Introduction to Syntactic Microvariation

Sjef Barbiers & Leonie Cornips

Meertens Instituut of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences

1 ▪ OVERVIEW

Most of the papers in this volume were presented at the Workshop Syntactic Microvariation that was held in August 2000 at the Meertens Instituut in Amsterdam. With this workshop, we aimed at initiating cooperation between a number of large scale European dialect syntax projects, including the ASIS-project in Italy, the SAND-project in the Netherlands and Belgium, the project English Dialect Syntax from a typological perspective in Freiburg, Germany, and the project Dialect Syntax of Swiss German (SADS) in Zürich, Switzerland. This volume contains both papers discussing the design and methodology of dialect syntax research projects (Bucheli & Glaser, Cornips, Kortmann), and papers describing and analyzing syntactic microvariation from a typological and generative point of view (the others). Table 1 provides an overview of the contributors to this volume, the language varieties and the syntactic variables they discuss.

TABLE 1 ▪ OVERVIEW

AUTHOR	VARIETIES	SYNTACTIC VARIABLE	
Barbiers	Dutch dialects	Negation	Negation
Bucheli & Glaser	Swiss German	Various	
Cornips	Heerlen Dutch	Infinitival Complementizers	Left Periphery
De Vogelaer, Neuckermans & Vanden Wyngaerd	West Flemish, East Flemish, Waaslands, Brabantish	Complementizer agreement	Left Periphery
Fleischer	German dialects	Preposition stranding	Prepositions
Haegeman	French Flemish, West Flemish	DP internal negation	Negation
Kortmann	South Western English dialects	Various	
Poletto	Rhaetoromance dialects	V2	Left Periphery
Seiler	Upper German dialects	Prepositional dative marking	Prepositions
Van Craenenbroeck & Van Koppen	Brabantish & Flemish dialects	Subject doubling	Left Periphery
Weiß	Bavarian	Sentential negation	Negation

The study of syntactic microvariation has various goals. The goal of traditional dialectsyntax is to explore the geographic distribution of syntactic variables. The geographically determined syntactic variation thus established can be used for other types of research, such as the investigation of language change and external language history. Recently, the aim of syntactic microvariation research has been extended to studying the universal properties of the human language, since it contributes to our understanding of the patterns, loci and limits of syntactic variation within that system. This goal is shared by both the typological and the generative approach. The main difference between the two approaches lies in the types of explanations provided: functional in the case of the typological approach, and formal in the case of the generative approach (cf. Kortmann, this volume).

The papers in this volume all focus on interdialectal variation and reflect one or more of the above-mentioned goals. Some focus primarily on the description and analysis of the geographic distribution of one or more syntactic patterns, others consider first and foremost the description and analysis of the syntactic properties of one pattern in a restricted number of dialects. The papers show that the study of syntactic microvariation is a valuable contribution to macrovariation research, which is the more common in comparative syntax. Whereas the latter is primarily concerned with standard varieties, microvariation research includes non-standard varieties. This does not only enhance the empirical basis of syntactic theory, but it also reduces the influence of prescriptive rules and makes it possible to test potential correlations between syntactic variables while keeping other, possibly interfering factors constant.

The papers in this volume are all concerned with an idealized language system and not with dialect internal variation. This means that topics such as language contact and change, code switching, bilingualism and multilingualism, speaker's attitudes, language choice, and language accommodation are left aside. Although this is a justifiable abstraction from the complex linguistic reality (cf. Chomsky 1986), we would like to note that various language system external factors may influence the system itself. Every dialect is a heterogeneous system. A dialect does not exist in isolation, it is in a constant interaction with one or more standard languages and with other dialects. Consequently, dialect speakers are usually bilingual or multilingual. It is well-known that social factors such as age, class, education, gender and ethnicity

determine synchronic linguistic variation too (cf. Cornips, this volume). Moreover, dialect systems are not static but in an ongoing process of change as a result of social, political, cultural and economical influences. It is to be expected that future research in syntactic microvariation, even when system and not use oriented, will pay more attention to the influence of these factors on the language systems explored.

2.1 ▪ *Microvariation in the left-periphery*

Three papers in this volume concentrate on the fine structure of the left periphery: De Vogelaer, Neuckermans and Vanden Wyngaerd on complementizer agreement in Flemish and Brabantish dialects, Poletto on V2 and V3 in Rhaetoromance and van Craenenbroeck and van Koppen on pronominal subject doubling in Flemish and Brabantish dialects.

