by empirically collected data (see, however, Romaine 1982a); and at present we do not have enough sociolinguistic data of this kind.

One direction that sociolinguistic research can profitably take, therefore, is the analysis of syntactic variation in spoken language. If we work with data from informal spontaneous conversation (and several writers have recommended this — see, for example, Labov 1972), then we may find that we have to reconsider our ideas about syntactic structure before we can begin to consider the ways in which it can vary. This is because the models that are available for analyzing syntax are derived not from spoken language data, but from idealized intuitions about language. Even those descriptive grammars that claim to be based at least in part on spoken language (such as Quirk et al. 1972, 1985) have edited and adapted their spoken data, presumably in accordance with the authors' idealized norms. The frameworks that do exist are valuable, of course, for a range of theoretical purposes (generative frameworks can define the limits of grammatical acceptability, for example) and for practical purposes also (Quirk et al. 1972, 1985 are useful for, among other things, the teaching of English), but they are of very limited use for analyzing the structure of spontaneous informal speech. Crystal (1980b: 166) points out in his analysis of the variety of English that he terms 'informal domestic conversation' that it tends to be assumed that the syntactic structure of this variety

... is basically a reflection of that of the written language, with a few additional conventions such as ellipsis, intonation and emphatic word order, and a few

omissions, such as the structures characteristic of the more formal and literary modes of expression.

This is not at all the case, however. Crystal's analysis leads him to conclude that the linguistic organization of this variety of English has been 'fundamentally misconceived'. The reasons that he suggests for this are partly the absence of data, and partly the uncritical application of existing paradigms of enquiry (see also Givón 1979a).

One question that will have to be resolved, then, is the type of analytical framework that will be suitable for analyzing the syntactic structure of spontaneous informal conversation. Crystal (1980b) has some suggestions about its clause structure. Leach and Coates (1980) and Palmer (1979), all working with corpus data from *The Survey of English Usage*, show how semantic gradience can be incorporated into the analysis of the English modals. There is perhaps most to be learned, however, from the experience of linguists working on the syntactic structure of Creole varieties of language, who have been forced to devise ways of dealing with the apparent indeterminacy of spoken language. Those working with Creole varieties of English have often complained that the frameworks used by traditional grammars of English — and also by more recent grammars — place too much emphasis on segmentation and classification into discrete static entities to be of use in analyses of spoken Creole English (see, for example, Roberts 1980; LePage and Tabouret Keller 1982). For example, 'conventional' grammatical frameworks (including some relatively modern frameworks, such as transformational-generative grammar) rigidly exclude semantic considerations when setting up discrete grammatical categories to analyze language. In order to satisfactorily describe the grammatical relationships that exist in Creole varieties, however, it has sometimes been found that semantic elements should be given a central role.

As an example, we can consider the use of *se* in Jamaican Creole English, as reported in Roberts (1980). *Se* occurs in the following structures:

- (18) An so di man se im mus kom in de nau.
'And so the man said that he should come in there now.'
- (19) Im nuu se a duon laas.
'He knows that I'm not lost.'
- (20) Big Boi fada tel im se dat im waan somting.
'Big Boy's father told him that he wanted something.'
- (21) Ya kyaan taak to im se 'ai laik televiun'.
'You can talk to him and say "I like television".'
- (22) Den Brada Anansi go ina di waata se im a fish.
'Then Brother Anancy went into the water saying that he was a fish.'
- (All examples and glosses from Roberts 1980.)

Roberts points out that in example (18) *se* is a verbal element, much like standard English *says*, and that in example (19) it is used to introduce an indirect statement, paralleling one of the uses of standard English *that*. The two forms are not necessarily exclusive, however, as example (20) shows; and in (21) *se* seems to have something of both these functions. This is so for the unusual 'gerundive' type use of *se* in (22) also. Subordinate clauses of the type introduced by *se* in (20) and (21) are not always introduced by *se*. Roberts points out that its occurrence is related to 'the idea of "saying"' (1980: 28). It is difficult to include this fact in any of the grammatical frameworks that are currently available; yet it seems clear that to account for the use of *se* in Roberts's data, precedence has to be given to the semantic element that appears to be constant, though the grammatical category is indistinct. Roberts argues convincingly that this is so for other features of Jamaican Creole English also, including *mas* and *mek*, where the grammatical categories are indistinct but where there is a constant semantic element.

Winford (1985) comes to a broadly similar conclusion in his reanalysis of *fi* in Caribbean Creole English. He points out that *fi* retains an element of locational or directional meaning in all those uses where it had previously been separately analyzed as a preposition, a modal auxiliary, and a 'preposition cum complementizer'.

There are some areas of non-Creole English where it seems clear that there is a constant semantic element but where the grammatical categories are indistinct. For example, the word *never* in British and American varieties of English occurs in a number of different constructions which are sometimes difficult to 'parse'. In all of them the element of emphatic negation is present, although the syntactic category changes:

- (23) She never eats oysters. (*never* = indeterminate)
(24) She never liked him. (*never* = temporal adverb?)
(25) She liked him, but I never. (*never* = ?)
(26) She spoke never a word. (*never a* = compound pronoun?)
(27) It's never Bella! (*never* = negative particle?)
(28) Never fear! (*never* = imperative marker?)
(See Jespersen 1917; Cheshire 1984.)

There are at least two other areas of 'standard' English where an approach of this type has been found necessary. Clark (1970) suggests that a single semantic element underlies different types of 'possessives'; and Bresnan (1972) analyzes the different syntactic functions of *for* as sharing a common basic meaning which she labels 'intentional' or 'motivational'.

There is a great deal to be learned yet, then, about the interrelations

that exist between syntax and semantics, and about the way in which the syntactic structure of informal spoken language can best be analyzed. Focusing our attention on the syntax of spoken language will enable progress to be made on this front.

There is a place, too, for situated descriptions of specific varieties of different languages. It is sad that after 25 years or so of analyzing language in its social context, we have achieved so little in the analysis of specific varieties. This includes both social and regional varieties, and the varieties used in different 'domains' (or 'registers'). As Dittmar (1983) suggests, descriptions of this type should include the semantic properties of the variety and, where possible, any communicative strategies that may distinguish it from other varieties. We need to be very careful, however, if we attempt to make comparisons between social and regional varieties of a language. In the past we have sometimes classified items as 'nonstandard' because we assume that they do not occur in the standard variety, when in fact they do (see Cheshire 1984). It is all too easy, when dealing with syntactic variation, to be guided by our own internalized prescriptive norms, without realizing that this is happening (see, for discussion, Lyons 1977: 586-587; Lakoff 1977: 82).

Descriptions of specific 'registers' of different languages are long overdue. Analyses of this kind would contribute to linguistic theory: Macaulay (1985: 674), for example, points out that generative grammarians have 'scandalously neglected' the analysis of alternative styles and registers, and their relation to the notion of linguistic competence. They would also, of course, contribute to the development of an integrated sociolinguistic theory, as well as being of immense practical use to teachers and speech therapists, and to all those whose professional work brings them into close contact with language-related issues.

This paper started on a pessimistic note, drawing attention to the lack of a coherent theory of language as it is used in its social context. It can end, however, on a more positive note.

We are, perhaps, not yet ready to construct the integrated and dynamic sociolinguistic theory that some of us feel to be necessary. When we are, the theory will need to be an interdisciplinary venture. This holds great hope for the future development not just of our understanding of language, but also of our understanding of social life generally. In the meantime, there is plenty of research to be done within sociolinguistics that will serve the dual purpose of informing theory and of being socially useful. These purposes can only be achieved, however, if we learn from the experiences of our predecessors and rid ourselves of our preoccupation with a concept that has been found illuminating for our understanding of phonological variation, but that cannot be extended to other levels

of language. It is eight years since Lavendera argued that the linguistic variable should not be extended to nonphonological levels of language. Although several papers have been written since then that argue against her position, we do not seem to have made much progress in the analysis of variation. As Lavendera pointed out, we can still perform quantitative analyses on nonphonological data, and quantitative statements can certainly be treated as data that call for interpretation (1978: 181-182), even though they should not be analyzed in terms of the linguistic variable. Rather than perpetuating our arguments about whether or not this view is correct, it would surely be better to direct our attention to trying to understand the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic variation that is almost inevitably involved in communication, and that is a fundamental aspect of the way in which people use language in their daily lives.

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Notes

1. Some parts of this paper were presented at the Economic and Social Research Council Workshop on Variation in British English Syntax, held at the University of Salford, 8-10 January, 1984. I am grateful for the comments that were made at the Workshop. I am particularly grateful to John Harris for his very helpful constructive criticisms of an earlier version of this paper — not all of which have been heeded. Correspondence address: Department of Applied Linguistics, Birkbeck College, University of London, 43 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PD, England.
2. The idea of a unidimensional continuum has much in common with the structuralist conception of language, as organized along a unidimensional hierarchy with phonology at one end and semantics at the other. However, the examples that I have considered as morphological variants could equally well be considered as lexical variants, resulting from phonological rules interacting with word-formation processes in the lexicon. My aim here is not to propose that one model of language is better than another, or that we should revert to a structuralist view of language, but simply that variation between single items, whether this is conceived as morphological variation or lexical variation, is fundamentally different from variation involving more than one item. I have found it helpful to think of morphology and syntax as forming a continuum and will continue to refer to this continuum in what follows.
3. The tagmeme and the syntagmeme, which are part of Pike's tagmemic grammar, are not comparable units.
4. More recent work, of course, has now shown that emic concepts are not adequate for analyzing all phonological phenomena.

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