

Syntactic variation and synonymy*

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This paper explores the extent to which ‘variant’ syntactic forms may be considered synonymous. In Labovian sociolinguistics (e.g. Labov 1972), it is presupposed that different forms may map to the same interpretation, though, in the case of syntax, just what kind of sameness counts remains a matter of some controversy. Elsewhere, the view that there can be no difference in form without some difference in meaning continues to be a common coin, espoused by a variety of theoretical frameworks, all of which motivate the scarcity of synonymy, either tacitly or explicitly, in terms of cognitive economy. In the Minimalist Program of Chomsky (1995) *et seq.*, where appeals to economy take a specific form, it is often assumed that variation between what appear to be synonymous structures actually involves choices between different numerations associated with different interpretive effects. Whilst they continued to flourish in comparative isolation, their sharply contrasting views on this point created few real difficulties, but with attempts to combine Labovian and Chomskyan insights now gaining momentum, tensions between their divergent positions have arisen anew. Granting that at least some measure of syntactic variation does in fact exist, the aim of this paper is to characterise in terms acceptable to linguists of both persuasions what definition of synonymy might be used to identify relevant cases, and to explore in the process what kind of empirical phenomena it might subsume, or, perhaps more significantly, what it might exclude.

1 INTRODUCTION

Although there are certain formal resonances between Chomskyan generative syntax and Labovian sociolinguistics, the connections between them have traditionally been fragile. There are various reasons for this, but one of the more salient concerns their differing attitudes towards variation. In the Labovian paradigm, the principles established by Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968) remain axiomatic: ‘structured heterogeneity’ is assumed to be the essential property of language, responsible both for fulfilling important social functions and for facilitating orderly linguistic change. These principles, coupled with a methodological commitment to investigating how language operates in the speech community, ensure that sociolinguistics continues to represent an explicit challenge to what Chambers (1995) calls *the axiom of categoricity*, viz. the assumption that the data used in linguistic analysis should be idealised so as to eliminate real world variation. In the generative tradition, however, where the focus is not on how language is used in society, but rather on how it is represented in the mind/brain of individual speakers, just such an assumption has long been considered legitimate abstraction.

For many years now, sociolinguists have been emphasising that the kind of polarised approach just outlined is far from ideal. Labov (1975: 56), for his part, has bemoaned what he regards as the undesirable consequences of “introspective linguistics continuing to construct divergent models on the basis of non-existent idiolects [whilst sociolinguists study] isolated cases of variation without any coherent grammar to place them in.” Recently, however, even generativists have begun to acknowledge the attractions of integration, Chomsky (2001: 41),

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