Syntactic Microvariation

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Abstract

‘Syntactic microvariation’ and ‘microcomparative syntax’ are the terms for a fairly new research approach that applies the theoretical concepts and techniques of modern generative theory to dialectal and other small-scale variational data. Traditional studies in dialectology aim at a detailed and fine-grained description of language variants; the ultimate goal being a proper classification of the dialects, their exact areal distribution as well as their historical/diachronic development. For formal generative theory on the other hand, the foremost goal is to model the human language faculty with Universal Grammar as a theory about possible human languages (and how they can be acquired). Microcomparative syntax tries to reconcile these two research traditions by applying the formal theoretical concepts of generative grammar to those ‘minor’, ‘peripheral’, and sometimes kind of ‘squishy’ differences between closely related language variants as they are typically found in dialectal data. Research in microvariation tries to offer new concepts that can account for the range and (limits) of inter- and intra-speaker variation in a principled way while at the same time testing existing formal theories against these microvariational data and thus contributing to the theory of language variation. A profound understanding of microvariation will also open a way to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of language change, given that language change necessarily preconditions variability in the data.

1. Introduction

Microcomparative syntax combines two different research traditions: on the one hand generative syntax with its main focus on the properties of the human language faculty (I-language) and with its rather abstract notions and sophisticated tools. On the other hand, traditional dialectology which aims first and foremost at a fine grained as possible inventory of the (mostly phonological) characteristics of geographically and historically related language variants. Due to their different goals, techniques, traditions, and scientific conceptions, they intersect only at some points. This survey will touch upon those points and illustrate thereby how both traditions can benefit from each other and thus provide a new and exciting perspective on the properties of human language.

Microvariation is a research program that deals with (at least) the following issues:
(i) a special object of study, namely the syntax of dialects and dialectal variation, i.e., ‘peripheral’ data that played a minor role until recently;
(ii) profound and systematic methods for collecting data (questionnaires, large scale investigations and statistical treatments, areal and sociolinguistic considerations);
(iii) the development of new theoretical concepts that are able to account for the attested variation without giving up the methods established in formal theories of grammar.

Before discussing the main issues of modern studies in dialectal syntax, it is useful to have a brief look at traditional dialectology in order to understand in which sense the two research traditions complement each other and where they overlap. This is the topic of
Section 2. Section 3 discusses the methods used in microcomparative syntax, and finally Section 4 gives a brief overview how microvariational studies have provoked a new discussion about the place of variability in the architecture of grammar.

2. Microvariation – Its Object of Study and Its Goals

2.1. WHAT IS A DIALECT?

Since microcomparative syntax deals with dialects, one of the questions that it has to answer is what a dialect is, i.e., to define its object of study. The notion dialect is notoriously difficult to define – as also traditional dialectologists have to admit. Any attempt at a proper definition of dialect – either in contrast to other dialects or to the standard language – is faced with sheer insurmountable problems. To find a precise, non-arbitrary cut-off point between two given language variants on a purely linguistic basis is virtually impossible. Do we speak of two different dialects when they differ from a randomly selected, let’s say “property number 29” on – although they share “properties number 1–28”? Where would the number of properties and their ranking come from?

Already for a classification on purely phonological aspects, dialectologists posit so-called transition zones, as illustrated in Figure 1 in which the shaded areas stand for variants for which the classification is equivocal.

The problem gets worse if two variants differ in a phonological property A but coincide in another property B. The following is a brief illustration of how a combination of a phonological property with a morphological one leads to a rather blurred picture, maps from DIWA\(^1\). Consider first the map in Figure 2. It shows a rather common dialectal difference, in this case the vowel quality of a verbal stem:

Next consider the map in Figure 3, which shows the distribution of another cell of the paradigm of the same verb, namely 3rd Plural. Note that we find yet another vowel distinction ([ia] vs. [o]) but this time there is in addition a difference in the consonantal tier: the region to the left of the thick purple line has dVn, whereas the other region to the right has dVnt.

Whereas the thick purple line is rather robust, the two clearly distinguished regions from map 1 now overlap. With the DIWA tools, the maps can be shown in an overlay – which shows impressively how difficult the task is, to classify language variants in a proper way (Figure 4).

