

Grammatical theory and variation in an exemplar-driven categorial grammar

This talk addresses the relation between grammatical theory and the probabilistic phenomena observed in sociolinguistic variation and in morphological productivity. Two obstacles have prevented a conciliation of these fields: the lack of a theory of the interaction between grammar and social meaning, and the lack of a plausible account of how probabilistic behavior can be generated without the encoding of probabilities in the grammar.

I offer new arguments against proposals that directly encode social meaning into lexical entries, like Bender (2007)'s. Still, I take it as a central task of the theory to provide an account of how morphosyntactic choices become indices of social categories. I show how this can be done in an associative model of lexical storage and access in the tradition of exemplar theory, coupled with a lexicalist theory of morphosyntax. The probabilistic behavior observed in variation and in morphological productivity can be derived in this model without assuming that language users encode probabilities directly nor compute them via Bayesian reasoning. While several grammatical theories are compatible with the proposal, I argue that a version of Combinatory Categorial Grammar (Steedman and Baldrige 2011) may be best suited to the task.

I present the details of the model through analyses of the competition between nominalizers in Portuguese, and of the *was/were* variation in Buckie English (Smith 2000), showing how the model can derive the categorical/variable splits observed by Adger (2006) and the sorts of structural dependencies that usage-based models based on shallow constructions have trouble with.

References

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