

Towards a cross-linguistic framework for analysing speakers' representations of linguistic variation

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A cross-linguistic comparison

Participant 1 (original: Hebrew)

“Correct Hebrew, and I am saying this also as a literature teacher, [...] is a very rare thing – even I don’t [speak it] and I am a trained literature teacher. The correct Hebrew is a little bit something that disappeared almost. I think that this is connected to the restricted language of the internet – I can speak about what it is not, I need to say what it is. Correct Hebrew is Hebrew of beautiful literature.”

Participant 2 (original: German)

“if we now think a lot about social media where people only write without full stops and commas disregarding actually correct language [...] especially with such young people [...] we they only speak in some abbreviations [...] this whole lol especially the internet abbreviations [...] if you take all these youth words you don't even know what they mean... honourable man [*Ehrenmann*] or something”



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Problem statement and RQs

All speakers are exposed to and must cope with linguistic variation (and change).

- Are there universal parameters for the representation of linguistic variation?
- How can we identify these parameters?



Agenda

- 1 Intro: Comparing Representations of Hebrew and German
- 2 Spotlights on the Philosophical Background:
From Husserl to Chomsky,
Analytic Philosophy and Embodied Cognition
- 3 Why do we need a Cross-linguistic Framework?
- 4 How to get there: Our Methods
- 5 The Framework



Background I: from Husserl to Chomsky and beyond

1. **Husserl's Phenomenology/Philosophy** (19th and early 20th century)

The phenomenon as observable aspect of perception

→ descriptive methodology, relation of self and world

Representations as some sort of 'images' or mental 'likenesses' of the reality

2. **Chomskyan Paradigm** (mid 20th century), following a strict Cartesianism (Chomsky 1966)

Linguistic Representation is innate and processed through the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) with no relation to the outer world.

3. **Fodor's Language of Thought (LOT)**

Representations are understood as sentence-like mental states that possess characteristics of language.



Background II: Analytic Philosophy and Embodied Cognition

4. **Neuropsychology:** Linguistic Representations are organized modularly with an own set for each phonetics and phonology, lexicon, syntax and semantics (Blumstein 2019:2), synapses are physiological representations which are fluid and adaptive

5. **Cognitive (Socio)Linguistics:**
 - (1) representations as guidance for navigation in the world, language use as a way of sharing internal states (Malt 2024)
 - (2) denying representations (*embodied cognition*)



Research gap: Why we need a cross-linguistic framework

How does literature cope with cross-linguistic comparisons, the role of the speaker and their relation to language worlds?

- Only scarce applications of Cognitive linguistic theory to metapragmatic research (need for „variational metapragmatics“ Schneider 2021)
- Representationalist theory is beneficial for research on language attitudes and ideologies
- Anthropological perspective is missing: individual speakers (as perceiving, thinking and acting subjects) are overlooked



How to get there: Our theoretical basis

Striedl

Representations as meta category of linguistic knowledge that is based on experience (sensu T. Krefeld)

Connected through

Schmid (2020):
“entrenched patterns of associations”

Hoffmeister

Representations as basic chunks of knowledge that result from individual (direct) or mediated experiences



Representations of Linguistic Variation

Shaping factors of Linguistic Knowledge

1. Complexity of different life worlds (context: social groups, communicative needs and targets, time, space, professionalism, ...)
2. Individual language experiences (language acquisition, mobility, ...)
3. Ideologies, attitudes, ...
4. Cognitive abilities, affective and emotional conditions



Representations of Linguistic Variation

- 1) Representations are formed by perception and are a prerequisite for (orientation and) action.
- 2) Representations are knowledge chunks that relate to the world, i.e. they are *isomorphic*.
- 3) During perception we internalize (*vergegenwärtigen*) aspects of the world: We make them “our own” and relate them to our attitudes, experiences and to socio-cultural norms
- 4) Iterative alignment of impression and mental representation, as grasped by *Predictive Processing*



How we 'predict' and act: Predictive Processing (PP)

- 1) We (as humans) have cognitive abilities and have a relationship to our environment.
- 2) A Generative Model *predicts* what – with a certain likelihood – is or isn't out there (beyond our skull).
- 3) Predictions get better (more precise) with more available 'data.'
- 4) Our predictions guide our actions.

(Piekarski 2021)

Note: We don't share the strong mathematical implications of PP (key word: *Bayesian brain*) that can lead to a circular reasoning (*mereological fallacy*).



A Cross-linguistic Framework: Methodology

- 1) **Background:** socio-cultural norms, experience, attitudes
- 2) **Method:** open approach (for example: free association tasks), context sensitive, speaker oriented
- 3) **Analysis:** primarily qualitative (if applicable, supplemented by quantitative approaches)



A Cross-linguistic Framework: 4) Parameters (not exhaustive, scale range)

Language	Aesthetics	beautiful – ugly
	Correctness	right – wrong
	Level of Difficulty	easy – difficult
	Familiarity	familiar – foreign
	Politeness	polite – impolite
	Haptic Quality	soft – hard
	Musicality	melodic – unmelodic
	Speed	slow – fast
Speaker	Education	educated – uneducated
	Gender	female – male
	Age	young – old
	Religiosity	religious – unreligious
	Geography	north – south, urban – rural
	Attractivity	attractive – unattractive
	Trustworthiness	trustworthy – not trustworthy
	Aggressiveness	calm – aggressive



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Future directions

More empirical studies (especially non-WEIRD- and non-LOL-languages)

A typology of speakers' representations of linguistic variation will give us a more complete understanding of:

- a) speakers' societies;
- b) their use of language;
- c) particular values they ascribe to languages (varieties);
- d) processes of language change



Take home message

- Apparently, speakers of all languages use comparable parameters to categorise utterances.
- This is surprising because speakers live in diverse life worlds that should require diverse categories (*Diversity leads to diversity*).
- Instead, speakers categorise utterances into comparable representations (*Diversity leads to some sort of uniformity*).
- Representations of languages (varieties) depend equally on socio-cultural and evaluative categories as systematic factors (e.g. vowel length).



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GRK
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Dynamik
und
Stabilität
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Thank you for your attention.

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