A follow-up question then is, how fine grained should the description be? The answer from both traditions would probably be: of course as fine grained as possible! However, we know that even the language of two speakers of the same variant may differ minimally and be it only in one property. To be empirically fully adequate, we would have to posit one single grammar for every speaker in the end. The question is: does it do any harm? If the goal of research is the mere classification itself it does – since then the classification is superfluous in a sense; however, with the tools provided by dialectometry, see below, valuable insights can be gained nevertheless. If the main object of research is the I-language, the internal linguistic knowledge of a (single) native speaker – it does not; at least not on principled grounds. Rather, we can see the huge amount of variational data found in dialects as an extension of the pool of data (E-language) from which we can draw our data and phenomena – and it is quite often data from dialects (or spoken languages in general) that reveal properties that are not so easily detectable in standardized written languages, see Section 2.3.1 for some illustration.
Coming back to the matter of classification, there is no way to deny that there is an intuitive understanding of one language variant differing on some ‘relevant’ level from other variants – while at the same time sharing a certain amount of properties.
Fig 2. Cut-out from DIWA map (South-West Germany), vowel differences in the infinitive of ‘tun’ (=do), [oa] vs [ua].

Fig 3. Cut-out from DIWA map (South-West Germany), 3rd Person Plural of ‘tun’ (=do). In addition to further vowel change, difference in the presence of a dental stop (dian vs. dont/deant).
Traditional dialectology takes into account non-linguistic criteria for defining this relevant level: mutual intelligibility, historical and geographical considerations as well as socio-cultural and political criteria. For microvariational studies, it is more important that the data to be considered come from variants that are non-standardized and that do not follow normative pressures.

We can characterize the object of study that microvariation deals with as those language variants that...

- are genetically and/or geographically closely related (→ traditional dialects);
- are non-standardized by lack of a normative grammar with formally codified grammatical rules (→ as natural as possible);
- do not have a long term uniform writing tradition (→ no normative pressure).

Practically, microvariational researchers stick to the traditional names for the dialects if adequate or simply use the place names from where the data come from in order to be maximally precise.

A rather new approach for solving the relative closeness/distinctness between language variants is the dialectometric approach, see particularly Nerbonne (2009), see also Montemagni et al. (2010). Dialectometry is a procedure based on numerical classification that allows to co-vary given features via visualization tools and thus to identify clusters of relevant features. A demonstration of how this works can be found under (http://www.dialectometry.com/) (in German), consult J. Nerbonne’s website (http://www.let.rug.nl/~nerbonne/paper.html) for further papers which will not be listed here individually.
Discussions of the classical issues and problems concerning classification in traditional dialectology can be found in Chambers and Trudgill (1998) and of course the Wiley series on ‘Principles of Language change’, edited by W. Labov, see also the various papers in Lingua 119/11 (2009), edited by J. Nerbonne and F. Manni.

In sum, microvariational studies will equally not be able to draw clear lines between the single language variants – just as traditional dialectology. While this matter is crucial for traditional dialectology, microcomparative syntax aims foremost at a deeper understanding of the human language faculty in its various manifestations. What is foregrounded is the analysis of the phenomena detected and what their variational behavior may tell us about the possible variational space – both under an areal and a theoretical perspective.

2.2. DIALECT SYNTAX

The most important point where traditional dialectology and microvariational studies differ is the focus on syntax. Syntactic questions hardly ever played a role in traditional dialectology. Several reasons can be listed for the minor role of syntax:

• Syntax has an inherent complexity that exceeds that of phonology and the lexicon, simply as a matter of combinatorial possibilities; Syntactic constructions can not be as easily ‘listed’ as, e.g., lexical items, the phonological inventory, and morphological paradigms.
• The elicitation of syntactic data must be based on theoretical considerations. Every satisfying syntactic description must also make use of grammaticality judgments which requires a careful and theoretically motivated design of a questionnaire, see Section 3.
• Syntax was not considered to be a worthwhile object of study since the syntactic differences between the dialects seemed to be negligible (or non-existent at all).
• Finally, rooted in the traditional attitude towards dialects as the language of uneducated speakers, syntactic research was often impeded by prejudices like “the syntax of dialect X is simple and incomplete, e.g., less subordination, simpler case systems etc.”

With the more sophisticated tools and concepts of modern syntactic theory, the first two points can be overcome and this is exactly what microcomparative syntax does, as will be demonstrated below. The third point has simply be proven false. As for the fourth point, the syntactic complexity of dialects of course equals that of all natural languages. Observations like ‘incomplete sentences’, ‘less subordination’, etc. are probably due to the fact that mainly ‘observational data’, i.e., recorded spontaneous utterances, were used to describe syntax (if at all). But spontaneous speech corpora are very badly suited for gaining an adequate data basis for an in-depth syntactic analysis. Finally, as will be shown below, the morphological complexity in terms of number and type of exponents is by no means less complex and often exceeds that of the standardized languages.

What has just been mentioned are the new issues that microvariational studies bring into traditional dialectology. What is new for researchers in generative syntax is the consideration of the areal distribution of syntactic properties. There exist already first results from large scale investigations in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and two just started projects on dialects in Germany, covering Hessian and the southwest of Germany, see for references below. They indicate that the syntactic areal distributions come very close to the traditional classifications. If true, this gives rise to further interesting theoretical questions about how and to which extent the single components of the grammar interact,
e.g., phonology with morphosyntax. The work by P. Beninca and C. Poletto on Northern Italian dialects shows furthermore that syntactic features can be ordered in syntactic hierarchies that seem to coincide with the areal distribution. Although it is not the foremost goal of microvariational studies to come up with dialectal maps, it is a promising line of research to combine traditional insights of dialect classification with theories about the internal structuring of the grammar. In this sense, microvariational studies enter uncharted territories: until recently there were neither dialect maps for syntactic features nor well-established procedures for gathering variational syntactic data in a systematic way.

2.3. WHY ARE DIALECTAL DATA SO IMPORTANT?

The first point to mention is that the comparison between two closely related variants comes something near the ideal of a “linguistic laboratory”, where one specific property can be examined in its consequences by keeping virtually all other properties constant, cf. Kayne (1996, 2005) for this line of thought. While this seems a more methodological issue, there are further points that make dialects highly valuable as an object of study in modern linguistics.

2.3.1. Dialects as a fruitful “data mine”

Non-standardized variants quite often show rather fine grained morphosyntactic distinctions that are leveled out in the standardized variants.

A good case in point are the forms of infinitives that occur in verbal clusters in West Germanic. As is well known, in Standard German and Standard Dutch the modal and/or perceptual verb in a 3-verb cluster occurs in the infinitive instead of the expected participle form (IPP-effect):

(1) weil ich das habe kommen sehen
    because I this have come see ‘because I saw this coming’

Although this change in form is awkward by itself and has been the topic of much discussion, data from dialects show that there must be even more going on. As discussed in great detail in Höhle (2006), there are dialects from Middle-East Germany that show very special forms in these contexts:

(2) hawe musd gi:e
    I have must go ‘I had to go’

(3) hawese kund sa:e
    I have-them could see ‘I could see them’

Note that the form shows a dental suffix but there occurs no ge- in front of the verbal stem as it would be the case with a ‘normal’ participle of a weak verb that is built via the template ge-Vstem-t. Under the modal verb können (can), the template is deficient in another way, namely such that the first part of the template shows up, but not the ending:

(4) mer kōa: gesough
    one can say
Note furthermore that in this case, it is the lexical verb which is affected by these “strange forms”. Whatever the analysis will turn out to be in the end, this overt morphosyntactic encoding may give us valuable hints for the deeper understanding of the syntax of verbal clusters.

Another example in this context is the productive usage of gerund forms that end with a dental stop and are inherited from Old/Middle High German. An example is given in (6):

(6) hond er ebbes z’essit?
    have you-pl something to eat ‘Have you something to eat?’

The variant is Bodensee-Alemannic in which this form is confined to constructions with weak quantifiers. In some Swiss German variants on the other hand, this form is used to express a ‘manner of motion’ component:

(7) es kunnt an fux z’schliichet
    Expl comes a fox striding (in a striding way)

In Standard German, neither of these forms show up: we find either the ‘normal’ infinitive (with or without zu) or the participle, in (7). As is well known, the infinitival syntax of German (and also Dutch for that matter) is rather complex in the sense that one and the same surface pattern may have different underlying structures. The above listed forms show that the morphosyntactic encoding is obviously much more transparent in the dialects/spoken variants than in the standardized language, see Brandner (2006) for further illustration with emphasis on the different distribution of the infinitival marker zu in Standard German and Bodensee-Alemannic, and Bayer and Brandner (2004) for further discussion of the gerund forms.

