Overview: Recent interest in modeling variation in and across languages/dialect in theoretical frameworks: investigate the role of features

- E-/I-language approach

  Optimal I-language that lacks optional operations vs. optionality: variation in form (not in meaning)

- S-language approach (Adger 2006, but note William Labov’s early work)

  Statistical patterns in the use of different variants across speech communities

1. **Macroparametric variation**

   Fairly abstract general principles that are obeyed by all languages may be parameterized (e.g., all languages have VP constituent which has object as the sister of the verb: Head—Right vs. Head—Left)

   There are a few simple parameters that define typologically distinct sorts of languages.

   Parameters can be conceived of as a set of binary switches, and a language is a specification of the state of these switches.

1.1 **Locus of variation**

   The exact ways that one speaker’s knowledge of language can differ from another speaker’s knowledge of language

   *Macroparametric view:* There can be variation in the grammar in addition to variation that can be attributed to the properties or particular lexical items.

1.2 **Extent of variation**

   Are large-scale differences always the cumulative effect of there being smaller-scale difference between languages?

   *Macroparametric view:* There are a few simple parameters that define typologically distinct sorts of language (e.g., single parameter in Merge that induces the core difference between head-initial and head-final languages).
1.3 **Methodology of comparison**

Effective methodology for discovering true parametric structure of language

*Macroparametric view:* Emphasizes that comparing historically unrelated languages may be necessary to discover certain kinds of parameters

- These parameters can have large impact on shape of a language, so mutually intelligible dialects tend not to differ in these respects.
- Interaction between mutually intelligible dialects generally prevents macroparametric differences from entering in one dialect and not the other.
- Comparing dialects is not a good way to find macroparameters.

2. **Microparametric variation**

Uses the same reasoning as the classical parameter theory but applies it at a higher level of magnification in the search for very localized differences with small but nontrivial effects in the grammars of very closely related languages (alias dialects)

2.1 **Locus of variation**

Chomsky-Borer Conjecture (Baker 2008)
All parameters of variation are attributable to differences in features of particular items (e.g., functional heads) in the lexicon.

Background: Borer (1984) proposed that parameters were restricted to properties of the (functional) lexicon. Under this view, languages differ in that they have different specifications for certain lexical items.

2.2 **Extent of variation**

Primitive, scientifically significant differences among languages are relatively small-scale differences, typically tied to a few closely related constructions. Lexical parameters will tend to have smaller scale effects than grammatical parameters. If a parameter is essentially a particular assignment of features to a lexical item, it will only affect structures that contain that lexical item. A parameter associated with a very common lexical item could have a large effect on the observed language, but parameters associated with items with less frequency will be more limited in scope.
2.3 Methodology of comparison
Compares closely related languages for finding genuine parameters

3. (Morpho)syntactic variation
Most of the variables described in grammatical variation are morphosyntactic (e.g., concerned with variation in functional categories, such as tense, modality, and negation); however, some are syntactic (e.g., word-order patterns in embedded and non-embedded questions).

Morphosyntactic variants
Akin to allophones/allomorphs: There is an abstract underlying unit which has a range of exponents (Adger 2006). On this Variation of Exponence (VE) interpretation, what distinguishes the variable from the phoneme/morpheme is that the variants are not simply determined by the linguistic context in which they appear, nor are they simply in free variation. They are more or less likely to be selected depending on a number of factors (e.g., the previous discourse, the speaker, audience, psycholinguistic factors, etc.). The VE of variables is not only formal, but functional, not restricted to linguistic representation but related to language in use.

Variation can arise from the “combinatorics of the syntactic system itself,” with the variants depending on what are essentially different syntactic routes to the same outcome (Adger 2006). The combinatorics of the system can impact the frequency of the variants.

References