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# Categories of grammar and categories of speech

## When the quest for symmetry meets inherent variability

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This chapter tracks the response to morphosyntactic variability in a massive corpus of prescriptive grammars of French dating from the 16th century through the present, and relates it to current mainstream approaches. Analysis shows that although variant *forms* have been recognized since the earliest times, only rarely have they been acknowledged as variant expressions of the same meaning or *function*. Instead three major strategies are marshaled to factor variability out. Their aim is not to prescribe or even describe, but simply to associate each form with a dedicated context of occurrence, in keeping with the dictates of the traditional grammatical categories from which they derive. This state of affairs is encapsulated in the *Doctrine of Form-Function Symmetry*. Although it fails to account for the data of spontaneous speech (which reveals asymmetry in the form of robust variability subject to regular conditioning instead), it continues to mold both prescriptive and formal linguistic treatments of variability, contributing to the growing gulf between prescription, description, and actual usage.

**Keywords:** prescription, praxis, variability, form-function symmetry, French, grammatical tradition, variationist sociolinguistics, Columbia School, linguistic variable, usage data

### 1. Introduction

The genesis of the long-term project described in this chapter owes much to what I learned from Ricardo many years ago about the Columbia School perspective on language and linguistic analysis. So, I am delighted at the opportunity to include this report in a Festschrift in his honor. I was particularly struck by his perspicacious observation that in many current treatments of linguistic phenomena, traditional grammatical categories were “promoted to the status of explanatory constructs”

(Otheguy, 2002: p. 374). He lamented the trend whereby claims about the way language is used somehow morph into the *data* of language use, regardless of their fit with actual linguistic observations of that data, while the many cases where claims and usage fail to coincide are handled as exceptions. The treatment of the dative in one grammar (Smyth, 1920), as elucidated by Huffman (2001), exemplifies:

(...) along with the statement of the dative as case of the indirect object, we find a list of no fewer than ninety-nine uses of the dative which are *not* the indirect object. This includes an entire page of instances of the dative as *direct object* (§§ 1460–1466), the well-known phenomenon of “case government.” The list is heterogeneous, open-ended, and includes many verbs that take either the accusative or the dative, seemingly indiscriminately. Other “uses,” such as “dative of military accompaniment,” “dative of the possessor,” and “dative of price,” obviously reflect contextual elements other than the dative itself. (Huffman, 2001: p. 39)

Too often this results in the “construction of elaborate intellectual edifices upon invalid initial assumptions” (Huffman, 2001: p. 45).

My first serious personal encounter with these issues originated in early attempts to describe the use of the French subjunctive (Poplack, 1990, 1992). Years of high school and college French, coupled with a lengthy sojourn in Paris including a stint at the Sorbonne, suggested that with a modicum of effort, it should be possible to figure out what was going on. But when I began extracting tokens from a large corpus of spontaneous French speech, I found that some subjunctives were missing in contexts prescribed to take them, as in the example reproduced in (1), while others turned up in contexts where they appeared unwarranted (2). And when I asked the speakers for clarification, most responded that they couldn’t provide any because they themselves didn’t use the subjunctive. (They turned out to be wrong about not using it, but right about not knowing under what conditions. But I didn’t know that then.) So, I decided to consult a grammar. I learned that the subjunctive was only licensed under certain governors, but some of those that were attested in my corpus, like *c’est cool que* in (3), did not figure among them.

- (1) Fallait tu *mets*<sub>[IND]</sub> un chapeau pour aller à l’église. (20C.064.2119)<sup>1</sup>  
 ‘You had to put on a hat to go to church.’

1. Codes in parentheses refer to corpus (20C = *Corpus du français parlé à Ottawa-Hull* [Poplack, 1989], 21C = *Français en contexte, milieux scolaire et social* [Poplack & Bourdages, 2005; Poplack, 2015]), speaker, and line number. Where data from more than one individual appear in an example, each is identified by a speaker number in brackets. The text of this and ensuing spoken-language examples reproduces verbatim the audio recordings constituting the corpus in question (as detailed in Poplack [1989]). The data displayed in Table 3 and Figures 5, 7, 10, and 15 derive from these corpora and a third corpus of 19th century speech (19C = *Récits du français québécois d’autrefois* [Poplack & St-Amand, 2007]).

- (2) Tu vas devenir gros après que tu *aies*<sub>[SUBJ]</sub> pris ça. (21C.168.959)  
 ‘You’re going to get fat after you’ve taken that.’
- (3) D’une façon c’est cool qu’on *soit*<sub>[SUBJ]</sub> seize. (21C.109.356)  
 ‘In a way, it’s cool that there are sixteen of us.’

I also learned that the subjunctive was endowed with a very complex semantics, although its precise nature remained somewhat murky. What did emerge clearly was that absent the subjunctive *form*, the utterance would convey a different meaning. But it was difficult to reconcile this notion with the many utterances in the corpus where speakers alternated among various tenses in the *same* context, as illustrated in (4), and as far as I could tell, these appeared to be saying the same thing rather than making distinct semantic contributions.

- (4) a. J’aimerais ça qu’ils la *fassent*<sub>[SUBJ]</sub> petite comme ça. (20C.019.959)  
 ‘I’d like them to make it small like that.’
- b. J’aimerais ça qu’ils *savent*<sub>[IND]</sub>, toutes les jeunes. (20C.041.2316)  
 ‘I’d like them to know, all the kids.’
- c. J’aimerais que ça *serait*<sub>[COND]</sub> cinq cennes. (20C.041.785)  
 ‘I’d like it to be five cents.’

This state of affairs is of course reminiscent of the classic cases of inherent variability that are the bread and butter of variationist sociolinguists. Here different variant forms may alternate in a specific context (in variationist terms, the *variable context*) with no change in referential meaning. Does such an account fit with the usage facts of the French subjunctive? Or, as per standard assumptions, are speakers rather alternating among different forms with the goal of conveying different meanings? In the latter case, the alternating forms could not be construed as variants of a linguistic variable, for which semantic or functional equivalence is a *sine qua non*. The answer to this question rests on the feasibility of discerning what (if anything) the subjunctive “means,” ascertaining whether that meaning was in fact conveyed in any particular instantiation, and delimiting the contexts in which subjunctive is available to express it (in variationist terms, *circumscribing* the variable context). Since speakers themselves proved unable to furnish this information, I consulted another grammar, which, unexpectedly, prescribed something different from the first. And further consultation, rather than resolving the matter, only compounded the confusion. This state of affairs was the catalyst for the comparative study of the origins and treatment of morphosyntactic variability in the prescriptive and descriptive linguistic traditions described in ensuing sections. The results provide clear empirical confirmation of the Columbia School credo that traditional grammatical categories cannot simply be equated with the data of language use; indeed, just as its disciples cautioned, unreflecting appeal to them often obscures the way

language is actually used. I argue that they also yield important insights into the way variability is handled in the contemporary canon, by both mainstream linguists and sociolinguists.