Examples of this sort can be found basically in any report on dialectal data – and of course not only in the area of infinitival syntax: agreement/concord phenomena within the DP, different shapes of determiners, corresponding to their different semantic values, etc. From this point of view, concentrating merely on data of the standardized languages would leave a whole “mine” of data unexploited – and in some cases miss the opportunity for a deeper understanding and more adequate analyses of the standardized variants as well.

2.3.2. Does dialectal syntax have special properties?

Another question is whether we expect dialects to show special properties in their syntax that distinguishes them systematically from the standardized languages. From a generative perspective, the expectation is clearly ‘no’. If both of them are instances of natural language, both of them have the same underlying properties of a natural language. However, as was just illustrated, standardized languages are more susceptible to levelling out fine grained differences and thus the question may arise whether they are truly ‘natural languages’. Furthermore, dialects – or to be more general, regional variants of spoken language – are those instances of language children are first confronted with during language acquisition; they build the primary linguistic input. The standardized written languages on the other hand are often learned only during school days. Weiß (2001) argues
therefore that dialects should be the foremost object of study for a generative linguist as they are naturally acquired and thus their properties reflect the ‘undiluted’ state of a natural language. Although the picture is clearly a bit different nowadays (children have from early on access to the standard language via mass media), the claim that that variant of a language that is used in every day conversation, i.e., the colloquial version, should be the goal of linguistic research is clearly true.

On the more empirical level, it has been observed by Sjef Barbiers and his co-workers that dialects – in contrast to the standard language – seem to show some typical properties that can be subsumed under the heading “doubling”, i.e., a seemingly redundancy via multiple occurrence of (mostly) function words; among them phenomena like doubling of negation (negative concord), doubling of complementizers, auxiliaries, subject pronouns, see the various contributions in Barbiers et al. (2008a) which show that the phenomenon is not restricted to the Dutch dialects but occurs in German, Italian and other dialects as well. Similar to the example discussed above, a careful analysis of these data can give us hints about a finer grained functional structure as the standardized written languages. Whether the avoidance of doubling in the standardized languages is a mere non-realization of the structures seen in the dialects or whether there is indeed a qualitative difference, remains an open issue.

2.4. DIALECTAL DATA IN GENERATIVE GRAMMAR

Dialectal data and phenomena have always played a role in generative theory. This positive attitude towards dialectal/non-standard data has to do with the general research goal in generative syntax: the competence of the native speaker. Since a native speaker knows her language perfect and complete as soon as it has been acquired in a natural acquisition process, every variant is per definition a full-fledged natural language and as such a proper object of study for the linguist. Take for an early example the work by Bayer (1984) on “Comp in Bavarian Syntax”, which gave a huge amount of data that violate systematically the Doubly filled Comp Filter (DFC).4 Investigations into other dialects/non-standardized variants revealed that DFC-violations were in a sense typical for dialects much in the sense of the doubling property mentioned above, cf. Haegeman (1992) on West Flemish, Penner and Bader (1995) on Swiss German, Hoekstra (1993) as one of the first investigations into Dutch dialects. Data like these were taken to prove, e.g., the correctness of the uniformity of the spec-head-complement pattern of phrases, see, e.g., Chomsky (1986) and thus they had (and have) a large impact on theory building. It also turned out that DFC-violations (in a broader sense) occur massively in Romance dialects. These phenomena have lead to the development of a theory that is now called the ‘cartographic approach’ to the left periphery, starting with Rizzi (1997), and which has stimulated much subsequent work,5 especially on Northern Italian dialects, see the work by Paola Beninca and C. Poletto. In the references, more work is cited where dialectal data play a crucial role in generative syntax, which cannot be listed here individually.

Another famous example for the relevance of dialectal data for theory building is what is known as ‘verb raising’ and ‘verb projection raising’, i.e., the various re-ordering possibilities within the verbal complex (consisting of AUX, modal, and lexical verb) in continental West Germanic; to mention just a classic work, see Haegeman and van Riemsdijk (1986) on West Flemish and Zürich German, see Wurmbrand (2004) for the variational space in contemporary dialects. I cannot go even into an illustration of this phenomenon.6 The reason to mention it nevertheless is that during the very vivid discussion especially of these data in the last decades, it turned out more and more that the variation

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found in this area was hard or even impossible to account for within the standard approach via parameter setting: First, optionality seems to play a role, i.e., speakers accept several orderings at the same time with only a few cases as really ungrammatical, see Barbiers (2005). Second, judgments are not as categorical as one would expect in a bi-valued parametric approach; rather, they are ‘graded’, i.e., there are intermediate stages of well-formedness. This issue poses additional new questions about the architecture of the grammatical system as a whole, see the contributions in Fanselow et al. (2006) for discussion.

This state of affairs calls for taking variability in linguistic data seriously, i.e., as a substantial property of the human language faculty. In this sense, microvariational studies try to overcome the (during its time useful and justifiable) abstraction from the linguistic surrounding, as suggested in the definition of the goal of linguistic research, namely as “…the language of an ideal speaker-hearer, in a completely homogeneous speech community…”, see Chomsky (1965:4).

The first step to face the challenge by abandoning the idealization of the native speaker is to get a clear picture about the type and extent of variability in dialectal data and this goal requires methods in data elicitation that were rather uncommon in generative linguistics until recently.

3. Methods

In this section, I will discuss the main issues that arise in collecting dialectal data and report on experiences that have been made so far. This section draws heavily on Cornips and Poletto (2005) and reports from own experiences in field work with dialect speakers. As said above, the elicitation of syntactic data involves more complex strategies than the listing of lexemes, phonological inventory, and morphological paradigms. Given the combinatorial possibilities in syntax – as well as its interaction with the other components of the grammar (semantics, pragmatics, prosody, and inflectional morphology), the difficulty lies in the correct choice of interesting and theoretically relevant phenomena.

3.1. HOW TO FIND INTERESTING DATA

One important source to detect interesting and promising data is the consultation of traditional dialect grammars which often describe the language of one particular village in great detail. Authors of these grammars quite often concentrate on the difference to the standard variant und thus point directly to phenomena of the type illustrated in Section 2.3.1. On the basis of such a phenomenon, a questionnaire can be built in which the phenomenon can be examined more closely. However, a detailed examination is only possible with a theoretical background in linguistic/syntactic theory. It means concretely that a preliminary hypothesis about the phenomenon in terms of a structural analysis must be made. Within a given framework, such a hypothesis will make certain predictions which can be tested with the informants by offering constructed examples. For example the gerund forms of the infinitive in Bodensee-Alemannic and Swiss German seem to be more predicative in nature instead of heading an infinitival verbal phrase of their own. A simple test would be to construct examples involving adjuncts that require a verbal projection and let the informants judge the well-formedness. If the result is rejection, the initial hypothesis is confirmed, if not the hypothesis must be revised and then its predictions must tested the same way in another round of data collection. The important point is that without such a theoretical background the subsequent question would probably not have arisen at all. Clearly, this is common scientific practice, but note that applying it to large
scale dialectal syntactic studies requires a much more diligent procedure as it is the case with data gained by introspection (and maybe checking them with some colleagues from the neighboring office). This brings us to the next topic which is how to build a questionnaire that meets the above discussed requirements.

3.2. BUILDING A QUESTIONNAIRE

One goal of a questionnaire study is to discover the distribution of a given phenomenon, i.e., in which area it does/does not occur. The second goal is then to verify/falsify hypotheses of the type mentioned above. Since slightly different pronunciations are usually not so relevant for syntactic questions, written questionnaires that are sent to the informants have turned out to be an appropriate method for getting a broad overview. This procedure can cover a large area at relatively small costs. However, using only written questionnaires runs the risk that fine grained morphosyntactic distinctions may be overlooked. Either simply because there is no standardized orthography for the dialects and thus informants may not write down all the sounds s/he produces. Or because informants may even add material (as, e.g., with the special verb forms illustrated in Section 2.3.1) because they tend to use the forms of the standard variant when it comes to writing. Therefore, oral elicitation accompanied by tape recordings is the preferred method if it comes to very detailed questions.

Depending on the type of research question, the questionnaire will contain different types of ‘tasks’, among them: translation tasks, completion tasks, and ‘multiple choice’. All of them have their pros and cons when eliciting syntactic data: translation tasks bear the risk that the informant sticks too closely to the word order or construction type of the presented example from the respective standard; furthermore – as it is also the case with completion tasks – the results may not be sufficient comparable in the end due to different lexical/constructional choices on side of the informant. ‘Multiple choice’ has turned out to be a very successful method. Here, the researcher constructs a bunch of possible realizations of a clause/construction in the respective dialect and the informant judges them. The advantages are clear: access to negative evidence, comparability is guaranteed, judgments can be given on a scale which can give clues about the reality of ‘grad- edness’; finally, the variables can systematically be controlled by the researcher. On the other hand, by using already constructed examples, the researcher runs the risk that unknown phenomena may be overlooked. For this reason, informants are asked to give their own versions if they are not content with the offered ones. This method has turned out to be a very fruitful tool for ‘data mining’.

For a detailed discussion of the (dis-)advantages of the various methods and the special problems arising in eliciting syntax, see Bucheli and Glaser (2002) where you can find in addition parts of a sample questionnaire.

3.3. HANDLING AND PRESENTING THE DATA

3.3.1. Annotation

Due to computer assisted facilities available nowadays, large amounts of data can be handled and made accessible to the scientific community. This should happen in an annotated form. In order to guarantee comparability of the results of various projects, annotations should follow a common guideline as provided by ISOCAT, http://www.isocat.org/index.html. The Edisyn-project (European Dialect Syntax, from 2005 to 2010, hosted by the Meertens Institute, Amsterdam and funded by the ESF) offers on its
web page further support how to annotate and store the data (http://www.dialectsyntax.org/index.php/manual-mainmenu-1); additionally further practical questions are addressed as well as suggestions and ideas about possible research questions in micro-comparative syntax.

3.3.2. Maps
The presentation of dialectal data in terms of maps is nearly a must. Larger projects can afford to create their own software. The SAND project (Syntactic atlas of the Netherlands), for example, has meanwhile published two (printed) atlases, see Barbiers et al. (2005) and Barbiers et al. (2008b), and furthermore offers on its website a dynamic version of the atlas where users can create their own maps, according to their research interests: (http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/sand). However, software to create such maps is not available to everyone; but it is very easy to sketch the areal distribution by using the tools provided by Google Earth®. Here is an example.

The region covered is Baden-Württemberg, southwest of Germany, with direct contact to Switzerland and France. The dialect spoken is Alemannic. The purple line shows the isogloss between Swabian and Middle- and Low-Alemannic, all sub-variants of Alemannic, cf. the dialect map in Figure 1.

The maps illustrate a phenomenon that was detected by consulting traditional dialect grammars of the area. There, it is reported that in oblique contexts (dative and after a preposition), the anaphor referring to the subject of the clause can be realized as a personal pronoun (en) instead of the reflexive (sich); the latter is the only possibility in contemporary Standard German, but the use of the personal pronoun was an option in Middle High German.

To illustrate:

Reflexive pronoun vs. personal pronoun:

(8) Na, di het er für en selber kauft (yellow dots)
No, these has he for him self(emph) bought
‘No, he bought them for himself.’

(9) Na, di het er für sich selber kauft (red dots)
No, these has he for himself self(emph) bought
‘No, he bought them for himself.’

To see whether the phenomenon still occurs, the sentences in (8) and (9) were presented to informants. They had first to answer which versions they accept and second which version they would prefer. As expected, nearly all speakers accepted the version in (9), corresponding to Standard German, but in some areas, the preference was given to (8).

Figure 5 is a screen shot of a *kmz. As can be seen, there is a clear areal distribution: Swabian and Bodensee-Alemannic show preferences for the version in (8) whereas this option is practically excluded in Low Alemannic. Note that this distribution coincides with the traditional classification.

3.3.3. Socio-linguistic aspects
Due to its focus on the I-language, usage based variability never played a role in generative grammar and therefore the consideration of socio-linguistic variables was simply not at issue. However, it is not to be denied that also in the area of syntax, socio-linguistic variables may influence the choice or the preference for a given version of a sentence, if
there are several possibilities put at disposal to the native speaker, cf. the discussion about optionality in Section 2.4. The first question is to which extent these factors empirically indeed play a role. In order to get a clear picture, investigations about the socio-linguistic variables of the informants must be included when doing field work in micro-comparative work, together with a statistical treatment of them, see the various contributions in Cornips and Corrigan (2005) for extensive discussion.

How to model such a situation in theoretical terms is the other question and this brings us to the last point, namely how to deal with variability when it comes to model the human language faculty.