De Vogelaer, Neuckermans and Vanden Wyngaerd

De Vogelaer, Neuckermans and Vanden Wyngaerd test two generalizations concerning complementizer agreement: the Inversion Generalization and the Identity Generalization. According to the Inversion Generalization, agreement morphology on the complementizer is always identical to agreement morphology on the verb in inversion. West and East Flemish dialects turn out to confirm the validity of this generalization. According to the Identity Generalization, complementizer agreement only occurs when the agreement ending of the inverted auxiliary in the present tense is identical with the agreement ending of the inverted auxiliary in the preterite. A comparison between the dialect of the transitional area Waasland and the neighbouring Brabantish dialect provides evidence for the correctness of the Identity Generalization.

Poletto

Poletto's paper investigates V2, V3 and the structure of the left-periphery in the Rhaetoromance dialect of San Leonardo. Elaborating on Rizzi's work, Poletto argues that there is evidence for a split CP in V2 languages that consists of the following positions: [Hanging Topic [Scene setting adverb [Force [Left dislocated element [Left Dislocated element [Focus [WH [FinP]]]]]]]]. Despite the many available positions preceding the finite verb, the San Leonardo dialect is a V2 language. This can be

explained if the first constituent moving across the finite verb blocks fronting of other constituents by relativized minimality. This predicts that V3 orders should be possible if one of the two constituents preceding the verb is base generated in sentence initial position. Poletto shows that this prediction is borne out. Microvariation in the distribution of XPs in the V3 order is argued to follow from the different positions of the finite verb. The verb has to move to a low position of the CP layer in all V2 varieties, but in some varieties it moves up to a higher position Force.

Van Craenenbroeck and van Koppen

Van Craenenbroeck and van Koppen show that pronominal subject doubling in Southern Dutch dialects involves two different phenomena: topic doubling and clitic doubling. Topic doubling is restricted to subject initial main clauses and involves the doubling of weak and strong pronouns, full DPs and proper names (subject to parametrization) by a strong pronoun. Clitic doubling, on the other hand, occurs in subordinate clauses and inverted main clauses, and can only involve the doubling of a clitic by a strong pronoun. On the basis of this distinction van Craenenbroeck and van Koppen argue that a split CP analysis is necessary for these Southern Dutch dialects. In particular, their analysis of clitic doubling requires a left-peripheral functional head attracting object clitics and a higher head attracting subject clitics. In subject initial main clauses, which only allow topic doubling, these CP layers are absent.

2.2 ▪ *Microvariation in negation*

Three papers in this volume deal with microvariation in the syntax of negation, Haegeman on DP internal negative doubling in Flemish dialects, Weiß on sentential negation and negative concord in Bavarian and Barbiers on variation in negation in varieties of Dutch.

Haegeman

Haegeman's paper concentrates on DP-internal negative doubling in French Flemish and West Flemish yielding negative concord. Haegeman argues that the Neg criterion is operative within DP as well. A negative quantifier inside DP is licensed in the Spec of a DP-internal negative head. Microvariation is reduced to parametrization of spell out: in the varieties of Flemish discussed in this paper the preferred option is to spell

out the DP-internal negative head, whereas this head cannot be spelled out in Standard Dutch. Haegeman also provides evidence for a split DP analysis.

Weiß

Weiß's paper provides a detailed description and analysis of sentential negation in Bavarian. Weiß argues that Bavarian, a negative concord language, has three types of sentential negation: ordinary sentential negation, presuppositional negation and expletive negation. The projection of ordinary negation is immediately dominating VP, presuppositional negation is right above IP, while expletive negation is in a particle position within the CP-layers. Weiß also defends the interesting claim that all languages are negative concord languages. Obligatoriness of single negation is mainly found in standard varieties such as Standard English and German. In these languages, it can be regarded as the result of artificial, language-external developments. From a syntactic point of view, these languages can be shown to exhibit hidden negative concord.

Barbiers

Barbiers' paper provides an overview of variation in negation attested in varieties of Dutch. One of the central observations in this paper is that variation in the X-bar status of sentential negation is not only found cross-linguistically but also intralinguistically. In Standard Dutch, sentential negation *nie(t)* sometimes behaves as a head and sometimes as an XP. Barbiers argues that this varying property of sentential negation does not need to be stipulated but follows from the interaction between the lexical specification of sentential negation and general syntactic licensing mechanisms. Another claim is that much of the distribution of negative elements in varieties of Dutch, among which expletive clause final negation in Aarschots and Afrikaans, can be understood as the result of generalized movement of negative constituents to SpecNegP (Haegeman's Neg-criterion) and a parametrized doubly filled NegP filter.

2.3 ▪ *Microvariation in the prepositional domain*

The volume contains two papers on microvariation in the prepositional domain, a paper by Fleischer on preposition stranding and a paper by Seiler on prepositional dative marking.

