

Variation and grammar: natural enemies? Lessons from Croker Island

Rob Mailhammer (Western Sydney University)

A constant tug of war in linguistics is the fact that grammars are systems of conventions that are constantly undermined by what speakers actually do (Honeybone 2011). Thus, grammars seem inherently malleable, as variation and even contradiction of the conventions they codify are commonplace (Áfarli and Mæhlum 2014). Nonetheless, linguistics has progressed significantly through attempting to describe these abstract conventions as rules and categories. On the other hand, variation in language has been investigated in more and more detail (see e.g. Tagliamonte 2012). The tacit consensus appears to be that there is a space of limited variation within the conventions that make up the construct of a given grammatical system. There have been attempts to integrate variation into theories of language, but a basic tension remains (Schmid 2020; Höder 2018).

English on Croker Island is an interesting case, because there the abstraction of a grammatical system is severely challenged by the amount of variation, both within and between speakers to the point where it is impossible to assume that there is one coherent system (Mailhammer 2021). However, there is for the most part no doubt that speakers successfully communicate with each other using their idiolectal repertoires. In this talk I argue that this situation calls for a different perspective on the relationship between variation and convention. This perspective sees conventionalisation above the observable structure as a phenomenon of the discourse. In this model, speakers represent linguistic systems that interact with each other through a contextually facilitated translation and pragmatic association through abstract categories. This model thus permits an understanding of how communication works across what could be called a bundle of varieties. Grammar or a language's system achieves coherence on the level of the data interpretation. It is therefore not about a set of common features but about the way they interact in particular situations, having been deployed by the speakers. More variability means that there is less conventionalisation and more admissible variation as opposed to less variability. A high degree of variability often requires constant or frequent renegotiation of understanding, but because speakers relate linguistic systems via abstract categories.

References

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Bio

Rob Mailhammer works as Professor of Linguistics at Western Sydney University. His research interests are broad but focus on Australian languages, language processing, variation and change as well as on, morphology, phonetics and phonology. Rob is (co-)author of 70 peer reviewed publications in these and other areas. He has also collected a large amount of field data in Iwaidja, Amurdak, Kunwinjku, Mawng and Aboriginal English from Northwestern Arnhem land. Rob's work has been supported by the Australian Research Council and other national and international funding organisations. It has also been reported on in national and international media.