

# **Integrating sociolinguistics and typological perspectives on language variation: methods and concepts**

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## **Description and aims:**

Linguistic variation, loosely defined here as the wholesale processes whereby patterns of language structures exhibit divergent distributions within and across languages, has traditionally been the object of research of at least two branches of linguistics: variationist sociolinguistics and linguistic typology. In spite of their similar research agendas, the two approaches have only rarely converged in the description and interpretation of variation (see Trudgill 2011). While a number of studies attempting to address at least aspects of this relationship have appeared in recent years, a principled discussion on how the two disciplines may interact has not yet been carried out in a programmatic way. The present workshop aims to fill this gap and to provide a venue for discussions on the bridging between sociolinguistic and typological research, with the ultimate goal of laying out the methodological and conceptual foundations of an integrated research agenda for the study of linguistic variation.

We identify two broad promising domains of interaction between sociolinguistic and typological approaches to the study of variation:

### *(1) Understanding and explaining non-linguistic correlates of linguistic diversity*

Over the past decades, researchers have argued that various factors pertaining to population structure and the broader ecology of speech communities contribute to shape the worldwide distribution of language structures. Examples of suggested factors are the difference between open and close-knit communities (Wray & Grace 2007; Trudgill 2011), geographic spread, population size, and number of linguistic neighbors (Lupyan & Dale 2010), proportion of L2 speakers in a community (Bentz & Winter 2013). These factors represent some of the building blocks of the *Linguistic Niche Hypothesis* (LNH, Lupyan & Dale 2010): language structures that represent a burden to adult learners (e.g., degree of inflectional synthesis) tend to be disfavored in language ecologies characterized by large numbers of speakers and loose network structures, and to be favored in language ecologies characterized by smaller population sizes and denser network structures.

Even though useful to test general hypotheses about linguistic adaptation, the sociohistorical variables that have so far been put to the test in the spirit of LNH remain somewhat *distal* to the fundamental mechanisms that underpin language variation and change. For instance, stating that there

is a relationship between population size and phoneme inventory size (Hay & Bauer 2007; Wichmann et al. 2011; cf. also Moran et al. 2012) does not in itself fully explain the linguistic and socio-cognitive mechanisms that give rise to cross-linguistic differences in phoneme inventories.

Understanding the link between sociohistorical and typological variation ultimately requires a twofold effort: on the one hand, conducting in-depth studies of language evolution and change, and the role of contact and language ecology in the dynamics of language; on the other hand, using evidence from these studies to develop new methods and variables for large-scale comparisons of language structures, social structures and interactions thereof.

## (2) *Understanding and explaining language-internal and cross-linguistic variation*

Structural variation is the main object of interest of typology and sociolinguistics: a closer interaction of the two disciplines may benefit both on a methodological and conceptual level.

On a methodological level, what typologists may learn from sociolinguistics is the opportunity to take into account (also) non-standard varieties, often neglected in the practice of building typological samples. The comparison between non-standard varieties may reveal the existence of common features even across typologically distant languages (cf. e.g. Auer 1990 and Auer & Maschler 2013 on Modern Hebrew and German) and could show patterns of variation that cannot be observed taking into consideration standard varieties only (Bossong 1991 and more recently Kortmann 2004, Chambers 2004, 2009, Filppula, Klemola & Paulasto 2009, Kortmann & Lunkenheimer 2013).

On a more conceptual level, linguistic variation is traditionally explained differently in typology and sociolinguistics. Patterns of cross-linguistic distributions are usually explained in terms of functional properties (economy, iconicity, processing, etc.) associated with individual constructions (Haspelmath 2019). Conversely, language internal variation is often explained by variationist sociolinguistics by also appealing to extra-linguistic socio-demographic factors (speakers' age and education, register, etc.). Likewise, in a historical perspective, typology has been concerned with the general mechanisms of language change that bring about specific cross-linguistic patterns of distribution (Cristofaro 2019), while sociolinguistics has put emphasis on the extra-linguistic factors behind the progressive diffusion of linguistic innovations within communities (Labov 2001). However, typological and sociolinguistic explanations of variation are in principle not mutually exclusive, and should be integrated into a general explanatory framework of linguistic variation.

The proposed workshop will bring together these two streams of research in the attempt of unifying *macro-* and *micro-*perspectives on language variation, thus creating opportunities for dialogue and exchange between scholars from each of these fields, their methods and proposed explanatory models.

We welcome contributions on any of the following topics (the list is not exhaustive):

- Theories:
  - conceptual tools for an integrated approach to the study of linguistic variation
- Methods:
  - sampling techniques and variable design (both sociolinguistic and typological) for studying adaptive responses of language structures to social structures.
  - corpus-based methodologies for crosslinguistic variationist studies.

- typologically informed description of intra-linguistic variation.
- Contributions from the ground: large-scale typological investigations, speech-community-based studies, and/or experimental studies focusing on (the list is not exhaustive):
  - the relationship between language structures and the non-linguistic environment
  - language-internal vs. external explanations for language variation and change
  - models of change and diffusion at the community level and at the level of language structures.

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