## 2. The *Recueil historique de grammaires du français* (RHGF)

At the core of this project is the *Recueil historique de grammaires du français* (RHGF) (Poplack, Jarmasz, Dion, & Rosen, 2015), a corpus of prescriptive grammars of French published between 1530 and 1998. Its aim is to furnish a diachronic window on the evolution of ratified usage, i.e., “standard” language, or the “norm.” The grammars are distributed across five periods we identified as pertinent for linguistic analysis (Table 1). Here we will be particularly concerned with Period V (1950–1999), an era that we may associate with the flowering of modern linguistics. As we will see, it represents an important bellwether of the treatment of linguistic variability.

Table 1. Distribution of grammars constituting the RHGF

Period		% corpus	N grammars
I	1500–1699	17	10
II	1700–1799	23	14
III	1800–1899	45	28
IV	1900–1949	18	11
V	1950–1999	60	37
Total		100	163

To be sure, the goal of the normative enterprise is to “fix” the language; in other words, to render it *invariant*, and variationists like myself focus on variability. Fortuitously, however, the areas most frequently targeted by grammarians are precisely those where speakers have a *choice* between different ways of expressing the same thing, i.e., those hosting what variationists recognize as inherent variability. A key discovery of the work reported here is that although grammarians rarely if ever explicitly acknowledged such variability, they have worked long and hard to eradicate it. While their efforts have not had a discernible effect on the evolution of vernacular speech, I submit that they have shaped the mainstream linguistic response to variation, and specifically to the variationist paradigm more generally, to this day.

## 2.1 The diachronic underpinnings of synchronic variability

What kind of evidence would be relevant to such a claim? Starting from a massive corpus of contemporary everyday speech (the *Ottawa-Hull French Corpus* [Poplack, 1989]), our team identified several cases of morphosyntactic variability, often salient and stigmatized in the community, and systematically mined the RHGF grammars for any mentions that could shed light on how they evolved to ascertain their current status. The type of mentions we targeted *attest* to the variability, as in Bouhours' (1675) observation that people have a lot of trouble deciding whether to use auxiliary *avoir* or *être* in compound tenses (5). They also allow us to approximately *date* it: the citation in (5) reveals that auxiliary alternation existed prior to 1675, when the grammar was published. Other mentions help us to infer any *social meaning* that might have been ascribed to the variants, as in Brunot's (1965) qualification of the conditional in *si*-clauses as "common" (6). Most revealing are those that allow us to deduce *linguistic conditioning* of the variability, whether *contextual*, as in (7), where the futurate present variant is admitted only in temporally disambiguated contexts, or *semantic* (8), as when doubt and desire are invoked as meanings of the subjunctive.

- (5) *Il a passé, il est passé. J' Ay veü des gens bien en peine de sçavoir lequel il faut dire.* (Bouhours, 1675: p. 384)<sup>2</sup>  
 'He passed [conjugated with both auxiliaries *avoir* and *être*]. I have seen people having a lot of trouble deciding which one to say.'
- (6) Le conditionnel [après *si*] ne se rencontre qu'en langue populaire.  
 (Brunot, 1965: p. 890)  
 'The conditional [after *si*] is only found in common speech.'
- (7) Le présent (...) se met au lieu du futur de l'indicatif; mais alors il est toujours accompagné de quelque nom ou adverbe de temps qui marque le futur.  
 (Vallart, 1744: p. 237)  
 'The present (...) is used instead of the indicative future, but then it is always accompanied by some noun or temporal adverb marking the future.'
- (8) On met le verbe au subjonctif, quand par ce verbe on veut marquer une chose qui tient du doute ou du souhait, sans affirmer absolument qu'elle est, étoit, a été, sera, seroit, ou auroit été.  
 (Wailly, 1768: p. 277)  
 'We put the verb in the subjunctive when by that verb we want to mark a thing that is in doubt or wished for, without absolutely asserting that it is, was, has been, will be, would be or would have been.'

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2. Examples reproduced from the RHGF are faithful to the original orthography. Typographical conventions follow those of the publisher.

These are the data from which we assess quantitatively four key characteristics of a (candidate) variable: its overall *salience* to grammarians, as expressed by the proportion of grammars mentioning it, the *type of treatment* accorded its variant expressions, the (cross-temporal and cross-grammar) *consistency* of that treatment, and its *persistence* over time. In keeping with the *Principle of Accountability* (Labov, 1972), we consider not only mentions of each of the competing variants constituting the variable, but also the grammars that fail to acknowledge them. In this way, we can detect trends, as opposed to isolated examples, which in turn enable us to trace the trajectory by which synchronic developments in the grammatical sector in question came about. Another major goal of the project is to compare this normative activity with *praxis* – actual speaker behavior (e.g., Elsig & Poplack, 2006, 2009; Poplack & Dion, 2009; Poplack, Lealess, & Dion, 2013; Poplack et al., 2015; Willis, 2000).

### 3. Findings

Such is the generalized faith in the infallibility of grammars that when usage does not conform to what (we think) they prescribe, the discrepancy tends to be attributed to linguistic change. In this connection, a first surprising finding to emerge from our meta-analysis of the RHGF is that virtually all of the variation examined, far from constituting recent alterations, had been attested since the earliest times. Another is that grammarians have always been aware of it. This could be inferred from three lines of evidence.

The first comes from a measure of the *persistence* of prescriptive dictates. Grammars display great volatility in this regard. A prime example comes from the treatment of elements prescribed to govern a subjunctive in an embedded clause: no fewer than 785 have been cited over the duration! Moreover, when broken down by period (Figure 1), it is plain that the number of governors prescribed per grammar has risen steadily over the five centuries examined, reaching a (bewildering) zenith of 131 in the Modern Linguistics Period (V).

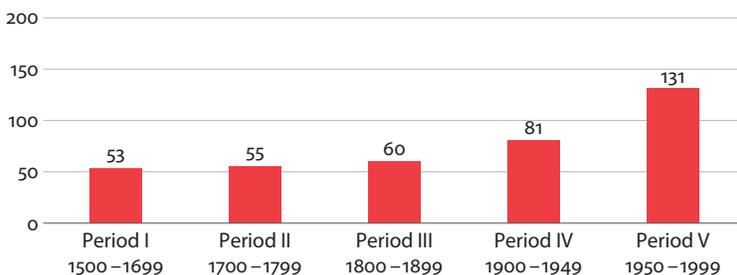


Figure 1. Maximum number of subjunctive governors prescribed per period

Remarkably few of these prescriptions have persisted over time, however (Figure 2). Instead, regardless of whether they involved verbal governors, non-verbal governors, or semantic classes of governors, well over half (56%–62%) of all such injunctions were prescribed in one period only, never to recur.

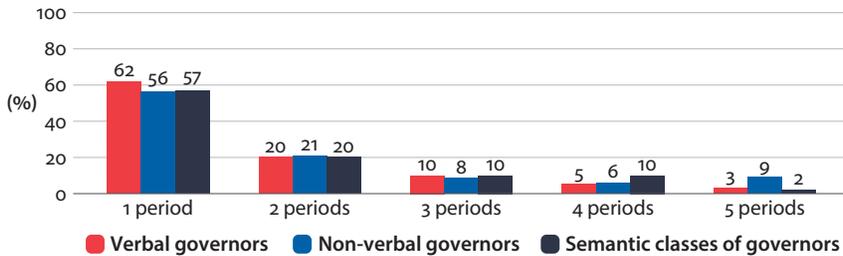


Figure 2. Persistence of prescriptions involving subjunctive governors

This leads to the next line of evidence: the pervasive lack of consistency over which meaning, function, or context of use should be associated with which variant, both across and within grammars. Readings and contexts of use tend to be presented contrastively, implying that they are isomorphic with forms; however, systematic comparison reveals that the same ones are often assigned to different forms while a single form may be assigned contradictory functions (Poplack & Dion, 2009). This is nicely illustrated by the treatment of the variable expression of proximate future temporal reference, via synthetic (SF; (9a)), periphrastic (PF; (9b)), and futurate present (P; (9c)) variants.

- (9) a. Mais le français c'est sûr ça *arrivera*<sub>[SF]</sub> pas demain là. (21C.306.405)  
 'But French, it *won't* happen tomorrow for sure.'
- b. Là il y en a une des blessées qui *va revenir*<sub>[PF]</sub> là comme demain. (21C.109.295)  
 'One of the wounded is *going to return* like tomorrow.'
- c. Fait que là je *commence*<sub>[P]</sub> demain. (21C.150.16)  
 'So I *start* tomorrow.'

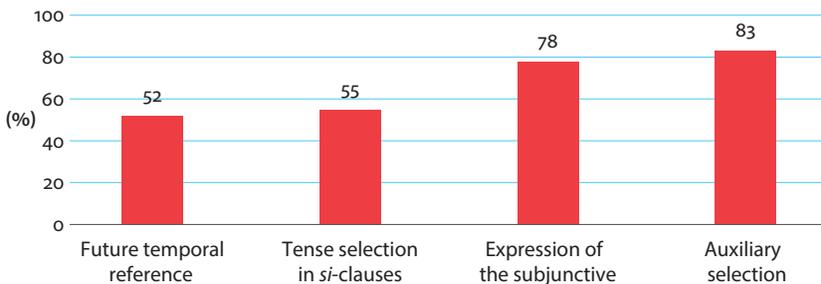
Table 2 depicts some of these discrepancies. To name but a few, the synthetic variant is said by grammarians to denote certainty, but also doubt; definiteness and indefiniteness; fear, but also hope. And each of the three future variants has been variously prescribed to express proximate as well as remote futures.

Finally, which variables are *salient* to grammarians and when they become so also appears completely arbitrary. Some garner much attention, others less, with no detectible motivation, and this also varies with time. Figure 3 shows that the two apparently least conspicuous variables in the aggregate, the expression of the

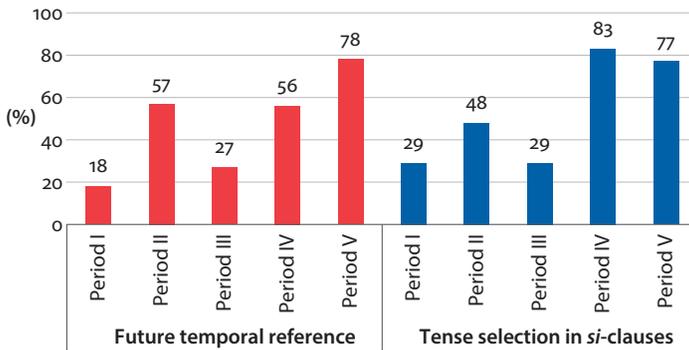
**Table 2.** Readings and contexts of use ascribed to each variant by RHGF grammarians (adapted from Table 6 of Poplack & Dion, 2009)

Synthetic future	Periphrastic future	Futurate present
Proximate/immediate	Proximate/immediate	Proximate/immediate
Distal	Distal	Distal
Certain/probable	Certain/probable	Certain/probable
Intended/resolved/guaranteed	Intended/resolved/guaranteed	Intended/resolved/guaranteed
Progressive	Progressive	
Definite	Definite	
Incipient	Incipient	
Neutral	Imminent	Imminent
Non-progressive	Linked to present	Linked to present
Doubtful/uncertain	Inevitable	Inevitable
Distinct from present	Assured	Assured
Indefinite	In speech	In speech
Not conditional	Informal style	Informal style
Obligation		
Unfinished action	Reinforced future	Impatience
Feared	True	With temporal modification
Desired	In writing	Vivid style
Hope/possibility/hypothesis	With certain verbs	Consequence of preceding discourse
With negation	In subordinate clauses	
With adverbial modification	Without temporal modification	

future and tense selection in protases of hypothetical *si*-complexes, illustrated in (10), become increasingly salient in the 20th century (Periods IV and V). This is illustrated in Figure 4.



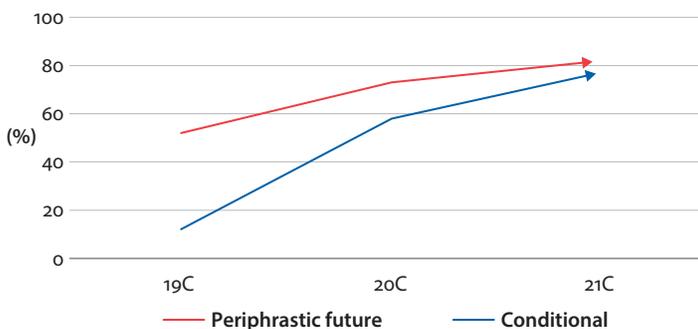
**Figure 3.** Salience (as measured by pertinent mentions) to RHGF grammarians of four morphosyntactic variables



**Figure 4.** Salience to RHGF grammarians of future temporal reference and tense selection in protases of hypothetical *si*-complexes over time

- (10) a. Peut-être que si je les *relirais*<sub>[COND]</sub> là, ça serait mieux. (21C.051.86)  
 ‘Maybe if I *would reread* them, it would be better.’
- b. Si on *voulait*<sub>[IMP]</sub> s’envoyer une avion de papier à l’autre classe on pourrait. (21C.051.118)  
 ‘If we *wanted* to send a paper airplane to the other class, we could.’

Analysis of the spontaneous speech of this period shows that these two variables happen to be the sites of vigorous change in progress (Figure 5), with the colloquial periphrastic and the stigmatized conditional variants making huge gains at the expense of their ratified counterparts.



**Figure 5.** Trajectory of variants of salient variables in *usage* over time

It is, of course, incumbent upon grammarians to notice ongoing changes. Nonetheless, they barely register the alternation between 3rd p. sg. indefinite pronoun *on* and 1st p. pl. *nous* (11) until the most recent periods either (Figure 6), although *on* was already virtually categorical in this context by the 19th century (Blondeau, 2007; Figure 7).

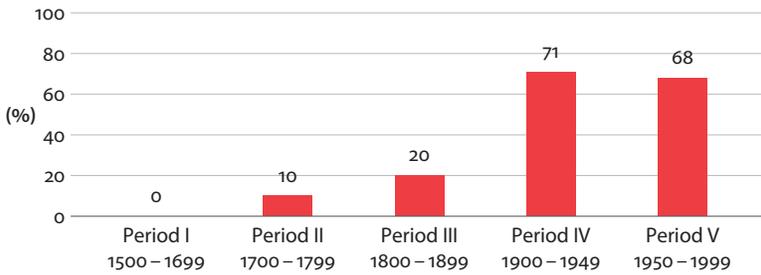


Figure 6. Acknowledgment of *nous/on* variability by RHGF grammarians (subsample) over time

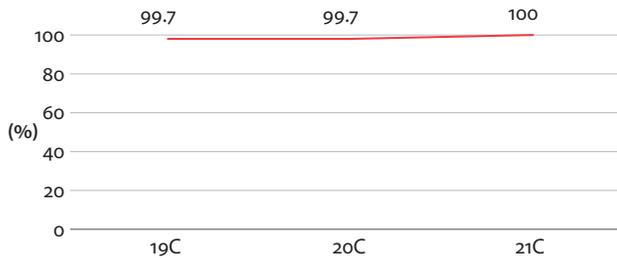


Figure 7. Overall distribution of *on* in *usage* over time

- (11) [036] *On* était, comme on dit, craintifs. [1] Ouais. [036] Sur certaines choses, *nous* étions craintiques– craintifs. (20C.036.545)  
 ‘[036] We were, as they say, fearful. [1] Yeah. [036] About certain things, we were fearful– fearful.’

The volatility, inconsistency, and arbitrariness of grammatical injunctions are all signs that variability has long been widespread. We turn next to the question of how grammarians have handled it.

### 3.1 The normative treatment of variability

Prescriptive tradition has had a long history of targeting variability, largely in its ongoing quest to eradicate it. How is this achieved? Our meta-analysis of the RHGF turned up a variety of avenues. Some grammarians simply ignore it. This is the strategy Girard (1747/1982) adopts in (12), by citing only the synthetic, but not the other variants of future temporal reference.

- (12) Lorsqu'on représente l'événement comme devant positivement arriver dans la suite, cela fait le temps avenir; qu'on nomme FUTUR, tel qu'on le voit dans cette frase: *je me donnerai de la peine; mais j'en viendrai à bout.*

(Girard, 1747/1982: p. 20)

'When the event is presented as definitively taking place at a time to come, that calls for the future tense, which we call [synthetic] future, as illustrated in this sentence: *I will work hard but I will prevail.*'

But many more acknowledge variability, or at least the variant *forms* participating in it. They fail to recognize them as variant expressions of the same referential meaning or function, however. Instead, they seek to establish *symmetry*: that idyllic grammatical state where every form has its dedicated function and vice versa. If forms are found to be competing, then either one of them must be ratified and the other(s) rejected, *or* each has to be assigned an exclusive locus of occurrence. In this way, "vacuous" variability or "free" variation can be factored out. Poplack et al. (2015) found that grammarians employ three main strategies to attain this goal: associating each variant with a different type of speaker (or register), assigning each variant a specific linguistic context, and/or matching each variant with a dedicated meaning. The following sections explore how they accomplish this.

### 3.1.1 *Prescriptive strategies for factoring out variability*

#### 3.1.1.1 *Social and stylistic*

The contemporary tendency of both professional linguists and naïve speakers to ascribe different variants to different sectors of society and to imbue them with the characteristics they associate with their (perceived) users has a deep history in the prescriptive tradition. A particularly illustrative example involves the variable choice of the conditional instead of the standard imperfect in protases of hypothetical *si*-complexes. Early on, the conditional was considered to "go well" with *si* (13), but subsequent grammarians have steadfastly proscribed this form in this context (14).

- (13) *Quand. Lorsque. Si. Si tost que. Si est-ce-que.* Vont bien avec le second imparfait, & second plusqueparfait & futur.

(Maupas, 1632: p. 186)

'*Si* [and other conjunctions]. Go well with the conditional and the past conditional and the [synthetic] future.'

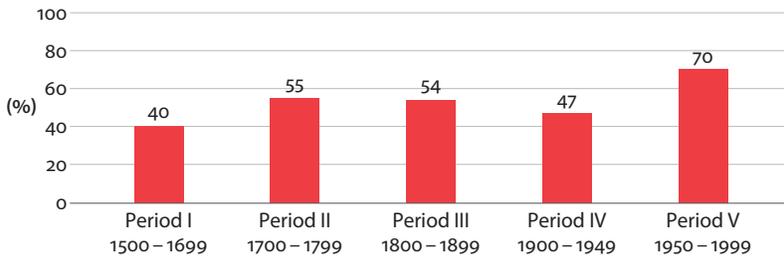
- (14) a. Mais: *Si vous m'auriez averti; Si je n'aurais su; Si j'aurais été* &c. seroient des solécismes.

(Mauvillon, 1754: p. 527)

'But: *if you would have warned me, if I would not have known, if I would have been*, would be grammatical errors.'

- b. C'est une faute d'employer le conditionnel après la conjonction *si*.  
(Carpentier, 1860: p. 81)  
'It is a mistake to use the conditional after the conjunction *si*.'
- c. La grammaire officielle condamne maintenant l'emploi du conditionnel dans ces cas et demande l'imparfait.  
(Nyrop, 1935: p. 368)  
'Official grammar currently condemns the use of the conditional in these cases and requires the imperfect.'
- d. Attention! il ne faut pas dire: 'Si j'aurais ..., si je pourrais ...,' mais 'Si j'avais ..., si je pouvais ....'  
(Bergeron, 1972: p. 80)  
'Warning! Do not say: 'If I would have ..., if I would be able to ...,' but 'If I had ..., if I could ....'
- e. Dans les propositions de condition introduites par *si*, le bon usage n'admet pas le conditionnel.  
(Grevisse, 1998: p. 353)  
'In conditional clauses headed by *si*, good usage does not tolerate the conditional.'

Injunctions against the conditional again proliferate after 1950 (Figure 8), but no attempt has ever been made to "explain" the prohibition (or the variation) on linguistic grounds. Here, the appeal is only to the properties of the *speaker*. The proscribed variant is not the province of educated adults, but only of foreigners, the uneducated, the masses, and children (15).

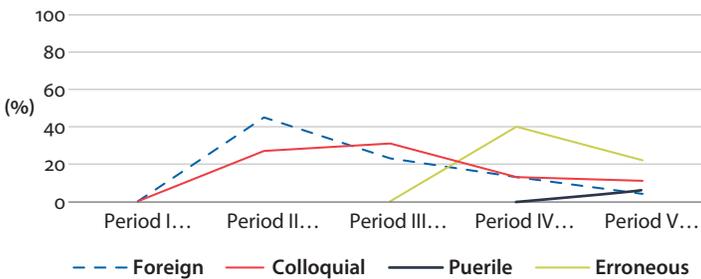


**Figure 8.** Proportion of RHGF grammars specifically excluding the conditional from protases of hypothetical *si*-complexes over time

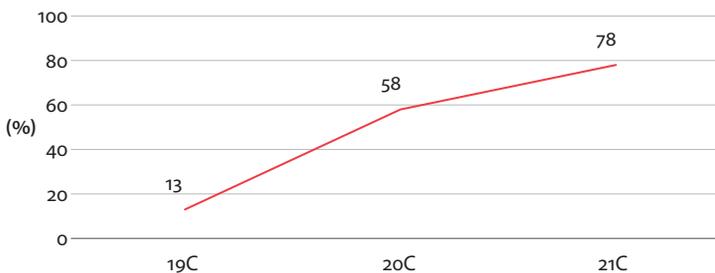
- (15) a. Mais seuls les étrangers ignorant le génie de notre langue peuvent préférer *si vous viendriez*.  
(Dauzat, 1943: p. 178)  
'But only foreigners unfamiliar with the spirit of our language could proffer *if you would come*.'
- b. D'ailleurs le peuple ne se prive jamais de dire *si j'aurais su* ou *si j'aurais eu*.  
(Martinon, 1950: p. 362, fn. 1)  
'In fact, the masses never miss a chance to say, *if I would have known* or *if I would have had*.'

- c. Le fameux: *Si j'aurais su, j'aurais pas venu*, du langage enfantin, est d'une parfaite logique. (Charaudeau, 1992: p. 474)  
 'The famous: If I would have known, I wouldn't have come, of child language, is perfectly logical.'
- d. Dans l'usage familial (...), le conditionnel s'emploie aussi dans la proposition introduite par *si*. (Riegel, Pellat, & Rioul, 1998: p. 318)  
 'In informal usage (...), the conditional is also used in clauses introduced by *si*.'

Figure 9 shows how these appreciations have evolved over time. Note how long the conditional was qualified as an “error,” made largely by foreigners. Not until the 20th century do grammarians begin to acknowledge that it is also used by native francophones, if only those of the lowest classes. The “erroneous” attribution continues right into the Modern Linguistics Period, where it now rivals the novel “childish” association. This finding achieves full significance when we consider that, in the community, the conditional has risen – vertiginously! – to become the current majority variant by far (Figure 10), and its users include native francophones of all stripes, from the “ignorant” to the intellectual, child to adult.



**Figure 9.** Social connotations ascribed by RHGF grammarians to the conditional in protases of hypothetical *si*-complexes over time



**Figure 10.** Rate of conditional selection in protases of hypothetical *si*-complexes in usage over time

### 3.1.1.2 Contextual conditioning

Another strategy favored by grammarians for factoring out variability is to restrict variants to particular linguistic contexts. This can be illustrated by the fate of the future temporal reference variants, all of which have been attested since the earliest grammars. Here again, while cheerfully acknowledging the various *forms*, grammarians fail to identify them as alternate expressions of the same referential meaning. Instead, they strive to match them with dedicated linguistic conditions or contexts. As detailed in Poplack and Dion (2009), large numbers of these were invoked. The most recurrent involves proximity of the future predication, and the claim that different variants are reserved for differing degrees of temporal distance. But as shown in Table 2, there is little consensus as to which variant expresses which; all of them have been associated with both proximate and distal futures. Still, once the associations between context and variant are tallied, the one linking the periphrastic variant with proximity does turn out to enjoy the greatest amount of inter-grammar agreement (59%); this is also the only association that persists over all five periods (Poplack & Dion, 2009). A variety of other elements relating to discourse context have also been said to influence variant selection, albeit at far lower agreement levels. These are depicted in Figure 11.

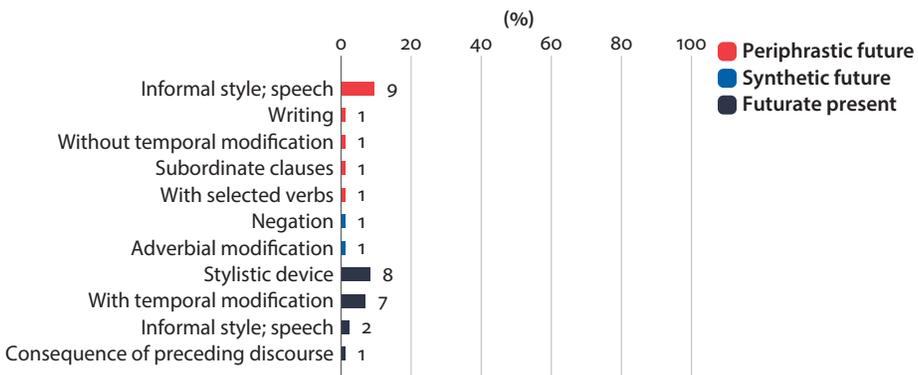


Figure 11. Inter-grammar agreement on contextual conditioning of future temporal reference variants

The preponderance of contexts associated with the periphrastic and present variants relative to the synthetic future suggests that the latter is the default marker of futurity, while the others are reserved for more specialized purposes. When we examine the way the variants were actually *used* in the speech of the same periods, however, we find almost no common ground between these injunctions and community norms. As can be seen in the results of the variable rule analysis (Table 3), which

operationalizes temporal distance and other contexts claimed to account for the variability, proximity in the future has no effect on variant choice in contemporary Laurentian French, and its effect was minimal (indeed, inferior to that of any other context) in the 19th century. Ironically, however, the overwhelming predictor of variant choice in speech *is* in fact contextual. The synthetic variant, far from functioning as the default, is instead almost categorically restricted to negative contexts, as illustrated in (9a). Reference to this effect is all but absent in the five centuries of grammatical tradition studied.

**Table 3.** Multivariate analysis of the contribution of linguistic context to the selection of the synthetic (over the periphrastic) variant in *usage* over time (reproduced from Table 2, Poplack et al., 2015)

	19th century			20th century		
Corrected mean	0.354			0.155		
Overall rate	39%			22%		
Total N	(1663/4293)			(725/3357)		
	prob.	%	N	prob.	%	N
POLARITY						
Negative	.99	99	451/457	.99	97	456/471
Affirmative	.37	32	1211/3834	.31	9	269/2886
Range	62			68		
SPEECH STYLE						
Formal	.64	51	109/212	.81	42	22/53
Informal	.49	38	1554/4081	.49	22	695/3203
Range	15			32		
ADVERBIAL SPECIFICATION						
Presence	.65	47	238/502	.59	13	47/358
Absence	.48	37	1381/3739	.49	21	592/2877
Range	17			10		
TEMPORAL DISTANCE						
Distal	.60	41	193/476	.48	16	79/495
Proximal	.50	30	342/1153	.51	18	119/679
Range	10			3		

### 3.1.1.3 *Semantic assignments*

Of all of the strategies for factoring out variability, however, the grammarian's ace-in-the-hole resides in the *meanings* he attributes to competing variants. Nowhere is this more evident than in the treatment of the subjunctive. On the many occasions when subjunctives fail to appear in “subjunctive-selecting” contexts, or

show up in presumed indicative contexts, the explanations proffered are invariably semantic. In keeping with this program, a remarkable total of 76 distinct readings have been assigned to the subjunctive variant over the duration. Predictably, they include the prototypical meanings conventionally attributed to the (Latin) subjunctive, such as doubt, desire, and volition. But these are far exceeded by much more elusive concepts like “psychic energy” (LeBidois & LeBidois, 1971: p. 501), “doubtful modesty” (Fischer & Hacquard, 1959: p. 328), “sentiment” (Laurence, 1957: p. 140), and “ideas” (Bruneau & Heulluy, 1950: p. 145; Sternon, 1954: p. 231), among many others. The affect, emotions, and even the soul of the speaker are also frequently invoked, as illustrated in (16). The fact that such readings are generally impossible to decode, let alone operationalize and test, conspire in making them so difficult to challenge.

- (16) a. Le subjonctif exprime les dispositions de l'âme relativement à des faits.  
(Crouzet, Berthet, & Galliot, 1912, Section 400)  
'The subjunctive expresses the dispositions of the soul relative to facts.'
- b. Toutes les fois que la parole est comme chargée de sentiment, dans toutes les phrases qui supposent une tension et un élan de l'âme, le subjonctif a ses raisons suffisantes en soi-même. (LeBidois & LeBidois, 1971: p. 510)  
'Whenever speech is charged with feeling, in all sentences that imply a tension and an impulse of the soul, the subjunctive is justified.'

Here too, only a very small minority of meanings has persisted across the five periods investigated; indeed, nearly half of them are ephemeral (Figure 12). Even the most persistent are treated inconsistently. For instance, only 11 of the 76 readings documented achieved so much as a 10% inter-grammar agreement rate (Figure 13). The frontrunner, *doubt*, is cited by only a third of the RHGF grammars.

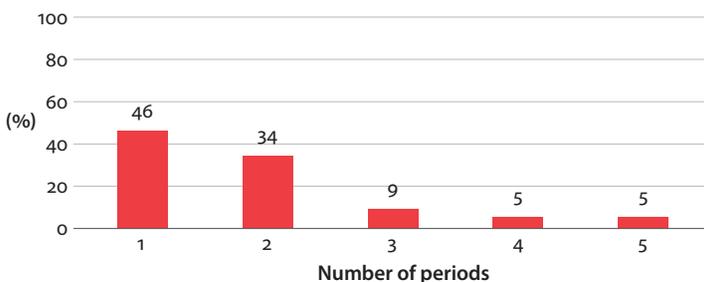
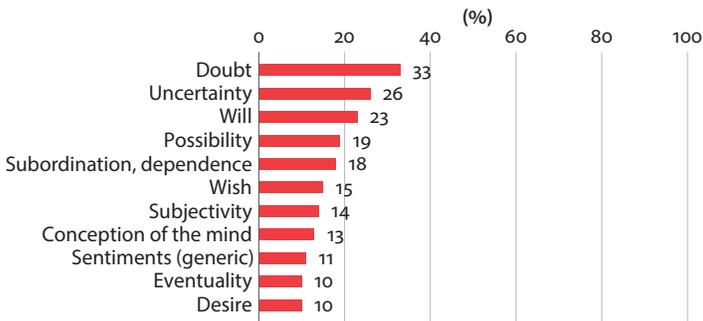


Figure 12. Persistence of semantic readings assigned to the subjunctive



**Figure 13.** Semantic readings ascribed to the subjunctive achieving inter-grammar agreement of 10% or better

Interestingly, many of the meanings ascribed to the subjunctive coincide with those ascribed to the future variants (17). And as we saw in Figure 11, they enjoy just as little consensus.

- (17) a. [Le futur périphrastique] présente la réalisation du procès comme plus assurée et sa réalité comme plus certaine que le futur, qui laisse subsister un doute. (Riegel et al., 1998: p. 315)  
 ‘[The periphrastic future] presents the reality and the realization of the process as more certain than the synthetic future, which implies some doubt.’
- b. Le futur simple (...) est souvent “chargé” de notions diverses (idées de possibilité, d’obligation, etc.) et de sentiments (désir, crainte, etc.) (Brunot & Bruneau, 1969: p. 337)  
 ‘The synthetic future (...) is often “loaded” with different notions (ideas of possibility, obligation, etc.) and feelings (desire, fear, etc.).’

It is instructive to compare these prescriptive injunctions with the way speakers actually use the subjunctive. I noted above that local francophones had reported that they *didn’t* use it. We have since learned that they in fact use it more in the aggregate than in other Romance languages recently studied in this connection (Poplack et al., 2018). The question is: *what* do they use it for? Since so many of the 76 readings attributed to this grammatical category reside in speaker intent or attitude, few could be operationalized and tested. Still, Poplack et al. (2013) did try to capture some of them through intervening variables. However, analysis of nearly 5000 contexts in which the subjunctive *could have been* selected in spontaneous speech showed that any apparent semantic effect was actually an epiphenomenon of the overriding effect of another factor: lexical identity of the governor.

Since the 19th century (at least), just four governors (*falloir* ‘be necessary,’ *vouloir* ‘want,’ *aimer* ‘love,’ and *pour que* ‘so that’) have together represented up to

three-quarters of all the governors occurring in spontaneous speech (Figure 14). Rates of subjunctive selection with these governors are high and rising (Figure 15), and when they are paired with a small cohort of four frequent and irregular *embedded* verbs (*aller* ‘go,’ *avoir* ‘have,’ *être* ‘be,’ and *faire* ‘make’), those numbers skyrocket. This is what accounts for the vast majority of all subjunctive morphology, not the way the speaker envisions or emotes about the predication.

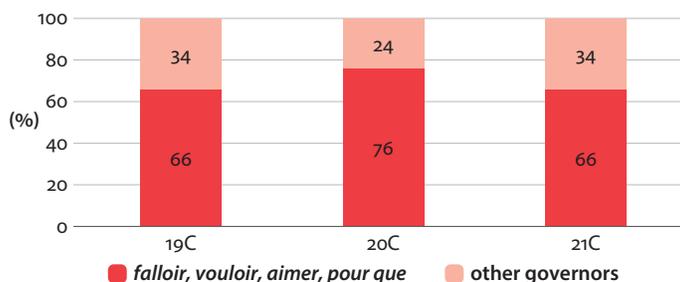


Figure 14. Distribution of subjunctive governors in *usage* over time

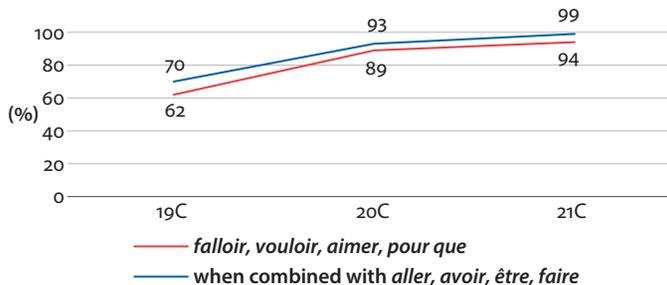


Figure 15. Rate of subjunctive selection in frequent governor and embedded verb pairs in *usage* over time

These quantitative patterns are invisible to any but systematic quantitative analysis. It thus comes as no surprise that they too have failed to be acknowledged in the normative tradition.

Summarizing, the foregoing results raise the inevitable question of why so many different associations have been invoked for these and other variants we have studied. Why have so few recurred over time, and why have they been marked by such inconsistency? The very volatility and idiosyncrasy of these normative treatments – not only longitudinally, but within the same time frame, and even the same grammar! – militate against the idea that the disparities result from actual linguistic change. Rather, I have suggested that they derive from the goal of eradicating “vacuous” variability and establishing *form-function symmetry*. For

some variables, the preferred method to achieve this is through social attributions or contextual associations. For most, it is by imbuing each variant with a meaning, whatever it may be, so long as it is distinct from that of its counterpart(s) in the grammatical sector in question. In all of these cases, the implication is that the associations between variants and domains of use are *privative*: the speakers who use one variant are not the same ones who use the other, or the context felicitous for one variant automatically excludes its competitor, etc. All of this suggests that the aim of the normative enterprise is not to prescribe the *correct* use, but to bring order to the perceived chaos of *variable* use. If the former were known, there would be consensus among grammarians with respect to prescribing it. Instead, we have seen that there is at best scant agreement on which meaning or function to assign to which variant. This explains why grammarians end up ascribing the same ones to different variants, and contradictory ones to a single variant. In the few cases where consensus can even be invoked, it is only at a very low level. We interpret this to mean that (a) the competing variants *can* express the same meanings, and (b) the meanings are *not* entirely coterminous with the variants. Of course, this is exactly the kind of form-function *asymmetry* that is characteristic of inherent variability.

Importantly, however, rather than accept the existence of variability, grammarians appear to have multiplied their efforts to stamp it out. This movement gains momentum in the 20th century, especially during the period we have associated with the flowering of modern linguistics. The proportion of grammars emitting prescriptions in general nearly doubles during this time (e.g., Figure 4). The meanings and functions assigned to variants mount dramatically. As illustrated in Figure 16, nearly two-thirds of those associated with future temporal reference, for example, first appeared in this period. The number of subjunctive governors prescribed per grammar increased by 60% (Figure 1), and most of the idiosyncratic (i.e., novel) meanings and governors associated with it were also introduced at this time, as can be seen in Figures 17 and 18. Condemnation of the conditional jumps by 49% (Figure 8). These examples could be multiplied.

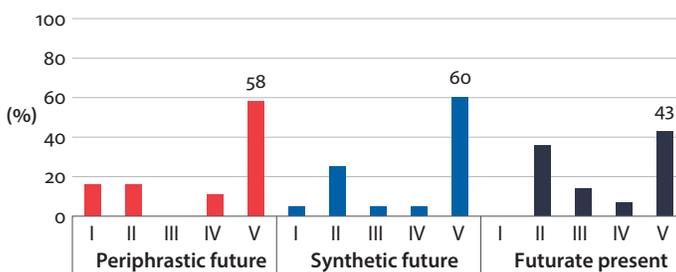


Figure 16. Period in which meaning was first invoked: future temporal reference

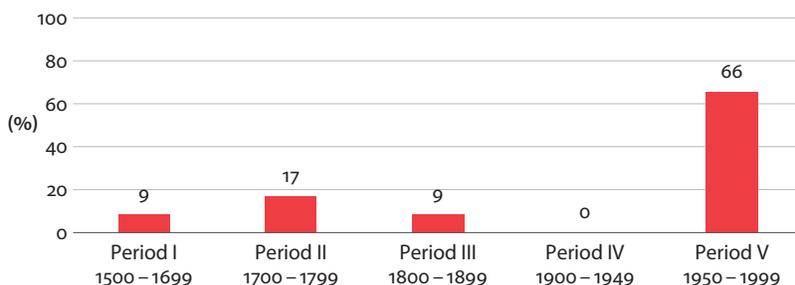


Figure 17. Idiosyncratic assignment of subjunctive meanings by RHGF grammarians over time

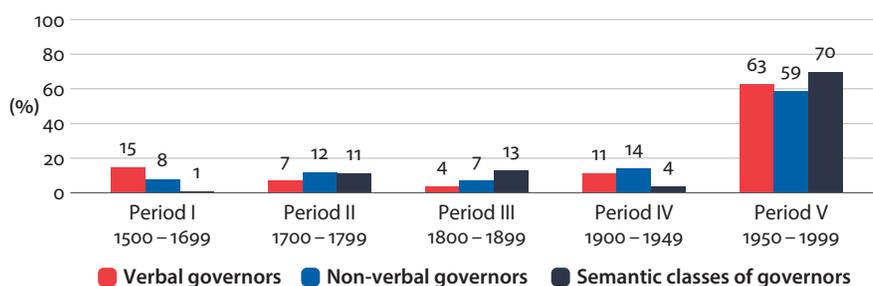


Figure 18. Idiosyncratic assignment of subjunctive governors by RHGF grammarians over time

Paradoxically, these spurts of normative activity seem to increase as the prescribed variants are *decreasing* in rate or productivity. Herculean efforts to re-establish form-function symmetry are thus a hallmark of the 20th century, especially the last half. This suggests that variability has become more salient and less palatable in the Modern Linguistics Period.

#### 4. Contemporary treatment of variability

From the few comparisons with usage presented here (see Elsig & Poplack, 2006, 2009; Lemay, 2009; Leroux, 2007; Miller, 2007; Miller & Dion, 2009; Willis, 2000; for others), it is clear that prescriptive dictates have not exerted much effect on the evolution of spontaneous speech. In the grammatical sectors we have studied, non-standard variants continue to prevail, and where change is attested, it is rarely in the direction of the prescribed variant. Nonetheless, they have significantly shaped the thinking of other grammarians, as well as that of linguists. In fact, the

preoccupations of the normative tradition, though often roundly rejected and even ridiculed, have filtered down almost unaltered to many contemporary analyses. Given the advances of modern linguistic theory in almost every other area, it is particularly remarkable that the treatment of variability has changed so little. On the contrary, many contemporary mainstream accounts are direct inheritances from prescriptive injunctions. Baunaz and Puskas' (2014: p. 242) claim that the subjunctive is "systematically associated with the subject's emotive experience" is but one notable example. But the major throwback is the enshrinement of what I refer to as the *Doctrine of Form-Function Symmetry*. It is neatly encapsulated in Bolinger's (1977) famous dictum in (18), in Goldberg's (1995) *Principle of No Synonymy* (19), and many other formulations (e.g. 20), both explicit and implicit.

- (18) The natural condition of a language is to preserve one form for one meaning and one meaning for one form. (Bolinger, 1977: p. x)
- (19) If two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct. (Goldberg, 1995: p. 67)
- (20) Wherever there is a difference in *form* in a language, there is a difference in *meaning*. (Clark, 1987: p. 1)

Espousal of the Doctrine of Form-Function Symmetry, in conjunction with its corollary, *categoricity*, means that much contemporary mainstream syntactic and semantic literature, just like its normative counterpart, must continue to devote itself to the problem of "unwarranted" variation. This rears its head in the myriad instances where the "wrong" variant is selected to express the apparently intended meaning, or where both variants alternate to express a single meaning that should purportedly be associated with only one, or when contexts whose semantic features were predicted to link them with one variant surface with the other. All of these asymmetries and mismatches are of course symptoms of inherent variability, and as we have shown, this is what characterizes the way the variants we have studied are actually used in spoken discourse. The extent and nature of this variability have remained opaque to most formalists and many functionalists, since belief in the primacy of speaker intent, the fundamental nature of grammatical categories, and the Doctrine of Form-Function Symmetry together conspire to obscure its existence.

