English Language and Linguistics 11.2: 257–259. © Cambridge University Press 2007
doi:10.1017/S1360674307002249 Printed in the United Kingdom

Special issue on
English dialect syntax

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Preface by the guest editors

This special volume is concerned with the syntax of nonstandard varieties of (mainly British) English, and how such syntactic variation is accounted for within a range of theoretical models. There has been a growing interest in the modelling of dialect syntax (a) in a number of languages and (b) in a number of syntactic theories (see, for instance, the research on syntactic microvariation in some Germanic languages in Barbiers, Cornips & van der Kelij, 2002, or the construction-based approach to variation in Leino & Östman, 2005). We have brought together five articles written in different theoretical frameworks (Principles and Parameters, Stochastic Optimality Theory, Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Word Grammar, and Construction Grammar), together with an introduction written by the editors, who themselves adopt very different theoretical frameworks.

The articles in this special issue present new theoretical research into grammatical variation in English, which yields a number of findings of interest to those involved in work in English dialectology, typology, and syntactic theory. While all of the articles come from different theoretical perspectives, and none deals with the same data, it is interesting to note that certain themes emerge independently from several of the contributions: for instance, the role of frequency in influencing patterns of variation is something which is addressed, at least in part, by three of the articles (Hudson; Bresnan, Deo, and Sharma; Hollmann and Siewierska); the effects of Standard English are addressed in quite different ways in the contributions by Adger and Trousdale, Henry and Cottell, and Bresnan, Deo, and Sharma; and the question of how much social structure impinges on grammatical structure is raised in both Hudson's and Bender's contributions. The final contribution to this special issue is a review, by Jeff Parrott, of a recent collection of articles on syntax and variation (Cornips & Corrigan, 2005).

The first article, written by David Adger and Graeme Trousdale, explores the ways in which English dialect syntax is of relevance to theoretical linguists of every persuasion. We show how various issues – from I- and E-languages to the notion of the standard variety – impact on the way in which variation in syntax is modelled and on what we

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674307002249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understand by the (morpho)syntactic variable. We also provide a brief commentary on how variation has been addressed in a range of linguistic theories. We also note the particular role English has had to play in the development of theories of (dialect) syntax, and the problematic nature of Standard English in this regard. The article therefore provides a general context for some of the other contributions to this special issue.

The second article, by Alison Henry and Siobhan Cottell, analyses a hitherto unnoticed property of Belfast English (Transitive Expletive Constructions) and shows how its presence in this dialectal variety of English raises analytical challenges for previous accounts of this phenomenon in other languages. This bolsters Henry's previous position that intralanguage variation can involve very small parametric differences tied to lexical properties of functional heads. Henry and Cottell argue that Belfast English differs from Standard English in the available syntactic positions for expletives, and they develop an analysis in terms of general locality domains which has implications for the analysis of clausal structure in UG.

In their account of the variation in subject agreement and synthetic negation in the *be* paradigm, in data from the *Survey of English Dialects* material, Joan Bresnan, Ashwini Deo, and Devyani Sharma illustrate patterns both across dialects and within idiolects. They illustrate the extent to which morphosyntactic levelling has occurred across individual grammars, and also how such variation patterns reflect markedness properties which have been attested in typological studies. The idiolectal variation they uncover raises problems for a 'competing grammars' hypothesis (Kroch, 2000), which would predict much more systematic covariation than is actually present in the *SED* material. The framework utilized, in part to account for the effects of standardization on these rural English varieties, and the relationship between categoricality and variability so induced, is that of Stochastic Optimality Theory; Bresnan, Deo, and Sharma illustrate how Stochastic OT has been developed in part to account for patterns of variability across and within grammars.

The next two articles tackle the question of the modularity of grammatical competence, and whether socially influenced syntactic variation raises a challenge for the autonomy of the grammatical system from social categories. Emily Bender's article argues, within an HPSG framework, that patterns of grammatical variation, as well as individual instances of use, carry social meanings, and can only be understood in that context. She develops the argument through a consideration of copular absence in African American Vernacular English, and provides a sign-based analysis to capture the socially significant variability.

The fifth article, by Richard Hudson, provides a Word Grammar account of *was*/*were* variation in the speech of informants from Buckie in Scotland (Smith, 2000), thus providing a contrast with the Minimalist analysis of the same data proposed by David Adger (2006). Hudson's analysis incorporates aspects of sociolinguistic variation in his framework by presenting language as part of a network of knowledge (including nonlinguistic knowledge): in common with other cognitive linguistic models of language structure, Word Grammar allows for relations to be established between

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linguistic and nonlinguistic categories (both of which are structured around prototypes). Hudson suggests that Word Grammar has certain advantages over other cognitive linguistic models, however, in that its theory of processing (based on spreading activation) can explain why speakers may select one variant over another when presented with a series of linguistic options in any communicative event.

The final article in this special issue, by Willem Hollmann and Anna Siewierska, presents an analysis of (in)alienability effects in Lancashire English. Despite the fact that inalienability is not normally said to have an effect in English, Hollmann and Siewierska show, by a careful analysis of first-person-singular possessives in possessive–noun constructions in their corpus of Lancashire English, that speakers of at least one variety of English have an inalienability hierarchy which is consistent with that of other languages, based on typological research. Using some of the apparatus of construction grammars, Hollmann and Siewierska suggest that speakers may construct schemas of possessive constructions of various degrees of abstractness; such schemas also seem to exhibit frequency effects, which is consistent with other work on productivity (cf. Goldberg, 1995), but Hollmann and Siewierska also point out some unresolved problems concerning the role of frequency in the emergence of constructions.

It is clear from these articles, and from the other ongoing work on microparametric variation in English, that research based on nonstandard varieties of English can enhance and refine theoretical models of language structure. Equally, a study of English dialects can make significant contributions to work on language typology, and to our understanding of the place of sociolinguistics in linguistic theory. We believe these articles make a timely contribution to the ongoing debate concerning the modelling of syntactic variation across dialects, and hope that they stimulate further research into English dialect syntax.

Graeme Trousdale
David Adger
March 2007

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