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Quantitative perspectives on syntactic variation: Investigating verbal complementation in a corpus of Mennonite *Plautdietsch*

Abstract

A common problem in linguistic description lies in analyzing grammatical variation – in seeking to derive perspicuous and yet empirically adequate accounts of variable phenomena in a given language. While the threads of variation might be perceived to run throughout the fabric of grammar, the theoretical and practical issues such variability poses are felt with perhaps particular acuteness in contemporary syntactic research, where analyses commonly adopt introspection and categorical judgements as their primary bases of argumentation. As Bresnan et al. (2007) contend, however, introspective methods applied without systematic consideration of empirically-attested variation in attestation and judgement may risk unintentionally underestimating the range and complexity of licit variation, and thus ultimately provide only partial accounts of the phenomena of interest. On this view, an active, analytical engagement with empirically-attested variation is essential to empirically-adequate grammatical description.

Corpora may play a natural role in this analytical process, inasmuch as they provide contextualized examples of grammatical variation which corpus-based techniques might then assist in understanding. The present poster pursues one such quantitative, corpus-based account of grammatical variation, concentrating upon verb placement alternations in a corpus of Mennonite *Plautdietsch*. Using generalized linear mixed-effects modelling (Baayen 2008) to study finite verb placement in subordinate clauses, this study is able to compare the simultaneous contributions of several hypothesized predictors of this variation, both in isolation and in interaction with one another. Given the pervasiveness of this syntactic variation, quantitative methods are particularly attractive in permitting more attested instances of variation (and potential predictors thereof) to be considered concurrently than might feasibly be accomplished with hands and eyes alone. Quantitative, corpus-based techniques, this poster concludes, may offer valuable insight into the structure of grammatical variation, and thus might inform and be informed by other, currently more prevalent methods of grammatical analysis.

References

- Baayen, R. Harald (2008). *Analyzing linguistic data: A practical introduction using R*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bresnan, Joan, Anna Cueni, Tatiana Nikitina, R. Harald Baayen (2007). "Predicting the Dative Alternation." In: *Cognitive Foundations of Interpretation*, ed. by G. Boume, I. Kraemer, J. Zwarts. Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Science, 69-94.