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Variability: Definitions of language and language learning

Virginia Valian

Hunter College & CUNY Graduate Center

Commentary

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Address for correspondence: Virginia Valian, E-mail: virginia.valian@hunter.cuny.edu

Four-year-old English speaker:	"Mommy, do you know Hebrew?"
Linguist mother:	"Yes."
Four-year-old:	"All of it?"
Mother:	"Yes."

A prevalent view in monolingual first language acquisition is that children acquire their native language. One's first reaction is, "well, yes, how could it be otherwise?" The study of 'heritage' learners suggests a reconsideration of that view. Polinsky and Scontras (Polinsky & Scontras, 2019) present a fascinating review of the phenomena characterizing heritage learners and propose several underlying mechanisms to account for those phenomena. Their review encourages a broader view of language acquisition. To me it suggests that variability is the norm.

Syntactic varieties

Microvariation in English (see, for example, https://ygdp.yale.edu/project-description) includes examples where speakers vary in their grammaticality judgments. Some speakers, largely Southerners, accept "Here's you a piece of pizza", while others, largely Northerners, reject them. Anyone who attends syntax talks has seen some people in the audience accept certain examples, others reject them, and still others waffle.

I would like to entertain the possibility that all instances of microvariation are instances of different language varieties that overlap with each other to different degrees, even if that means accepting the possibility that no one speaks exactly the same language variety as someone else. In each area of grammar we can assess the similarity between two different varieties. "Standard" English includes a perhaps infinite number of varieties. For those in my local community, vocabularies largely overlap, surface syntax largely overlaps, and phonology and prosody largely overlap. But some in my community say "me and Jane want pizza tonight" and for me that is ungrammatical. My English_1 is different from their English_2. And so on with other languages. Our linguist mother knows all of HER Hebrew, but not all of Hebrew.

A related point is that the number of things a speaker CAN say is much larger than the number of things they DO say. All English speakers might mentally represent the passive, but some of them may never use it. In 86,655 adult input sentences to 3 children aged 2–5 there were 4 full passives, 87 truncated passives, and 197 adjectival passives (Gordon & Chafetz, 1991). Data from the British National Corpus show a similar paucity of passives.

When assessing heritage learners we do not always know what variety, or how many varieties, they are exposed to. The more speakers a learner is exposed to, and the more contexts, the greater the likelihood that they will hear multiple varieties.

Registers and preferences

In a casual register a speaker of a nonnull subject language may fail to include an overt subject, perhaps to establish rapport. Conversely, some speakers of Spanish may 'overuse' subjects. Why might that be? Polinsky and Scontras (Polinsky & Scontras, 2019) suggest that heritage speakers are more apt than monolinguals to explicitly produce subjects in their null subject heritage language because they have a general difficulty with silence. Another possibility is that an overtly pronounced subject makes syntactic relations clearer for both speaker and hearer. Monolingual speakers vary in the extent to which they overtly mark syntactic relations, such as inclusion of an optional overt complementizer (Valian, 1976), or an overt subject. Speakers of null subject languages may 'overuse' subjects in some contexts to ensure clarity of reference. In addition, learners may rate some sources more highly than others.

Variation of syntactic contexts

Children acquire verbs earlier if they not only hear a verb more frequently but hear it in a wider variety of syntactic contexts (Naigles & Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998). The more speakers a

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child is exposed to, the greater the likelihood that she will hear a variety of structures and a variety of examples for each structure. From variety children can more easily map out the extent and limits of their language.

Limitations and implications

There are likely many simultaneously-active mechanisms for divergences from standard language versions. Variety can't explain everything. In some cases, it doesn't seem to apply. Gender agreement between determiners and nouns is a basic property that monolingual native speakers have no problems with. The nouns that are problematic tend to be those that diverge from a language generalization, even if those nouns are frequently encountered, making this an instance in which learners do not profit from variation. In addition, variety seems a stretch in accounting for the very slight accent that some heritage speakers have. But it might nevertheless be helpful to have a fuller idea of the range of standard varieties.

Reports on the extent to which heritage learners have 'mastered' a feature of the minority language are themselves extremely variable. Some heritage learners seem to be almost indistinguishable from monolingual native speakers and some are very different (see discussion in Kupisch & Rothman, 2018). The child acquiring a heritage language may receive input in that language from a single speaker, from a very small set of speakers, or from as large a set of speakers as a monolingual child exposed to that same language. The more speakers a child is exposed to, the greater the child's chance of seeing both the commonalities across speakers and the divergences. Some of the observed variability in heritage speakers, I suggest, is due to the VARIETY of input the child hears – where variety includes language variety, register variety, variety of structures used, and variety of contexts within structures.

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