4. Theoretical Implications

Optionality and gradedness are notoriously difficult to get captured by the techniques provided by generative grammar. Optionality is not expected to occur, especially in a theory in which ‘economy of derivation’ builds a decisive role in deriving grammatical outputs, as is the case with the Minimalist Program, see Chomsky (1995, 2000, 2001, 2005). Gradedness in the judgments equally poses a serious problem since – if real – it
means that there is seemingly no clear basis on which ‘the grammar’ can decide; a situation that is not even expressible in a bi-valued parametrical theory.

It is impossible in this brief survey to discuss the manifold suggestions that were brought up in recent years to deal with variability. However, we can make out two basic lines of thought:

(i) Keep parameter theory basically intact but modify certain components/notions.
(ii) Build in the variability into the architecture of the grammar.

Let us first turn to the approaches subsumed under (i):

The most ‘conservative’ approach within this line of thought is what can be subsumed under the notion ‘parallel grammars’. The idea behind this conception goes back to earlier work in language change. For example, Kroch and Taylor (1997) suggest that at certain stages of language development, speakers may have two grammars simultaneously. In language change, eventually one of the grammars wins (grammar competition). Concerning dialectal variation, the idea has been put forward that having two (or even more grammars) is the permanent state, see, e.g., Eide and Áfarli (2010), see Henry (1995, 2002), Embick (2008) for this view. A similar line of thought can be found in, e.g., Barbiers (2005, 2009) although his main concern is not to defend classical parameter theory. In his view, the one and same grammar generates several possible surface outputs (whereby the syntactic and semantic structure remains constant) and outer syntactic factors, e.g., socio-linguistic ones, determine which surface variant is chosen in an actual situation. This kind of approach allows to keep the ‘classical theory’ – be it Principles and Parameter theory (P&P) or Minimalism – unaltered.

Another trail is to rethink the notion of ‘parameter’. In classical P&P theory, the important aspect of a parameter is its clustering property, i.e., the setting of one parameter has consequences in several domains, cf. the pro-drop parameter with consequences on that-trace effects, subject postposing, etc., see Roberts & Holmberg (2010) for a recent discussion. The suggestion concerning microvariation, mainly put forward by Kayne (1996, 2005), also Holmberg and Sandström (1996), is that there are micro-parameters accounting for small-scale differences. These have per definition a smaller domain of application – to the extent that they may affect only one property that distinguishes between two languages/dialects, cf. the ‘laboratory situation’ mentioned above. ‘Classical’ macro-parameters then are merely a cumulation of a row of microparameters, but see Baker (2008) for a defense of ‘classical’ macro-parameters. See for discussion of this issue also the target article in Theoretical Linguistics by Holmberg (2010) and the various response articles.

Yet another way to keep the classical architecture intact is to distinguish between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ on a more theoretically founded basis than it was done in former days. Microvariation then belongs to the periphery and there, other kinds of principles/rules operate, see Uriagereka (2007) who models the various levels according to the Chomsky-hierarchy: the periphery is described with a context-sensitive grammar whereas the merge operation for example is taken to correspond to a finite state grammar. Others suggest to model the variation in the periphery via (stochastic) Optimality theory put on top of a Minimalist structure generating grammar, see Broekhuis (2008), Seiler (2004), Salzmann (2009); see for the general approach to stochastic OT, Bresnan and Deo (2001), applied to variational data.

Approaches that can be subsumed under (ii) run the risk to lose the advantage of a method to draw a clear line between grammatical and ungrammatical. But the question arises whether or not a grammar model that has built in the possibility of variation into
its architecture is empirically more adequate than one which deals with variability outside the grammar. Given the mere fact of language change and the diatopic variation attested, such a model might be worth considering.

In Minimalism, the classical concept of parameters has been replaced by a model where variation is located solely in the lexicon, specifically in the featural make up of lexical items realizing functional categories. The clausal phrase structural skeleton is invariable and the (surface) differences between the languages is a consequence of whether an item must or must not move – again ultimately based on the grammatical information residing in the lexical items. The concept is based on considerations in Borer (1984) and has become known as the Borer–Chomsky conjecture.

