CHAPTER 11

Introduction: Multicultural Communicative Situations
Non-Canonical Syntax in Non-Native Englishes

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11.1 What Is Non-Canonical?

Non-canonical syntax is found in a range of social settings in which English is spoken by non-native or second-language speakers. This introduction to Part III considers definitions and key concepts before turning to these social settings and the main sources of non-canonical syntax among these speakers, as well as appropriate methods for analysis.

In the context of language contact and variation, the term 'non-canonical syntax' has a number of related interpretations, all of which are relevant for looking at the emergence of non-canonical structures in non-native English varieties. The original use of the term refers to a range of phenomena within a given language – for example, within English – that involve divergence from typical or default syntactic structures. These are usually information-structural deviations from a default word order (Birner & Ward 1998; Ward & Birner 2004). 'Non-canonical' in this earlier sense can thus mean information-structural syntactic reorganisation or more generally any less conventional or innovative syntactic usage (Birner & Ward 1998; Huddleston & Pullum 2002).

The latter, more generalised characterisation accommodates the second common meaning according to which the term refers to non-standard or atypical systems at a more general level, for example, whole social registers or varieties. The 'canon' in these cases is not the set of unmarked structures within a variety, but often a variety as a whole. In this case, a standard (typically native) variety like Standard British or American English embodies the 'canonical' usage, which is distinguished from 'non-canonical' usage in other varieties of the language.

In recent work (Lange 2012; Pham & Leuckert 2019), a third related use has become more prominent, namely non-canonical usage in new, emerging, and contact varieties of a language. This use is slightly distinct

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from the second use above. This use above tends to be associated with prescriptive judgments of incorrectness and deviation from a conservative or outdated usage norm, whereas in this part of the volume, the focus is on the emergence of novel syntax – novel in terms of frequency, function, and/or form – in a range of situations of social contact and language learning and shift. These are often similar to the historical, vernacular environments in which usage that is now (but has not always been) canonical developed, so prescriptive concerns are not the focus. At times, a descriptive comparison to a norm or canon is valuable for understanding the stages of semantic, pragmatic, and/or syntactic change, but novel usage of this kind can also be described on its own terms.

Information structure is most directly related to the first of the three meanings above, but is implicated in all of them. The exigencies of discourse can reorganise the elements in a 'canonical' clause (*a child sat in the mud*) in a number of ways, including, for instance, preposing and postposing (*in the mud sat a child* or *in the mud, a child sat*), left and right dislocation (*she sat in the mud, that child* or *one of the naughtiest children, she sat in the mud*), argument reversal (*that mud's been sat in by a child*), *it*-cleft (*it was a child who sat in the mud*), existential *there* (*there was a child who sat in the mud*), and *wh*-clefts (*what the child did was sit in the mud*). These effects are usually described as located in discourse, as they concern the status of information as common ground or novel for interlocutors, but they have also been described as involving the speaker's (or writer's) attitude or evaluation (Pham 2017).

A final dimension of ambiguity in terminology around non-canonical syntax, as noted elsewhere in the present volume, is whether it specifically pertains to the (non-)canonical ordering of arguments relative to their discourse status, as above, or to (non-)canonical usage in syntax more generally. The original term applied specifically to how the status of arguments in discourse affects a canonical or 'unmarked' ordering. For example, 'non-canonical constructions are used in predictable ways in order to preserve a general old-before-new ordering of information in English' (Ward & Birner 2004: 172). A large body of work has elucidated this relationship between discourse givenness, hearer familiarity, and order of constituents (Firbas 1966; Prince 1981; Vallduví 1992; Lambrecht 1994). Syntactic constructions that diverge from standard norms more generally – not just in information-structural terms, but also in terms of semantic and formal syntactic behaviour – have also been described in recent research as non-canonical. Indeed, as we will see, the two kinds cannot be easily dissociated, as discourse-based reorganisation can

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influence morphosyntactic behaviour and vice versa, and so the present volume casts a wide net to capture whole systems of syntactic innovation.

11.2 What Is Non-Native?

Although the native speaker is privileged in almost all fields of linguistics, the concept of the native speaker is surprisingly indeterminate. Nativeness can be defined in linguistic or social terms, including shared grammaticality judgments, mode of acquisition, amount of use, test performance, language dominance, type of variation, social group membership, historical status, or perception by others. Research on World Englishes and on English as a Lingua Franca has challenged some of these conceptualisations within linguistics, as it is in these contexts that common assumptions about nativeness start to give way (Paikeday 1985; Rampton 1990; Kachru 1992 [1982]; Schneider 2007; Agnihotri & Singh 2012; Mauranen et al. 2015).

For example, it is unremarkable in India to find people who pass one but not another 'test' of nativeness. A person might have used English every day for most of their life and affiliate themselves with it as one of their dominant languages, yet have highly variable grammatical structures and intuitions. Or they might have stable or 'standard' grammatical structures and intuitions but proficiency in only one register that is used relatively rarely. They might have a default code that mixes Hindi and English, so that they sound like native speakers in both but may be unable to speak either language on its own. Parents might transmit English to their children as their primary language while nevertheless retaining a host of highly variable phonetic and grammatical forms. The reality of these complexities sits uncomfortably beside simple categorisations of Indian speakers – and many millions of others in postcolonial contexts – as either 'non-native' or 'native'.

The reality is one of a bilingual cline (Kachru 1992 [1982]) with variable language use and competence across different dimensions: acquisition, function, and context of situation. Acquisition refers to varying performance levels, for instance in rural as opposed to urban education and through daily use. Function may vary according to whether English is being used for personal communication, instrumentally as a national 'link' language, or as an international mode of communication. Context of situation may vary considerably according to regional, cultural, or occupational practices and norms. At one end of the cline are speakers who consider English a native language and at the other, speakers who command only a restricted subset of functional uses of English.

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Mukherjee (2007: 182) offers an empirically based model of Indian English (IndE) as 'semiautonomous', caught between the pull of conservative (exonormative) and innovating (endonormative) forces. He notes a characteristic self-critical stance that suggests a lingering anxiety about correctness in varieties experiencing nativisation. Sharma (2023) shows intermediate patterns of this kind (e.g., native-like acceptance being more apparent in IndE phonology than grammar), and differing degrees of dialect confidence between IndE and Singapore English (SgE), again pointing to degrees of nativeness.

In this final part of the book, the focus is on speakers described as non-native. In fact, Part III implicates the full continuum of speech community types: English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). This broad focus permits a consideration of how these different social contexts of use make speakers more or less sensitive to factors such as structural complexity, simplification, variation in input, and the emergence and focusing of new norms of use (see Szmrecsanyi 2009).

The intriguing case of ELF, for example, once again challenges the interpretation of 'non-standard' syntax as a deviation from a canonical standard as opposed to a new form of accommodation or collaboration. Many multinational firms now have commerce conducted solely among ELF speakers, who quickly converge upon and regularise new norms. A simple contrast of native and non-native competence does not always suffice for such situations. It is useful to bear in mind that speakers of ESL, EFL, and ELF are often speakers with substantial proficiency and competence (Paikeday 1985), and often strong affiliation with the language (Rampton 1990). When speech is produced and processed in these diverse communicative contexts, the acquisitional status of the individual but also their social goals and affiliations will influence how much their speech is affected by limited native speaker input, and how likely socio-pragmatic contexts are to generate new ways of signalling stance or meaning.

Some of the examples presented later in this introductory discussion are drawn from speech communities that combine native and non-native dynamics: for example, in urban multiethnolects in Europe, we find new syntactic forms triggered by group second language acquisition in high-migration zones, but these are rapidly absorbed into native usage by the adolescent population, quickly becoming identified with native speaker identity rather than learner status (Cheshire et al. 2013).

