

What choice(s) do we have?

Processing and contextual constraints on syntactic variation across the globe

We report on an ongoing project synthesizing the Probabilistic Grammar framework (e.g. Bresnan 2007) with research on World Englishes: we adopt a large-scale comparative and sociolinguistic perspective on grammatical variation to explore the extent to which language users' grammatical knowledge differs across varieties of English.

Methodologically, we use multivariate probabilistic models to investigate variability in the cognitive constraints that fuel variation within and across speech communities. Such constraints, e.g. the tendency for longer constituents to follow shorter constituents, are not necessarily tied to formal structures but to stochastic generalizations about language usage. Thus, rather than simply describing probabilistic variation in corpus data, the project aims to illuminate aspects of the linguistic knowledge that language users with differing English backgrounds implicitly command.

The case study we present explores three patterns of syntactic variation in English which are sensitive to a range of constraints: the genitive alternation (*the president's speech* vs. *the speech of the president*), the dative alternation (*Tom sent Mary a letter* vs. *Tom sent a letter to Mary*), and particle placement (*Tom looked the word up* vs. *Tom looked up the word*). Drawing on data from nine varieties of English featured in the International Corpus of English (British, New Zealand, Canadian, Irish, Indian, Singapore, Hong Kong, Philippine and Jamaican English), we find that while all nine varieties share a core grammar for each of these constructions, cross-varietal differences in the choice of alternative do emerge in contexts where differences in processing effort between the two alternatives is minimal.

References

Bresnan, Joan. (2007): "Is Syntactic Knowledge Probabilistic? Experiments with the English Dative Alternation." In *Roots: Linguistics in Search of Its Evidential Base*, edited by Sam Featherston and Wolfgang Sternefeld, 75–96. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.