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(Lack) of semantic equivalence between variants

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It is a long-standing dispute in variationist sociolinguistics whether and in what sense the linguistic variants under study need to be semantically equivalent to collectively form a variable (Sankoff 1973, see, e.g., Romaine 1984, Dines 1980, Lavandera 1978, Terkourafi 2011, Pichler 2010, Hasan 2009[1989]). Labov's famous tenet states that sociolinguists should study "variable ways of saying *the same thing*" (Labov 1972; our italics). But especially when studying variables 'above and beyond phonology' (Sankoff 1973), some sort of meaning difference will generally play a part in determining the distribution of each variant.

Several authors have suggested alternative bases for defining a methodologically valid variable other than (the inherently excluded) semantic equivalence. A range of equivalence types have been proposed from *truth-conditional* (Weiner and Labov 1983) over *pragmatic* or *illocutionary* (e.g. Dines 1980, Romaine 1984, Terkourafi 2011) to *structural* equivalence (Pichler 2010, giving epistemic phrases such as "I don't know", "I don't think" as an example).

At the other end of the process of linguistic investigation awaits a related question. Once variants have been coded and distributions determined, we need to assess the implications of our findings in regard to grammatical status. Categorical distributions are easily interpreted as instances of rules-without-exceptions. But hardly any distributions are in fact categorical, so the question becomes one of cut-off points: How large a proportion must (the least used) variant comprise for it to count as variation? Must this variation be related to external factors for it to be sociolinguistically relevant (in other words: is it by definition a categorial distinction if it is only/mainly linguistically determined)?

In our paper we will discuss these questions in relation to two ongoing studies of grammatical variation and change exploiting the LANCHART corpus of spoken Danish (Gregersen 2009, Gregersen, Maegaard, and Phrao 2014): 1. word order, and 2. general extenders.

1. Word order

Danish (as well the other mainland Scandinavian languages) distinguishes between two word orders: 'Main clause word order' places sentence adverbials and negations after the finite verb (V>Adv), while the 'subordinate clause word order' always has sentence adverbials placed before the finite verb (Adv>V). In spite of terminology, both word orders are found in subclauses:

(1) (det er også en af grundene til) at vi tør **næsten ikke** at flytte (V>Adv)
(that is also one of the reasons to) that we dare almost not to move

(1') at vi **næsten ikke** tør at flytte (Adv>V)
that we almost not dare to move

'that's also one of the reasons that we almost don't dare to move'

V>Adv word order in subclauses is a type of Main Clause Phenomenon (Aelbrecht, Haegeman, and Nye 2012), and as such it has been argued to signal relative informational importance, dubbed

emphasis, assertion, main point of utterance or *foreground* (Hooper and Thompson 1973, Meinunger 2006, Julien 2007, Simons 2007, Wiklund et al. 2009, Jensen and Christensen 2013).

In our study, almost 9,000 subclauses have been manually coded for a range of factors relevant to hypotheses regarding foregrounding, ranging from type of matrix predicate to presence of conjunction, enabling multifactorial analyses of the relative effects on the distribution of the two word orders (Jensen and Christensen 2013). The results support the hypothesis that V>Adv word order is associated with foregrounding, but notably, only if we accept it as a statistical tendency in language use rather than as an invariant coding. This raises the question of the status of grammatical categories, also addressed in usage-based models such as exemplar theory (Pierrehumbert 2001, Bybee 2006). In contrast to earlier suggestions, our results only show a small influence on word order of non-linguistic variables such as geography, time and social class.

2. General extenders

Another variable to be discussed in our paper is general extenders (GEs), such as Eng. *and stuff like that, or something*. Previous studies have found that it is a feature of youth speech, sometimes correlated with sex and class (e.g. Dubois 1992, Cheshire 2007, Tagliamonte and Denis 2010, Pichler and Levey 2011), but also that GEs have a variety of different functions in discourse (Dines 1980, Overstreet 1999, Cheshire 2007).

In our study, all GEs occurring in the data are coded for a number of linguistic and contextual variables based on findings of previous studies, e.g. category and number of other referents in the extended phrase, presence of right-peripheral discourse markers, position of the GE in the utterance, and co-speakers' treatment of the utterance with respect to conversational turn taking. This coding allows us to follow grammaticalization processes of the different GE types based on distributional and mixed models analyses. Regarding social factors, our data support the general finding that GEs are more frequent in youth speech. Adolescents have the highest relative frequency of GEs, and speakers tend to decrease their GE use during their life span, whilst participating in community changes regarding the use of the different GE types.

Clearly, both of these variables (word order and general extenders) involve semantic and functional differences between variants. On the other hand, they also share functional/semantic characteristics, albeit at another level: Both the V>Adv and the Adv>V word orders are used to form Danish clauses (main or subordinate), and in subclauses both *may* express foreground information, but only one *signals* it (V>Adv). All general extenders may refer to open-ended or vague lists and may thus perform acts of positive politeness in suggesting in-group membership with the hearer ('you understand what I mean because we share experience/outlook on life/taste...').

So how do we interpret our findings? Are we dealing with a sociolinguistic variable at all in the case of the word order distinction (previous studies find regional differences, but we only find them marginally; on the other hand, there is to all appearances a large difference between spoken and written Danish with respect to word order)? What does it mean when we find that the GE type with *sådan noget* (lit. 'such some') was predominantly a WC male feature in the 80s, and decreases in use over time, but is still by far the most prevalent, especially in youth speech? And what are the implications of our finding that predictions based on apparent time use of GE types do not hold up in real time?

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