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Wiese (2023) makes a compelling case for how these social and communicative situations are central to novel syntactic usage. In relation to non-canonical syntax in bilingual contexts, she notes:

> Typically, the com-sits [communicative situations] associated with such dialects are initially restricted to these specific settings, that is, relevant characteristics are urbanity, youth, and ethnic and linguistic diversity. Further on, such dialects can loosen their association with a specific community and setting and spread to broader contexts, for instance, generally to com-sits among adolescents or to informal urban settings. From the point of view of com-sits, we can capture this as a broadening of the com-sit base when less specific situational characteristics become relevant. . . . Another aspect of com-sits that urban contact dialects highlight is that com-sits support the emergence of grammar. These urban contact dialects are not just characterised by a bunch of words, of course: their elements are integrated grammatically. Hence, linguistic elements can organise into different systems through their association with different com-sits. (Wiese 2023: 49–50)

Wiese (2023: 54–7) goes on to illustrate this through a striking example of 'market grammar' in Berlin's Maybachufermarkt. Signs advertising produce were observed to follow a number of syntactic rules (order: numeral+classifier, numeral+currency; zero agreement: *zwei Mango*, **zwei Mangos*) that allow users to cross language boundaries easily, swapping in lexicon from German, Turkish, and English. In the market, users were able to offer field researchers clear intuitions about these rules of their functionally driven, register-specific code ('Not Mangos. Mango!', 'Nobody says Mangos here!', 'Kiste! That's how one talks on the market.', 'No plural on the market!').

We can see how the communicative situation influences syntactic outcomes by comparing this example to a very different non-native English-using environment, ELF in middle-class professional and academic contexts. In some contexts of spoken ELF, such as multinational workplaces, we may expect to see regularisation, simplification, and transparency (e.g., non-idiomatic language and one-to-one meaning-form correspondences) in syntactic constructions used between non-native speakers from different L1 backgrounds (Mauranen et al. 2015). On the other hand, in the register of ELF academic written discourse, Wu et al. (2020) find that ELF speakers use longer sentences, more coordinate phrases, and more complex nominals than an American English reference corpus.

Social setting, function, and register are thus crucial factors in determining the specific communicative goals that give rise to specific syntactic

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formats. It is these situational pressures that generate many of the observed regularities and cycles of discourse-based restructuring, potentially a process universal to human language and only accelerated by contact.

11.3 What Gives Rise to Non-Canonical Syntax among Non-Native Speakers?

With our focus on a broad meaning of 'non-canonical', extending to information-structural as well as other syntactic innovation, two immediate questions arise: (1) what counts as an example of non-canonical syntax, and (2) what gives rise to these novel, (initially) non-canonical uses, especially in non-native speaker contexts?

In terms of the first of these – what counts as an instance of non-canonical syntax – Lange and Rütten (2017: 244) offer a concise summary: 'Languages in general and both, varieties and registers of English in particular may display different preferences for the formal realization as well as the frequency of individual information-packaging strategies.' These preferences give rise to expectations within language users of what is canonical (cf. Introduction to this volume). Non-canonical syntax can thus involve innovative syntactic constructions, which may not be attested at all in other varieties or registers, but also innovative frequency distributions, such that all the structures are shared with a reference variety, but infrequent constructions have become much more frequent in the variety in question (or vice versa). Relatedly, non-canonical syntax may involve a structure that is superficially similar to a canonical construction, but its function differs. Decades ago, S. V. Shastri, the creator of the first corpus of IndE in the late 1970s, observed that unlike 'transparent' features, involving a new form, more 'opaque' syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features may be very common in IndE, where 'it is perhaps not the "form" that is at variance but the "function"' (Shastri 1992: 274).

Below, we consider some of the main sources of non-canonical syntax found in the language use of non-native or bilingual speakers (see Matras 2009 for a detailed review). One obvious source, but by no means the only one, is language transfer: change that is rooted in the contrasts between syntactic structures in English and those in a non-native speaker's other (native) languages. Related to this is the relative need for pragmatically rich English language input for the acquisition of certain syntactic constructions, such that both L1 influence and universal discourse patterns intervene in its absence. A second source of change is inherent variability in English itself. It is often the presence of low-frequency non-canonical standard variants

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within the reference or standard variety that opens up variability for contact-driven non-canonical usage particular to non-native speakers. Finally, a third source is simply pragmatic innovation, where novel functions of language structure arise out of the exigencies of a new social setting.

