SYNTACTIC VARIATION AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE: THE CASE OF AAVE COPULA ABSENCE

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Emily M. Bender
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I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Thomas Wasow
(Principal Co-Advisor)

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Penelope Eckert
(Principal Co-Advisor)

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

John Rickford

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Ivan A. Sag

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Arnold Zwicky

Approved for the University Committee on Graduate Studies:

Abstract

This thesis explores the implications for competence theories of syntax of the data on variation found by sociolinguists working in the Labovian tradition, through a case study of variable copula absence in African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

A distributional analysis of the categorical constraints on AAVE copula absence shows that it is indeed a syntactic, rather than phonological variable, contra Labov (1969, 1995). Further, its analysis requires a phonologically empty element, even the surface-oriented framework of Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) (Pollard and Sag 1994).

AAVE copula absence is also subject to well-studied and robust non-categorical grammatical constraints. Previous formal approaches to such non-categorical constraints on variation treat non-categorical grammatical constraints as separate from whatever social constraints might also apply. Building on the idea that variation is socially meaningful (Labov 1963, Eckert 2000), I propose that, on the contrary, social and grammatical constraints interact: social constraints are conceptualized as the social meaning of a variable, and grammatical constraints as the intensifying or attenuating effect of the grammatical environment on the social meaning or social value of the variable. This hypothesis is tested and substantiated by a matched-guise experiment, focusing on the effect of the following grammatical environment.

Three types of linguistic knowledge seem to be involved in the judgments the participants gave in the experimental task: knowledge of social meaning attached to linguistic forms, direct knowledge of a grammatical structure that is computable from more basic signs already in the grammar, and knowledge of the frequentistic,

non-categorical grammatical constraints on variation. Traditional conceptions of linguistic competence place all three of these types of knowledge outside the grammar proper. However, I argue that that distinction is not based on empirical evidence and should be subject to reevaluation. Further, I suggest that sign-based grammars are uniquely suited as models for exploring possible extensions of linguistic competence and that sociolinguistic variation, the social value of variables and the non-categorical grammatical constraints that apply to them provide an interesting locus for the study of the boundaries of linguistic competence.

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Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures