

Does usage-based linguistics force a rethinking of sociolinguistics? The case of individual variation

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Variation is a central notion in both sociolinguistics and usage-based linguistics, albeit for different reasons. While for sociolinguistics variation is itself an interesting phenomenon to explore, as it correlates with variation in the social characteristics of speakers and/or conversational contexts, usage-based linguistics comes at variation from a theoretical angle: the very hypothesis that lies at the heart of the usage-based approach predicts variation. If, in addition to innate cognitive skills, an individual's linguistic competence is built up on the basis of that individual's language use and exposure, each person's competence is different (Croft 2000), competence being defined as the inventory of linguistic units (form-meaning combinations) someone has mastered, and the degree to which each of these units is entrenched for that person. The innate cognitive skills presumably act as a brake on variation: although extremely varied language practices exist across speech communities, people may also be said to use language in more or less the same way the world over.

We now face the question to what extent these two perspectives on variation can be combined. We will explore one aspect of this question by investigating the *extent* of individual variation within relatively homogeneous social groups. Getting a handle on this issue will make it possible to assess whether sociolinguistics needs to allow a larger role for 1) *within-group* differences; and 2) *intra-individual* differences across language-related activities.

We will report initial results from a study in progress in which we investigate the extent of individual variation in the entrenchment of Dutch multiword units, building on work by Arnon & Snider (2010) and others. Multiword units may be expected to differ more in entrenchment across individuals than single words, because their frequency will usually be lower than that of the single words they contain.

We are now collecting data on entrenchment levels through four different tasks, which differ in the type of language behavior they elicit, including production (anticipation task), reception (eye tracking task), reproduction (recall task), and evaluation (judgment task). Participants are selected from three groups (Human Resources managers, job seekers and people not yet looking for a job) that are expected to differ in the frequency with which their daily life makes them encounter the stimulus items: multiword units that typically occur in the domain of job hunting.

Per multiword unit, results are compared to frequency scores in a large Dutch corpus, to see to what degree frequency measures and experimental measurements match. Usage-based approaches often assume a fairly linear link between corpus frequency and cognitive entrenchment, but the evidence for this is not unproblematic (Arppe et al. 2010).

The results will be used to inform two debates: 1) whether the grouping of data from similar speakers, common in variational sociolinguistics, is likely to hide considerable variation between such individuals; and 2) whether entrenchment is a unitary construct: if it is, the different measures should yield similar results.

References

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