11.3.1 L1-L2 Contrast and Input Demand

A clear source of non-canonical syntax among non-native speakers of a language is their first language(s) (L1). Examples include a much more frequent use of existing fronting devices (topicalisation, left dislocation) and novel topic-marking devices in many Asian varieties of English (Lange 2012; Leuckert 2019). These can involve constructions fairly directly transferred from the first languages (*Can or not?*: SgE, syntactic format transferred from Sinitic substrates) or indirect attempts to reconstitute a feature of the first language through constructions available in English (*Every year, inflation is there*: IndE, partly recreating the Indo-Aryan use of clause-final copula for existential meaning). Bao (2015) describes this as a 'filtering' of substrate meanings through superstrate lexicon: semantic functions of the L1 come to be reconstituted in reorganised elements of available L2 syntax. These are not simply errors of course; they have developed their own grammatical rules and speakers have intuitions concerning these constructions (Parshad et al. 2016).

Some have argued that non-canonical usage in a contact variety arises in part due to complexity within the English system, suggesting an acquisitional source of divergence (Housen 2002; Davydova 2011). This can be refined to be a statement about difficulty *relative to* the structures available in the L1. Sharma (2023) argues that this interpretation of difficulty – termed *input demand*, or how much input a speaker of a given L1 needs to acquire an L2 form – may account for why certain non-canonical syntactic constructions persist more over time and become established as a new dialect feature while others do not.

Some syntactic innovations arise repeatedly across non-native English usage. Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi (2004) use the term 'varioversals' for such forms, due to their shared origin in the variety type, for example, arising out of acquisitional processes or restricted input in non-native contexts. Some examples are given in (1) below;[1] Mauranen et al. (2015) cite similar features as potentially arising across ELF situations as well.

[1] Sources of examples in (1): a.i.: Wee & Ansaldo (2004: 58, 67); b.ii.: ICE-East Africa, S2B020BT; c.i.: Sharma (2023: 119); c.ii.: van Rooy (2006: 37); e.i. Sharma (2023: 126); e.ii.: van Rooy (2008: 356); all other examples: Platt et al. (1984).

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(1)
a. Irregular use of articles (omission):
   i. His sister passed message to me. *Singapore*
   ii. . . . like mudbrick hut with thatch roof. *West Africa*
b. Present perfect and simple past levelled (occurrence with punctual adverbials):
   i. I have seen him yesterday. *Philippines*
   ii. Nine supporters of Malawi's president-elect Mr Bakili Muluzi have been killed when a bus crashed into them as they celebrated their victory. *East Africa*
c. Wider range of uses of the progressive (with stative verbs):
   i. We are knowing each other. *India*
   ii. Maybe one or two is having HIV/Aids. *South Africa*
d. Resumptive/shadow pronouns (with subject and object):
   i. Some teachers when I was in high school I liked them very much. *Papua New Guinea*
   ii. My daughter she is attending the University of Nairobi. *East Africa*
e. Loosening of sequence-of-tense rules (past perfect after present):
   i. Never before in the Capital's history these colonies had faced such a flood threat. *India*
   ii. Most of these syringes and razors you find that they had been used by someone before. *South Africa*
f. Invariant non-concord tags (negative):
   i. Upili returned the book, isn't it? *Sri Lanka*
   ii. He loves you, isn't it? *West Africa*

Some non-canonical innovations in a contact setting arise from more general discourse-driven principles – not strictly grafted from first languages, but drawing on universal or logical tendencies that emerge due to wider mismatches between L1 and L2 and foregrounding of pragmatic functions (Lange 2012; Leuckert 2019). Current theoretical models in bilingualism research such as the Interface Hypothesis can also offer new insights into why we might repeatedly observe discourse-based solutions to the challenge of mismatched grammars in contact (Sharma 2023).

11.3.2 Non-Canonical Alternatives within Standard English

As L1 sources of change are so prominent and noticeable in non-native varieties, loci of variability within English tend to be less of a focus as a source of new usage, but they play a key part in the actuation and spread of non-canonical syntactic usage in second and foreign language varieties (Sharma 2001; Hundt & Vogel 2011). Indeed, there is a risk of over-idealising how homogeneous canonical, standard, or unmarked usage is in native varieties. Native and standard English varieties encompass a substantial degree of variability, as attested in the preceding parts of this book.

