Variationist sociolinguistics meets morphological typology: grammatical analyticity vs. syntheticity in varieties of English

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Drawing on terminology, concepts, and ideas developed in quantitative morphological typology, the study seeks to sketch new ways of analyzing language-internal variability. It thus offers a sweeping overview of typological variability in terms of grammatical ANALYTICITY (the text frequency of free grammatical markers) and grammatical SYNTHETICITY (the text frequency of bound grammatical markers) in a wide array of varieties of English. The variational dimensions investigated include geography, text type, and real time. Empirically, the study taps into a number of publicly accessible text corpora, and calculates Greenberg-inspired indices (cf. Greenberg, 1960) to characterize the varieties studied.

The cumulative weight of evidence presented in the study suggests that English is anything but a monolithically analytic, or monolithically non-synthetic, language. Instead, there is, first, a good deal of geographic variation where socio-history and variety type seem to impact variability, much along the lines of Trudgill, 2009). Second, we see significant short-term diachronic variation, where real-time variability is induced by changing discourse norms (cf., for instance, Mair, 2006). Third, the data also attest to pervasive text type variation where, among other things, the orality-literacy divide (in the spirit of, e.g., Biber 1988) takes center stage. In short, we are dealing with variability galore, which is demonstrably sensitive to language-external factors.

On the interpretational plane, the study offers that grammatical syntheticity and analyticity each afford certain payoffs, such as increased explicitness in the case of analyticity and better output economy in the case of syntheticity. Against this backdrop, variability is interpreted in terms of how speakers and writers seek to achieve communicative goals while minimizing certain types of complexity (e.g. hearer-reader comprehension difficulty) and/or cost (such as the monetary cost associated with being exceedingly explicit in advertisements).

References