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## The register-specificity of variation grammars

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Variationist linguistics is concerned with how language users choose between alternative ways of saying or writing the same thing. The set of relevant probabilistic constraints on a particular variation phenomenon constitutes what I call a “variation grammar”.

The talk addresses the extent to which language users may have available different variation grammars for different types of situational context (“registers”). Thus, the crucial question is whether or not our linguistic choice making processes differ depending on whether we engage in e.g. informal conversation or write blog entries. This issue is under-researched but loaded theoretically: variationist sociolinguists tend to believe that “internal constraints [...] are normally independent of social and stylistic factors” (Labov 2010:265), but preliminary evidence (Grafmiller 2014) suggests that there may actually be a good deal of register-specificity.

I outline a methodology to address this matter empirically, drawing on both observational corpus evidence (i.e. customary multivariate modeling of linguistic choice making in naturalistic production data) and supplementary rating task experiments in the spirit of Bresnan (2007). To exemplify, I will discuss a case study covering syntactic variation in multiple spoken and written registers in varieties of English around the world (see Szmrecsanyi et al. 2016).

**References:** • Bresnan, J. (2007): Is syntactic knowledge probabilistic? Experiments with the English dative alternation. In: *Roots: Linguistics in Search of Its Evidential Base*, 75–96. • Grafmiller, J. (2014). Variation in English genitives across modality and genres. *English Language and Linguistics* 18, 471–496. • Labov, W. (2010): *Principles of linguistic change*. Vol. 3: *Cognitive and cultural factors*. Wiley-Blackwell. • Szmrecsanyi, B., Jason G., Heller, B. & Röthlisberger, M. (2016). Around the world in three alternations: Modeling syntactic variation in varieties of English. *English World-Wide* 37, 109–137.

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