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An example noted by Ranta (2009) is lack of plural agreement in existential *there*-constructions in English: ELF speakers are often penalised for utterances such as *There's people outside*, on the false assumption that native speakers do not produce such forms.

As noted, one form of change in non-native speakers may be an increase in the relative frequency of these 'built-in' non-canonical constructions. For example, IndE has dramatically higher frequencies of topicalisation and left dislocation constructions than British English, a difference in frequency rather than form. (As previously mentioned, IndE also allows non-canonical constructions that fall outside of the set of constructions licensed in British English at all.)

An example of repurposing an existing non-canonical form within Standard British English for a new non-canonical system in a new dialect is the development of a new topic-marking function of the relativiser *who* in Multicultural London English (MLE). Cheshire et al. (2013) compare the use of different relativisers in two varieties of English: traditional London English and the newer MLE. They show that the same canonical set of relativiser forms in English (Ø, *that*, *who*) are used in both varieties, but only in the latter variety has a new topic-marking function developed for *who* (e.g., *my medium brother who moved to Antigua*, with high topic persistence of that referent in the following discourse). They note that 'present-day English does not have a specific topic-marking feature, using instead a range of non-canonical syntactic structures such as presentational existential clauses and left-dislocated "presentational" constructions to introduce both a new subject and a new topic into the discourse' (2013: 68). By contrast, many of the languages that are in the linguistic ecology of high-contact MLE speakers (e.g., Jamaican Creole, Igbo, Yoruba, Moroccan Arabic, Sylheti, Bengali, Twi, Spanish, and Maltese) have overt topicalisers and focus devices. Cheshire et al. (2013) argue that the novel development in MLE is in line with Matras's (2009) observation that, in contact situations, the features most susceptible to transfer are those that convey the speaker's monitoring and directing of the interaction, due to their routinisation in usage. They conclude that 'topic marking, then, can be considered to be one of the information structuring strategies that drive innovation in situations of extreme linguistic diversity' (Cheshire et al. 2013: 67). Their study offers a vivid example of existing (non-)canonical variation in English giving rise to a more elaborated non-canonical system. (It is worth noting that Mauranen et al. 2015 also observe systematic innovation and change in the relativiser system in ELF,

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supporting Matras's speculation that certain parts of the syntactic structure are more susceptible to change in contact.)

Inherent variability in English as a source extends to further subtypes of sources, such as change arising from distributional biases in the input (see van Rooy 2008 for an example from Black South African English) and universal principles of markedness that are subtly present in native standard varieties and that may get amplified in a non-native variety. For instance, the accessibility hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977) affects syntactic rules in both native and non-native varieties.

11.3.3 Pragmatic Innovation in the Usage Environment

Cheshire et al.'s (2013) example also relates to a further source of novel non-canonical syntax, namely innovation that arises out of particular functions or pragmatic needs in a given group. The social situations of European multiethnolects such as MLE are an intriguing environment to observe these processes at work.

These varieties have developed in major European cities after late twentieth-century migration. Examples include Multicultural London English (London), Kiezdeutsch (Berlin), Citétaal (Belgium), Rinkebysvenska (Stockholm), Straattaal (Netherlands), and further varieties in Copenhagen, Oslo, Helsinki, and other cities (Cheshire et al. 2015). The varieties share a number of defining features: they originated through late modern migration into working-class areas of European cities, they developed partly out of group second language acquisition in a social mix of non-native and near-native speakers in high-migration zones, they involve rapid change at many levels of the language, and they have been quickly absorbed into native usage by the adolescent population, shifting from learner to native speaker identity.

A number of grammatical innovations in these varieties originate in the pragmatic context of new usage by teenagers of recent migrant heritage background and mixed nativeness, in intensive social interactions that closely resemble the 'com-sits' described by Wiese (2023) earlier. One example of an MLE innovation is a novel causal interrogative construction with the format *why . . . for?* An example is *Why they looking at me like that for?*, a blend of *Why . . .* and *What . . . for?* One might argue that this is simply a learner error that has taken hold. However, the use of the form has been consistently observed in MLE to express purpose, rather than a general cause. Brookes et al. (2017) show convincingly that the redundant use of *for*, given its implicit presence in *why*, has the effect of being

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a 'reinforcing' or 'expressive' feature. They observe that the 'variant typically occurs in pragmatically-charged environments, such as those that involve a confrontation between the participants in the conversational exchange or in direct speech contexts that report an aggressive encounter' (2017: 6). Its absence in elliptical structures or in negated clauses reinforces this analysis.

