

Free Variation = Unexplained Variation? Empirical and Theoretical Approaches to Optionality in Grammar

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Deadline extension: Sep 20, 2020

Recent years have seen an increasing interest in grammatical (in particular: syntactic) variation (e. g. Dufter et al. 2009), e. g. genitive variation in English, copula variation in Spanish, linking elements (Fugenelemente) in German compounds. Statistical models are employed to predict speakers' choices as accurately as possible (e. g. Bresnan & Ford 2010). However, there always remains a portion of unexplained data, often thought to be "free" variation (Cappelle 2009). But what exactly is it that we are left with if we strip away all possible extralinguistic and intralinguistic factors? Is it random noise or something systematic? How do we tackle it methodologically? And what are its implications for our respective grammatical theories (e. g. how do we model form-function relations)?

We welcome contributions on any language and from any area of linguistics (e. g. phonology, morphology, syntax) that approach the workshop topic on a solid empirical basis. Contributions may, for example, present phenomena showing puzzling amounts of free variation or show that some variation previously thought to be free can, in fact, be thoroughly explained by some factor overlooked before. The questions we want to address include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (How) Can we benefit methodologically and theoretically from assuming free variation?
- How can we study free variation? How similarly do variants have to be distributed to be considered in "free" variation?
- What are the implications for our models of grammar?
- How does free variation come into existence? Can it be diachronically stable or do free variants tend to become functionalized in the long run?
- Are there different types (and if so: what types) of free variation? Are there general differences across e. g. phonology, morphology and syntax?
- What role is played by frequency and gradience? Do free variants necessarily need to occur at equal frequencies and/or be equally acceptable?

Invited speaker: Freek Van de Velde (KU Leuven, Belgium)

We invite submissions for 20-minute oral presentations (+ 10 minutes discussion) in English or German. Abstracts should clearly state the research question(s), the methodological approach, and the (expected) results. They should be anonymously submitted via <https://easychair.org/conferences/?conf=freevari2021> and should not exceed 500 words (excluding data, figures and references). The extended deadline for submission is 20 September 2020; notification date is 30 September 2020.

A limited number of travel grants of up to 500 Euro are available for accepted contributions by DGfS members without/with low income. Please note that the regulations of the DGfS do not allow that workshop participants present two or more papers in different workshops. While we hope that the conference can take place as planned, there might be changes due to Covid-19.

References:

- Bresnan, Joan & Marylin Ford. 2010. Predicting Syntax: Processing Dative Constructions in American and Australian Varieties of English. *Language* 86 (1), 168-213.
Cappelle, Bert. 2009. Can we factor out free choice? In: Dufter et al. (eds), 183-201.
Dufter, Andreas, Jürg Fleischer & Guido Seiler (eds.). 2009. Describing and modeling variation in grammar. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter.