

WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTAL LINGUISTICS? WITH VARIATION THEORY

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INQUIRY RECEIVED: I finally had a chance to look up your book [*Essays on time-based linguistic analysis* [Oxford University Press, 1996] on amazon.com. It really sounds interesting. In your comments on the book, I noticed that you felt the "artificial line between "synchronic" and diachronic" linguistics is a "false" and "impractical" one. May I ask, what makes you feel this way?

REPLY: The idea that analysis is only practicable for a static (changeless) idiolect spoken by one person in one style at one moment, etc. is patently at variance with something as variable and dynamic as language. (It is an unsuitable model encouraged by the notion that there is a "standard" English--impossible, since there is no academy to standardize English.) That analysing greatly varying subgrammars in terms of an overall grammar is not possible is a false assumption, like so many assumptions of static linguistics (e.g. that only basic words can be borrowed across languages--an assumption often shown to be false). Variation theory in developmental linguistics shows how a variable grammar can be formalized. The *idiolect* of static linguistics is a virtual reality based on impossible ideas--ideas having the consequence (more boldly stated in the forties than subsequently) that two different English (sub)grammars--for different styles or for the same style with different speakers, etc.--are as theoretically different as Chinese and Navaho. Other unlikely notions include Chomsky's "instantaneous change." However, Chomsky main ruly linguistics possible with respect to his concept of rule-ordering--and much else.

Variation in a language is due to change. The implicational ordering of various rules depends on their temporal succession (unless *re-ordering* is involved; the OUP book you refer to discusses that complication in great detail). This means that subgrammars containing a later change/rule also contain earlier ones. An overall grammar can *define* each subgrammar by indexing for it the "most-implying" rule (the rule of that lect which is higher than all of the other rules operative in the lect in question on the implicational scale of the overall grammar). Note that rules have more general and more detailed forms, the more-detailed implying the more-general. Without change--and you cannot have change without time--you cannot have an "English" grammar--only an artifact--an "idiolect." Variation theory was first taught by me when I was an assistant (research-)professor at Georgetown University in D.C.--which was and is a very sociolinguistically oriented place.

My difference with dialectologists and sociolinguists--as well as with "synchronic" theorists (who don't believe in analysing variation)--is precisely this:

I believe in studying variation IN the grammar--leaving the distribution of variants

OUTSIDE of the grammar in social and geographical space to sociologists and geographers. Dialectologists and sociolinguistics are isoglossist (drawing lines between geographical or social groups); synchronists are also isoglossists (they draw lines between each and every style of every speaker).

The chapter on dialects in the book under scrutiny shows how this solves problems in spatial dialectology not amenable to any other approach. I claim that my approach is the only "linguistic"--or *systematic*--way of analysing variation.

QUESTION: Also, why are you opposed to "positivistic listings and classifications" in grammars? I'm in no position to argue with you about these matters, I'm just curious.

RESPONSE: The position of positivist, antitheoretical linguists (pre-Chomskians, dialectologists, sociolinguists) is that a list (even a classified list) is something you can add or remove an item from without (in most instances) affecting the others. The opposite is true in a *system*--which has a retiform or reticular character, in which deleting, adding, or re-ordering something here affects many of the remaining items over there. Some linguists reject components in the grammar (without showing how a grammar of that kind would be possible), even though a language like Korean has got a *syntax* very much like that of Japanese and a *phonetology* that doesn't resemble that of Japanese. Anyhow, phonetological explanations, morphological explanations, and syntactic explanations are different in kind, as everyone who has tried making both knows. Some linguists eschew rules, again without showing how you can have an objective semantic analysis (of meanings), syntactic analysis (of constructs), phonetological analysis (of phonemes and intonational accents), morphological analysis (of formatives and formations) *without* rules--or whatever one wishes to call generalizations. Generalizations are something that a list is precisely NOT, though rule formation is ordered to leave P. Kiparsky's ELSEWHERE PRINCIPLE --where every conditioned item implies the most general form of a given rule--lacking conditions--at the end. This DEFAULT form of the rule is listed last. It is the smallest subset of the more complex whole. Examples are found in the book under scrutiny and in the scores of writings by the author cited there and listed in the Bibliography.

The ELSEWHERE PRINCIPLE is also a It is also a pedagogical principle: If you learn the exceptions first, then the regularities can be simply learned en bloc with a wave of the hands. If you proceed from the general to the exceptional, you will always have trouble remembering not to apply the "regular" rule to an exceptional item.

To take the most prominent group of positivist and Eddingtonian linguists today, the

Labovians, I have seen analyses of three vowels or so that are totally at odds with (cannot be fitted into) the overall system they belong to: They are amenable to overall patterns and the different *explanations* of those different systems. To assume that the lengthening-with-in-gliding of *bad*, *bed*, and *beard* in the Northeast of the US (where these items sound like *bared* and *beard* in *r*-less forms of that kind of English) in any way resembles either Southern States in-gliding of *bad*, *bed*, and *bid*--let alone the up-gliding heard in *bag*, *bang*, *bath*, *baffle*, and *cast*; both claims have been made--is about as wrong as you can get. First, the in-gliding and up-gliding of SS do not occur in the same sets of sound environments. Second, neither is accompanied by the lengthening heard in New York, etc.--thus, *bid* is never as long as *beard*, and *bad* is never as long as *bared* in comparable intonational environments.. Nor do the up-gliding examples (now current in every variety of English (though its occurrence in *bang* implies its occurrence in *bag*) ever exhibit length. You cannot write a long vowel in *eye*, as so many non-native-speakers do, without doing unconscionable violence to the system.

MORAL: One cannot analyse a miniset of items in different systems as though they had the same explanations --viz. the same relations to other items in their different systems.

Academic correctness does not permit you to write Southern States *eye* with a long vowel, unless you can (*per impossibile*) show that there are more degrees of length in these kinds of English than there really are. The vowel sound in the first syllable of *diaphragm* in allegro speech is longer than this vowel is in *eye*; if *eye* is long, then the vowel (or diphthong in slower tempos) *dia-* has got to have a third kind of length--overlong! In *r*-less varieties, *dire* is longer than *dieldye* but hardly longer than *dia-*. (I am, of course, referring to segmental prosodics, *not* clause-final suprasegmental prosodics.)

Do not forget, as do those who just look at instrumental recordings, that *long* or *short* means longer or shorter *than other items in the identical segmental environment and intonational environment*. Do not forget that prosodics--length and tone (which is relative to the average frequencies of what is being said)--have segmental functions that are very different from those of suprasegmental length and tone. Loudness also belongs with suprasegmental prosodics. Suprasegmental prosodic phenomena have semantic values that segmental length and tone *as such* generally lack. In all varieties of English in which length is systematically relevant, there are (in any given environment) two degrees of distinctive length and three degrees of phonetic length--all of which maintain their relationship even

though their instrumentally measured average lengths vary not only with suprasegmental tempo and clausal boundaries but also according to their suprasegmental positions; thus, a given segmental length is instrumentally shorter in the suprasegmental position that "e" finds itself in in *cedar* than it measures in the position of the same sound in *seed*, despite its being the same vowel with the same length for the language-user and the language system. The same relations holds between *herd* and *herded* in lects that replace "r" with length on the preceding "u." Further, the lengthening position of a systematically short vowel or diphthong is the same as the shortening position of a systematically long vowel or diphthong in an *r*-less variety of English--i.e. one in which "r" not followed by a vowel is replaced by length on the preceding vowel or diphthong:

	A		
B		C	
	cot		cod,
cart		card	
	cut		cud,
curt		curd	
	bought		bawd,
abort/wart		ward	

Because phoneticians don't understand the system of English vowel-gradation (which is disappearing to a great extent in Northern States English) or the liquid-final diphthongs (those ending in satellite liquid vowels as well as ordinary non-low vowels) and cannot distinguish the two kinds of "dark-l" heard in *stool* or the different "r" sounds in *merry*, current transcriptions cannot distinguish in any elegant way the three pronunciations of *loyal*, the four pronunciations of *stool*, the two of *merry* and *Jules*, the SS allegro pronunciation and the Northern pronunciations of *billion*--all except the last properly transcribed on pp. 238, 240, and 243 of my *English phonetic*

transcription (for which I can furnish *addenda & corrigenda*), published in 1985 by The Summer Institute of Linguistics and The University of Texas at Arlington. Diphthongs ending in satellites of different heights in Irish English and the English spoken in non-Keltic regions are not only different--they allow different predictions of future developments; thus [ai] in Irish *ride* will not likely become [a] the way [ae] is become [a] in several kinds of English--unless [ai] first becomes [ae] and then changes to [a]. Note that the [w] in situation changes to [v] in certain varieties (read about the Cockneys in Dickens) no less than does the "w" at the beginning on any English word; without writing [w] there (as one dictionary does), the system of English is left unexplained--and foreigners will say "sitcheeation."

What is desiderated are systems that are adequate for explanations in syntax, morphology, and phonetology; they are noticeably lacking among the generality of phoneticians.

I have seen raw data presented with no analysis; evidently, the reader is supposed to do what the author should have done--viz. figure out a ruly description. I have seen classifications that could not be right because they exhibit no natural groupings--by which i refer to a (sub)class characterized informally by the appropriate *generalization* (e.g. non-obstruents) or formally by a feature value (e.g. [- obstruent]). I have seen "l" grouped with (light as well as heavy) non-obstruents (like stops) in a (non-rule-description of a phenomenon; it may not be always impossible but it's nearly unlikely (that's why there is no natural-class feature including obstruents and "l"--unless it is fricativized, as in Welsh). That being so, a person presenting such data is delinquent if s/he fails to address unexpectedness of the phenomenon by giving an account of how it could be. One either invents such a feature and then justifies it from data for various languages; or one rejects one's analysis as erroneous--the most likely condition. Doing otherwise exhibits a lack of a scientific mind, however prestigious one's positions as a linguist may be and however vaunted one's claims to being "scientific" or even "more scientific than others."

COMMENT RECEIVED: Your book really sounds like something I would like to have.

RESPONSE: Thanks; I naturally appreciate the compliment, but you may feel differently when you plod through the book. It will take time for the demonstrated positions in that book (not least the origin of Middle English) to become generally accepted. That is usual. But it must be selling, as I received more royalties not long ago than for the previous royalty

period, if memory serves. One needs to remember that linguists generally thought that Chomsky was impossible to read when he first came on the scene; without any thought of comparing myself to him, the fact is that, no matter how clear something is in itself, it will make little sense to all who think in a different paradigm of fundamental assumptions.




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