It is reminiscent of non-canonical negation structures in Jespersen's Cycle, whereby in French a redundant emphatic particle (*ne . . . pas*) developed out of the pressure for discourse informational clarity, starting out as non-canonical as the former negation device eroded, and later became the canonical negation (Dahl 1979). On analogy with those cases, MLE causal interrogatives could retain their narrow purpose function and register restriction, or they could grammaticalise into a general cause marker, losing their immediacy, emphasis, and stance/affect (confrontation) constraints. This sort of pragmatic bleaching with stabilisation and spread would resemble semantic bleaching found across grammaticalisation, such as the grammaticalisation of determiners out of more contextually constrained demonstratives (Hopper & Traugott 2003).

Thus, a new non-canonical construction in MLE involves initial grounding in speaker stance and immediacy, but with the potential to spread and lose its pragmatically narrow and marked functions over time. In the long term, a process of vernacular renewal may continue to regenerate forms of this kind, especially in high-contact urban youth groups.

The influence of immediacy of communicative function on linguistic form and use has been described in a range of research (Bernstein 1971; Koch & Oesterreicher 1985; Leuckert & Buschfeld 2021). It arises under specific conditions of intensive, vernacular social interaction. If we think back to Asian Englishes, discussed earlier, we can argue that IndE did not historically involve a preponderance of such interactional contexts, because of very limited nativisation and use in young peer groups; this is different to SgE, which was used in informal trade and later nativised more rapidly, with more extensive nativising use within child and teenage peer groups. The two varieties have developed very distinct kinds of innovative, or non-canonical, usage.

11.4 Summary

Adopting a broad definition of non-canonical syntax as atypical usage across any syntactic domain, this introduction to Part III has focused on

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key characteristics of such innovations among what are described as non-native English-speaking groups. Not surprisingly, difference between these speakers' first languages and English is an important source of change. Two further sources of non-canonical syntax were noted. One is the presence of standard but minor (less frequent or more pragmatically constrained) variants, that is, inherent variability within English, that can lead to shifts in the balance of frequency or dominance of competing constructions. Another is pragmatic innovation that will always arise under certain interactional conditions, in native and non-native varieties alike.

The balance of these three forces can vary dramatically from situation to situation. The discussion pointed to the considerable need to understand the particular acquisitional and social setting to understand the nature of non-canonical innovations. If a situation involves little nativisation and language shift, with acquisition and use established through education and work, the syntactic innovations we observe are likely to be very different to those found in intensive adolescent peer groups involving rapid shift from non-native to native speaker status, with a reliance on the language as a vehicle of intimate personal exchange (Thomason & Kaufman 1988; Matras 2009).

Furthermore, the methods adopted for analysis also need to be particularly attuned to all of these considerations, to capture multiple dimensions of variation. Given the potential for innovation in frequency, function, form, or all three, both quantitative and qualitative perspectives on variation are needed, whether for naturalistic, elicited, or experimental data. And the question of nativeness and pragmatic context presents further challenges for coding precise uses of non-canonical forms.

The three chapters in this part of the volume elegantly illustrate ways to respond to these challenges. They span the full gamut of social situation types, from learner English (see Kircili, in Chapter 13), through ELF (see Neumaier & Leuckert, in Chapter 14), to nativising varieties of Asian English (see Götz & Kircili, in Chapter 12), with some intriguing observations about parallels across these. They investigate both classic non-canonical syntax that relates to information structure (adverbial fronting and introductory-*it* constructions) and usage that goes beyond this (absence of plural marking), and they highlight the complex interplay of L1 transfer with universal language processing and discourse pressures, as well as intriguing elements of genre sensitivity. The studies also demonstrate the value of triangulation across multiple perspectives on the data, with distinctive qualitative, (descriptive) quantitative, and statistical approaches to capturing incipient systematicity in non-canonical usage patterns.

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