Seminar in Sociolinguistics: The grammatical locus of linguistic variation  
LING-GA 3510.001 – Spring 2017

1. Course logistics

Time: Tue 9:30–12:15  
Location: 10 Washington Pl. #308 (Socio lab)

Instructor: Dr. Laurel MacKenzie  
Contact: laurel.mackenzie@nyu.edu  
Office: 10 Washington Pl. #305  
Office hour: by appointment

Prerequisite: LING-GA 1510 (Sociolinguistics) or permission of instructor

Auditors are welcome. If you’re planning on auditing, please send a short email to the course instructor (laurel.mackenzie@nyu.edu) with your NYU netID in order to gain access to the course materials.

2. Course description

Our focus in this seminar will be the grammatical locus of sociolinguistic variables, traditionally defined as cases in which speakers have “two or more ways of saying the same thing” (e.g. Weiner and Labov, 1983). We will read, discuss, and synthesize a number of papers which use data from language production to support arguments about the abstract locus of surface variability. Questions to be considered include:

- Are probabilistic alternations part of the grammar, i.e. the same system that instantiates categorical alternations?
- How do we define a linguistic variable? Is this a useful theoretical/methodological construct?
- How are conditions on variable phenomena represented grammatically? Are social and stylistic factors part of grammar? Are all types of variables subject to the same sorts of conditioning, or do we find asymmetries? If so, why should this be?
- How do we locate where in the grammar particular instances of surface variation are situated? We’ll consider case studies in which quantitative data is brought to bear on the locus of particular variables.
- What advantages/disadvantages are offered by different frameworks for representing variable phenomena in grammar? (e.g. variable rules, competing grammars, exemplar-based frameworks) What kind of data were they developed to account for, and how well do they extend to other cases?

In some cases we will consider side-by-side two or more papers that approach similar questions from different angles, and see if we can figure out what, if anything, they have to say to one another. We will make a concerted effort to consider both “p-side” and “s-side” variables, as well as variables whose level of grammar isn’t immediately apparent. We will draw both on classic papers and on recent publications.

3. Requirements

3.1. Presentations

This is a seminar class, in which we will learn from each other through discussion of the papers we read and the issues they raise. Participants (both enrolled students and auditors) will take turns leading class meetings and presenting on the assigned papers. Enrolled students are additionally required to propose a relevant paper to read, which they will present in the last two weeks of class. This should be a paper that connects to the student’s own research interests and/or term paper for this course.
3.2. Participation

All participants are expected to do the assigned reading and to participate in the discussion of the material in class. For each paper, there will be a discussion forum on NYU Classes. Enrolled students are required, and auditors are encouraged, to post one question for each paper by 9pm on Monday. (If you’re presenting a paper the next day, you don’t also have to post a question on it.)

3.3. Term paper

Enrolled students will write a short paper on a topic of their choice, and present on this work in the last class meeting. A 1–2 page abstract and bibliography should be circulated to the class on Monday, 3/20. Papers will be due Tuesday, 5/9.

4. Schedule

4.1. Is variation part of grammar?

1. 1/24: Yes

2. 1/31: Maybe not always (1)

3. 2/7: Maybe not always (2)

4.2. What does variation look like under the surface?

4. 2/14: The linguistic variable

5. 2/21: Locating variable TD-deletion

6. 2/28: Locating copula/auxiliary variation

7. 3/7: The variant as the bearer of social meaning and/or locus of change

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Spring Break – no class

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3/20: Circulate term paper abstract & bibliography

4.3. Representing the variable: variation as competition

8. 3/21: Competition & change

9. 3/28: Competition & stability
4.4. Representing the variable: other approaches

10. 4/4: Representing the variable: Optimality Theoretic approaches
    Auger (2001) | Bresnan et al. (2007)

11. 4/11: Representing the variable: exemplar-based approaches

4.5. Presentations

XX. 4/18: No class – Laurel in Edinburgh for Workshop on Sound Change – we’ll find a time to make this session up

12. Makeup session TBA: Your chosen papers

13. 4/25: Your chosen papers

14. 5/2: Term paper presentations

5/9: Term paper due

References


Bresnan, Joan, Ashwini Deo, and Devyani Sharma. 2007. Typology in variation: A probabilistic approach to *be* and *n’t* in the *Survey of English Dialects*. *English Language and Linguistics* 11:301–346.