Concerning variation, this framework allows us to isolate very limited and local variations: the (historically) same lexical item can comprise a different combination of features and thus lead in the end to a different syntax in terms of lexical realization of the respective positions in the syntactic structure. To give a very rough sketch, take again the phenomenon of Doubly filled Comps. Assume that a lexical item can comprise in language A the feature for [subordination] and for [clause type] (e.g., *if* in English); but in language B, e.g., certain Dutch dialects, the correspondent item (*of*) bears only the feature for [clause type] and is unspecified for [subordination]. Therefore, an additional complementizer for subordination (*dat*) is inserted to ensure that [subordination] is realized. In this case then we get a complex left periphery with the sequence *...of dat...* as it is attested in some Dutch dialects, but see Barbiers (2009) for a much more detailed discussion. This type of approach is advocated in Adger and Smith (2005, 2010), Adger (2006, 2010) where a lexical item (morphological exponent) may lexicalize various combinations of formal features but where crucially the syntactic tree itself is invariable, but see Adger (2010) for a slight revision. Bayer and Brandner (2008), on a similar basis concerning the lexicon, assume generally a flexible phrase structure and that lexical items may bear a feature ‘latently’ such that it is activated only in certain syntactic environments, leading to different syntactic outputs. Finally, with Distributed Morphology as background, markedness-based variable Impoverishment rules were suggested to account for intra-speaker variation, see Nevins & Parrot (2010) for a recent analysis of variational data in English within such a framework.

At the moment, it is hard to foretell which of these approaches is most promising. This brief overview has shown that microvariational studies have already initiated a new and vivid discussion about the fundamental architecture of a model for the human language faculty.

**Short Biography**

Ellen Brandner received her PhD in linguistics at the University of Stuttgart. Her main interests are comparative Germanic syntax, the syntax discourse interface (Verb second), dialectal, and historical variation. She taught and conducted research projects at the universities of Stuttgart, Tübingen, München, Konstanz, and Wuppertal. From fall 2011 on, she will conduct a newly DFG-funded project on Alemannic dialect syntax at the University of Konstanz (Germany).

**Notes**

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DIWA is the digitalized version of the Wenker-Atlas, a large scale examination of the German dialects whose results were drawn as maps between 1888 and 1923. The maps are available with various interactive tools for presentation and can be found under http://www.3.diwa.info/titel.aspx.

For the German dialects, the famous Wenker-sentences are used now also for comparative syntactic analyses, see http://www.uni-marburg.de/fb09/igs/mitarbeiter/fleischer/forschung/wenkersyntax (in German). But note that these were translation tasks, see Section 3.2. For a brief background on Wenker and his work, see http://www2.ku.edu/~germanic/LAKGD/wenkersaetze.shtml. (in English); the website contains in addition a list of the sentences with English translations.

Note that this cannot be due to phonological weakening. The infinitival form with –en as a suffix is reduced, however, a schwa remains, as can be witnessed from the examples above.

The filter states (basically) that only either the complementizer or a relevant wh-phrase may surface in embedded questions and relative clauses, to exclude sequences like: *I wonder who that came; it is a typical instance of the doubling phenomena, mentioned in the previous section.

See the volumes in “The Cartography of Syntactic Structures” series, published by OUP.

See, for example, the online bibliography on verb raising maintained by Susi Wurmbrand: http://wurmbrand.uconn.edu/Bibliographies/vc-bib.html.

Works Cited


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Further Reading

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tion Series 136).
Zwart, Jan-Wouter. 1993. Clues from dialect syntax: complementizer agreement. Dialektsyntax. Linguistische Beri-

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List of links to websites of current (or recently finished) dialect research projects
DynaSAND (dynamic atlas of the Dutch Dialects)
http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/sand/zoeken/index.php
NORMS (Nordic Centre of Excellence in Microcomparative Syntax)
http://norms.uit.no/
ASIt Northern Italian Dialects, Paola Beninca
http://asis-cnrl.unipd.it/
SADS (Syntaktischer Atlas der deutschen Schweiz)
http://www.ds.uzh.ch/dialektsyntax/index.html
SyHD (Syntax der hessischen Dialekte, constituted only recently)
http://www.syhd.info/
SynALM (Syntax der alemannischen Dialekte)
http://ling.uni-konstanz.de/pages/home/brandner/index.html
Homepage of the Edisyn Project with valuable links and an electronic paper archive on micro-comparative syntax
http://www.dialektsyntax.org/index.php/home-mainmenu-1