The formal linguistic literature is replete with alternative proposals to explain these recalcitrant cases. They all have in common the intent to eliminate vacuous variation and restore form-function symmetry. Preceding sections revealed how the prescriptive tradition appeals to three major avenues to accomplish this. The social route has long been rejected by the mainstream as outside the purview of linguistics proper. The appeal to context may not entirely succeed in ruling out two ways of saying the same thing. This explains the pre-eminence of meaning in

explaining variant choice, echoing the time-honored prescriptive tradition. Even when consensus on the precise semantic contribution of a particular variant is lacking (as continues to be the case more often than not), the conviction that each makes a distinct one is widely endorsed. Where meaning A is intended, variant A will categorically be selected and vice versa, because the semantic features “requiring” one variant must naturally exclude the other.

Among the variety of avenues to which formalists appeal to support this position is to reanalyze the semantics of the variant or the semantics of the context until the desired match is achieved (e.g., Abouda, 2002; Giannakidou, 1999; Giorgi, 2009). Another is to impose a semantic contrast on a constructed example. This is how Schlenker (2005: p. 23), for instance, “explains” the putative difference between subjunctive and indicative in a sentence like *Jean se lamente qu’il pleut*<sub>IND</sub>/*pleuve*<sub>SUBJ</sub> ‘John is sorry that it’s raining’ (21).

- (21) To my ear the subjunctive version is rather neutral, but the indicative requires a particular situation – one in which Jean says something, to others or himself, to the effect that he is unhappy that it is raining. (Schlenker, 2005: p. 23)

This is, of course, entirely reminiscent of the traditional normative exegeses of what literary figures meant when they did or did not use a variant, like the one proposed by Bescherelle in 1877 (p. 22):

- (22) When Mme de Sevigné says: *Il me semble que mon coeur veuille*<sub>[SUBJ]</sub> *se fendre*, ‘it seems to me that my heart wants<sub>[SUBJ]</sub> to break,’ she is not at all convinced of what she is asserting; it is as if she said: I am tempted to believe that my heart wants to break. This is not at all the case when Voltaire says: *Il me semble que Corneille a donné*<sub>[IND]</sub> *des modèles de tous les genres*, ‘it seems to me that Corneille has given<sub>[IND]</sub> models of all genres.’ Voltaire is asserting here a positive fact, about which he has no doubt, he is convinced of it, he has examined it and judged. From these observations, and even more from our citations, we believe, against the grammarians, that one should use: 1° the indicative every time one asserts (...) a fact of which one is entirely convinced; 2° the subjunctive in the opposite case. (Bescherelle, 1877: p. 651, translation ours)

But the most powerful weapon in the contemporary quest for form-function symmetry remains the appeal to the *speaker* – her intentions, convictions, emotions, desires, indeed her very soul, in the terminology of traditional grammarians. As Bolinger (1977) also apprises us:

- (23) Linguistic meaning expresses our attitudes towards the person we are speaking to, “how we feel about the reliability of our message, how we situate ourselves in the events we report.” (Bolinger, 1977: p. 4)

From here it is a short step to inferring, as did Confais (1995) with respect to future temporal reference, for example, that:

- (24) The synthetic future variant functions less as a vehicle of the speaker's *conviction* with regard to the non-verifiable content of his utterance than as a sign of his *engagement vis-à-vis* his utterance. [This variant] is used more to "interest" the interlocutor, to console, reassure, promise, give instructions, and so on.  
(Confais, 1995: p. 401, translation ours)

Now, since the speaker is the ultimate arbiter of what s/he wanted to express, failing all else, the analyst can always resort to the inference that if s/he selected variant A, s/he must have wanted to express meaning A. And since no one but the speaker is privy to that information, the Doctrine of Form-Function Symmetry remains unchallenged, *even when analysts cannot agree on what the speaker meant*.

## 5. Discussion

Why do these disagreements arise? Where forms appear to be alternating in the same context, proponents of unique form-function relationships attempt first to pinpoint what distinguishes the forms, and then to link them to categorical co-occurrences with something else. Where this fails, as we have seen to be the case for all the variables reviewed here and many more, the alternating forms themselves are said to be the sole bearers of the proposed functional, semantic, or pragmatic distinctions. These in turn derive from those considered to be inherent in the grammatical categories to which the forms "belong." But in practice, the nature or even existence of these distinctions, in the absence of any categorical surface correlate, is strictly a matter of individual interpretation. This is especially true when variant selection is relegated to semantic, pragmatic, or psychological motivations. Invoking them licenses the analyst to explain alternation among forms as resulting from differences in the way the speaker *envisages* the event, rather than (what may appear *prima facie* to be) random occurrences.

Particularly disturbing about these developments is that for many of these variables, such interpretations have transformed themselves into (apparently widely shared) *intuitions* about variant use, and thence into the *data* of language use. These in turn serve as the basis for numbers of elegant and highly ramified theories that have little if any basis in the *facts* of language use, exactly as adumbrated by the Columbia School. This raises the epistemological question of whether a grammatical category or a linguistic form can embody a meaning when it is not used by speakers to express it.

Ironically, so pervasive is the Doctrine of Form-Function Symmetry that it is also at the heart of *sociolinguists'* rejection of syntactic variation. The controversy that raged in the 1970s over the existence of the syntactic variable (e.g., Labov, 1978; Lavandera, 1978; Romaine, 1981) revolved around the very same issues. Linguists were willing to concede that phonological variants may lack a dedicated linguistic meaning (in variationist terms, they all refer to the same state of affairs), but they insisted that variation above the level of phonology carried meaning *by definition*. A *sociolinguist* may be prepared to expand the purview of meaning to the social and stylistic, as was Lavandera (1978). But the possibility that variants of a variable could alternate with *no* change in meaning (as in Weiner and Labov's [1983] famous construal of the agentless passive, for example) continues to meet resistance. Attributing distinct roles to each variant restores the desired isomorphic relation between function and form, while implicitly rejecting the possibility of bona fide grammatical variation.

The uniquely variationist perspective on the alternation among variants beyond the phonological is of course that, even if different meanings or functions did play a role in variant selection, those distinctions need not apply every time one of the variants is used. This is because in certain contexts (specifically, in the *variable context*), such distinctions can be *neutralized*, and neutralization is the fundamental mechanism of variation and change (Sankoff, 1988).<sup>3</sup> The evidence we have been accruing from years of systematic confrontation with the data of morphosyntactic variation in spontaneous speech fails to validate virtually all of these prescriptive and formal linguistic treatments, revealing robust variability instead. Whether or not the variability is (socio)linguistically arbitrary, it is subject to regular conditioning. This conditioning is profoundly entrenched in the *community norm*, but much of it is opaque to intuition and introspection. This is why it remains invisible to those who confine themselves to these methods of linguistic analysis. Such discrepancies in the treatments of variability, coupled with the confusion between the categories of grammar and those of speech, are responsible in large part for the growing gulf between usage, prescription, and much linguistic description.

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3. Of course, such neutralization cannot simply be inferred; it can only be established on the basis of systematic confrontation – in discourse – of variant forms with putative meanings or functions.

## Acknowledgments

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