

Is indigenization in probabilistic constraints a sign of different grammars?

Insights from syntactic variation in New Englishes

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This study explores the effects of indigenization in the probabilistic constraints that fuel syntactic variation in New Englishes. For this purpose, I investigate patterns of variation in the well-known dative alternation (*I give Mary a book* vs. *I give a book to Mary*) across nine international varieties of English. My primary interest lies in the extent to which speakers of different varieties of the same language rely on the same cues when choosing between dative variants, and whether differences in those cues give rise to different grammars.

Recent research has shown that indigenization — that is, “the emergence of locally characteristic linguistic patterns” (Schneider 2007: 6) — takes place not only at the lexis-grammar interface but also as a gradient localized acculturation of constraints on syntactic variation in the grammar of speakers from different communities (e.g. Bresnan and Hay 2008). However, the extent of these constraints’ potential cross-lectal variability is still not fully understood.

The present study builds upon previous work in two ways. First, while earlier studies have focused on the prototypical verb *give* (e.g. Bresnan and Hay 2008), I analyze 83 alternating dative verbs. Second, I include data from geographically more diverse English varieties than previous comparative studies (e.g. Bresnan and Hay 2008; Tagliamonte 2014), including both native (British, Canadian, New Zealand, and Irish English), and non-native varieties of English (Jamaican, Hong Kong, Philippine, Singapore, and Indian English). For this study, $N=8,549$ dative variants were drawn from the International Corpus of English, sampling speech and writing across all nine varieties. Following standard practice (see Tagliamonte 2012), I restrict attention to contexts where either variant is available within the envelope of variation, weeding out observations involving e.g. beneficiary constructions (see e.g. Bresnan et al. 2007). In case of uncertain interchangeability, I searched for uses of the alternate variant in either Google (restricted by country domain) or the Corpus of Global web-based English (Davies 2013). Next, I annotated for numerous factors given the literature (e.g. Wolk et al. 2013): the length (in characters), animacy, definiteness, givenness, syntactic complexity, and pronominality of each constituent, recipient person, theme concreteness, and semantics of the verb.

Analysis of the data using generalized linear mixed-effects models (Pinheiro and Bates 2000) and conditional random forests (Tagliamonte and Baayen 2012) reveals that the effect direction of the constraints is consistent across all varieties, that is, the choice of dative variant does not differ under the joined influence of the annotated factors. However, in Jamaican, Canadian, and Indian English, the factors ‘length’, ‘recipient pronominality’ and ‘theme concreteness’ show significant deviations in effect strength from the overall average. Results thus highlight that syntactic variation in postcolonial Englishes is characterized both by qualitative

stability regarding the choice of dative variant and localized indigenization in the quantitative strength of individual constraints. These findings support a model of grammar in which diverging grammars of individual communities emerge out of the variation in the probabilistic constraints that govern syntactic variables.

References

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