Fleischer

On the basis of written sources Fleischer describes the geographic distribution of preposition stranding, long and short R-pronoun doubling and orphan prepositions (i.e. prepositions without an overt complement) in the German dialects. The relevance of Fleischer's paper is that the data falsify several claims in the literature about the geographic distribution of these constructions and about the interaction between syntactic constraints and phonological constraints. First, the geographic distribution presents no evidence for the complementary distribution of the stranding construction (prepositions with an initial consonant) and the long doubling construction (prepositions with an initial vowel). Instead, the data points towards an asymmetrical relation. Prepositions with an initial vowel only allow (long) doubling of the R-pronoun, while prepositions with an initial consonant allow both the stranding and the (long) doubling construction. Stranding of the preposition *mit* 'with' is an exception since it is attested all over the German speaking area. Secondly, it is not the case that in the long doubling construction the two R-pronouns have to be 'phonologically identical'. Finally, the claim in the literature that the preposition has to be left adjacent to the lexical non-finite verb in OV languages does not hold for the doubling construction.

Seiler

Seiler describes the distribution and the properties of prepositional dative marking (henceforth: PDM), i.e. a dative NP introduced by a preposition-like morpheme *an* or *in* in Bavarian and Alemannic (Upper German) dialects. The area is not homogeneous; some Bavarian and Alemannic dialects have PDM, others do not. In three respects the marker in the PDM construction behaves like a preposition. It is in complementary distribution with prepositions, given the fact that it cannot occur on an NP embedded in PP. Just like prepositions the marker cannot occur inside a clitic cluster. Just like prepositions, the marker can be fused with a determiner. The dative marker differs

from prepositions in that it cannot be omitted in coordination, it cannot be separated from determiners / quantifiers by particles such as ONLY, it cannot be a host for clitics, and it does not cooccur with R-pronouns. Moreover, personal pronouns do not provide a suitable environment for PDM. It is interesting that Seiler does not find any correlation between the lack of overt dative morphology and the occurrence of PDM in Alemannic and the Bavarian dialects. Hence, where variation between PDM and bare dative exists, this variation is guided to a large extent by discourse-pragmatic and phonological differences that can be traced back to the fact that PDM has an additional syllable.

3 ▪ METHODOLOGY OF SYNTACTIC MICROVARIATION RESEARCH

Dialect syntax projects deal with the geographic distribution of syntactic variables. The geographic aspect makes it crucially different from other types of syntactic research and it has a number of consequences for methodology. First, all other factors potentially determining syntactic variation have to be kept constant. Syntactic variation may be a consequence of having a heterogeneous sample of language users. It is necessary to homogenize the sample with respect to social variables of the speakers such as autochthony, geographic mobility, language background (monolingual or bilingual speaker), socio-economic background, and gender.

Secondly, an atlas project requires oral and / or written *elicitation methods* in order to collect reliable and sufficient data. Elicitation of data, for instance by collecting grammaticality judgements, is necessary in addition to corpora in order to be able (i) to examine sentence types that rarely occur in spontaneous speech or (written and recorded) corpora and (ii) to examine negative data that an observational study cannot provide. Note that dialect monographs usually do not provide information about the syntax.

However, oral and written elicitation fieldwork both have their disadvantages. Every elicitation situation is artificial, because the subject is being asked for a sort of behavior that is entirely different from everyday conversation (cf Schütze 1996: 3). Sociolinguistic research has clearly shown that the response of subjects on direct judgement tasks ('Is this a good sentence in your dialect?') often tends to reflect the form which they believe to have prestige or obeys the learned norm, rather than the

form they actually use (Labov 1972: 213). A reasonable alternative is to use more indirect elicitation tasks (e.g. 'Do you encounter this sentence in your dialect?'). Different levels of speech style (informal and formal) yield another complicating factor for syntactic data elicitation.

Oral elicitation differs from written elicitation in that the former enables the researcher (i) to elicit a more natural reflection of ordinary language use and (ii) to observe and immediately respond to the reactions and answers of the subjects. However, there is a high risk that the subjects will accommodate i.e. adjust from the dialect towards the standard-like varieties or more formal speech styles of the interviewer. A solution to this problem is to summon the assistance of another dialect speaker(s) from the same community with the same social variables, as in the SAND-project (cf. Cornips & Jongenburger 2001).

Written elicitation methods induce numerous well-known task effects such as: (i) repetition effect, i.e. the subjects repeat exactly the sentence offered to them; (ii) sentences are rejected on the basis of lexical items, knowledge of the world and context of the sentence; (iii) subjects give judgements on the basis of interpretability rather than grammaticality; (iv) habituation effect: when a given sentence type is offered repeatedly, acceptability tends to increase; (v) order effect: the relative order in which test sentences are presented to the subject has influence on the judgements; (vi) written forms are unduly influenced by prescriptive educational practices. These task effects have to be taken into account, both in the design of elicitation methods and in the resulting analysis.

There are various elicitation tasks in addition to the ones mentioned above such as: (i) Indirect grammaticality judgement task combined with a scale; e.g., the subjects have to indicate how uncommon (highest value = 1) or how common (highest value = 7) the variant is in their local dialect; heterogeneity is assumed by providing several alternatives for one test sentence; (ii) Discourse driven elicitation task (Bucheli & Glaser, this volume); a little story or a relevant context precedes each sentence to create a discourse situation; (iii) Translation task; (iv) Empty spots task; the subject has to fill in the relevant (function)word(s) from his dialect; (v) Completion task; the subject has to finish the sentence; (vi) Compliance tests (Greenbaum 1973); the task is to transform a stimulus sentence in some way, for example, to convert a statement into a question; (vii) Relative judgements; common practice in generative research of

the late 60s and early 70s. The subject is not asked to give a judgement about one sentence but rather to compare the acceptability of two or more sentences and (viii) Meaning questions; In this task the subject is asked to provide the meaning of a sentence.

Bucheli & Glaser, Cornips and Kortmann pay attention to the methodological challenges facing large-scale projects within the field of dialect syntax.

Bucheli & Glaser

Bucheli and Glaser describe the aims, the methods and the material of the *Syntaktischer Atlas der Deutschen Schweiz* 'Syntactic Atlas of Swiss German' (SADS).
In the first phase of the SADS thirteen different syntactic phenomena are involved. They are basically chosen on (i) the fact that little is known about the areal distribution of these constructions, (ii) the assumption that they will be geographically distributed throughout the Swiss German area. Written elicitation is chosen based on the density of the grid, the large geographical area and the limited resources. The first phase resulted in a total of 2,534 completed written questionnaires from 344 reference points. The different elicitation tasks in the written questionnaire in the SADS are: translation task, sentence completion task and multiple choice task. In particular the latter one yields very good results. Furthermore, each question was preceded by an everyday context, i.e. a little story, in order to create a discourse situation. Finally, with respect to the social variables of the informants, an interesting finding of Bucheli and Glasers' research is that the answers of a proportion of the highly educated people (mostly male), teachers and people interested in dialectology are unreliable in that they show normative judgements, hypercorrection and influences of the standard language.

Cornips

Cornips examines the variation between *om* and *voor* as two variants of the infinitival complementizer in Heerlen Dutch, a regional Dutch variety. Heerlen Dutch may be considered the result of imperfect group learning during the very rapid process of language shift due to an insufficient availability (of speakers) of Standard Dutch in the beginning of the 20th century. Such a shift began with the transfer of contrasts and

patterns from the shifters' local dialect into their version of Standard Dutch: that is, with their failure to learn that these patterns did not exist in the target language. Subsequently, these patterns have spread to the target language as a whole. Cornips tries to detect the sources of syntactic variation in spontaneous speech at the level of the individual and the group of speakers. Although the syntactic variation does not present a clear-cut situation, Cornips demonstrates that the variation can be minimized and understood by taking social and linguistic factors into consideration as well. Furthermore, the distribution of infinitival complementizers in spontaneous speech data differs from that in elicitation data. In particular, speakers with a higher education are able to control variation in elicitation procedures, but not in spontaneous speech.

Kortmann

Kortmann discusses the increase of dialect syntax study for generative theory, optimality theory and language typology. The existing databases of for instance the English dialects are too small and display an insufficient range of syntactic features needed for typological and generative research. Therefore, the Freiburg research group is compiling a very large corpus (FRED; already 1,5 million words) of English dialects. The corpus includes a subcorpus of the Southwestern dialects in England (160,000 words including many unpublished interviews of dialect speakers born around 1900). Kortmann discusses briefly the geographic distribution of several syntactic features. Some exclusively occur in the English dialects of the southwest, such as unstressed auxiliary *do*. Others occur in other English dialect areas too, such as zero-relavitization of the subject. The phenomenon of double negation is not regionally bound but generally occurs in spoken non-standard English.

▪ REFERENCES

Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin and Use*. New York: Praeger.

Cornips, L. & W. Jongenburger (2001). Elicitation techniques in a Dutch syntactic dialect atlas project. In: H. Broekhuis & T. van der Wouden (ed.), *Linguistics in The Netherlands* 2001, 18. John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 57-69.

Greenbaum, Sidney. (1973). 'Informant elicitation of data on syntactic variation'. *Lingua* 31. 201-212.

Labov, William. (1972). *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Schütze, C. T. (1996). *The empirical base of linguistics. Grammaticality judgments and linguistic methodology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.