Variation and Reconstruction

EDITED BY

Thomas D. Cravens

VARIATION
AND
RECONSTRUCTION

Edited by

THOMAS D. CRAVENS
University of Wisconsin, Madison

JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA

FOREWORD

This book has been a long time coming. Large measures of both thanks and apologies are owed to authors, the first for cooperation in dealing with editing and setting sometimes difficult texts, the second for the overly long gestation period. Thanks also to Anke de Looper of John Benjamins — whose gentle but firm hand and extraordinary patience saw this project to a successful end — and to E.F. Konrad Koerner, who accepted and encouraged the production of a volume focusing on the topic of variation and reconstruction.

Mary Niepokuj kindly agreed to write an introductory chapter framing this volume, and her contribution should definitely be read before digging into the others. She makes it clear that although the studies in these pages are quite disparate in terms of languages examined and problems dealt with, they are individually enabled, and jointly unified, by an appreciation of what is by now a banal truism for many, yet one that still has not fully penetrated all realms of linguistics: the fact that variation is normal.

The individual successes here in treating language-specific problems demonstrate by example the benefits of adopting variation as a general procedural given. In doing so, the authors bear witness by contrast — some implicitly, some overtly; several with unassuming éclat and élan in either case — to the impediments that would have been imposed by *not* giving variation its due place. The overall effect is to see not only that, at the factual level, insisting a priori on invariant forms at any bygone stage denies the nature of living language as used by real people in real communities, but that procedurally, as a result, merely expecting invariance as a sort of default norm can shackle our work at its incipience. Over and above the valuable insights into particular diachronic workings of individual languages and language families, perhaps this volume can play a part in nudging presuppositions further along in the direction of assuming linguistic variation as the norm, any place, any time.

TDC
December 2005

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

VARIATION AND RECONSTRUCTION
INTRODUCTION

MARY K. NIEPOKUJ
Purdue University

1. *Introduction*

Sapir began chapter 7 of *Language* with the blunt statement, "Everyone knows that language is variable" (Sapir 1921:141). The importance of this variability to linguistic change, however, remained largely unrecognized until the landmark publication of Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968), which established the interconnectedness of synchronic variation and diachronic change. For some researchers, this interconnectedness boils down to nothing more than the trivial observation that since languages don't change overnight, a period of time must occur when an older version of a structure and a newer version are present simultaneously in a speech community. Labov summarized this view in the following manner: "[i]f variation is nothing but a transitional phenomenon, a way-station between two invariant stages of the language, it can have only a limited role in our view of the human language faculty. Inherent variation would then be only an accident of history, a product of the unsurprising finding that human beings cannot abandon one form and adopt another instantaneously" (Labov 2001:85). This particular view of variation brings with it the assumption that variation is both a vehicle and a consequence of language change, implying that in its initial stage the language did not exhibit variation, and implying that once the change is completed the language will once again be uniform.

Other researchers, such as Milroy (1992) and Labov (numerous publications, especially Labov 2001) have taken a more nuanced view of the interaction between variation and change, pointing to the existence of stable variation, variation that persists across many generations. To understand the role of this sort of variation requires the assumption that explaining language

maintenance is as important as explaining language change. In this second view, variation is not viewed as a transitional, transitory phenomenon, but instead as one aspect of understanding the relationship between language as an abstract system and language as the product of group norms.

By and large, however, the questions of how variation relates to reconstructed languages and to the methodology of reconstruction have received much less discussion than its relationship to change. This is partly because of the implicit assumption mentioned above, that variation in languages occurs only as a transitional phase from one invariant system to another. A second reason for overlooking the problem of reconstructing variation is due to general methodological practices in comparative linguistics. Durie (1996), discussing why comparativists are reluctant to reconstruct variation to a proto-language, notes, "[s]o often it takes many decades of comparative work before a long-standing problem can be solved, whether involving a single etymology or a whole class of 'exceptions'. Because of this, [linguists] who specialize in historical work are characteristically most unwilling to conclude that any particular instance of a seemingly irregular change cannot be solved [...] This mind-set, which is at once optimistic and skeptical, has made many comparativists immune to a considerable body of evidence that certain types of sound change can be lexical in nature [...] and thus phonologically irregular" (Durie 1996:113). The "optimistic and skeptical" linguist clings to hope that forms which seem to indicate variation — or at least forms which fail to conform to the regular nature of linguistic change — can be shown to be regular after all, as Verner showed that a substantial portion of the exceptions to Grimm's Law were instead the result of some additional regular diachronic change.

In some ways reluctance to invoke variation in the proto-language to explain difficult data parallels reluctance to resort to substrate explanations. Because such explanations are easy to invoke but difficult to falsify, they are only persuasive in cases where a significant amount of evidence exists to justify their use. Nevertheless, just as the available evidence sometimes points strongly to substrate explanations, so too evidence sometimes warrants reconstructing variation.

A third reason for neglecting this issue may be a misguided notion of economy, a mistaken application of Occam's Razor. Historical linguists have had great success at discovering regular sound changes such as Grimm's Law without finding it necessary to know anything at all about the sociolinguistic variables that may have been found in Proto-Germanic at the time. Even Labov (2001:28) points out that certain kinds of sound change, in particular

mergers, seem to occur independent of social structure. Given that many cases of language change have been analyzed with a fair degree of success without bringing social structure into the picture, the thinking goes, it is simpler and more rigorous to try to explain all linguistic change without reference to the social system.

A fourth reason why researchers have failed to reconstruct variation may have to do with the quality of the textual evidence available for manuscripts written prior to the invention of the printing press. It has been, and continues to be, common practice to attribute variant forms found in early manuscripts to "scribal error," and, indeed, scribes certainly made plenty of mistakes in copying manuscripts. Nevertheless, when confronting unexpected forms, it would be preferable methodologically to invoke scribal error only when the evidence clearly supports such an analysis, or as a last resort, rather than as a first resort.

The articles in the present volume consider the relationship between variation and reconstruction from a number of different angles, with a number of different focuses. Several of the papers discuss evidence from Germanic, either Proto-Germanic (Joseph and Schwink), or daughter languages such as Dutch (Goss and Howell), Afrikaans (Roberge), Newcastle English (Milroy), and a Wisconsin German dialect (Geiger and Salmons). Other papers look at Italian (Cravens), Spanish (Harris-Northall), and the non-Indo-European languages or families Aramaic (Miller), and Proto-Hmong-Mien (Ratliff), and the Southeast Asian languages Phan Rang Cham and Tsat (Thurgood). In doing so they bring together a number of issues which are of current concern in comparative and historical linguistics. These issues are interconnected; nevertheless, after an overview of the articles in this volume I will try to tease them apart and focus on each issue in turn. I will begin by giving a brief overview of the papers in this volume.

2. *Overview*

The first author, Cravens, discusses a number of problematic forms in Italian; rather than continuing intervocalic /p t k/ unchanged, as is normally the case in Italian, these forms exhibit voiced /b d g/. Cravens looks at variation found in Tuscan dialects in the present day, finding that underlying voiceless stops may in practice be realized as voiceless occlusives, spirants, and lax voiceless or voiced forms, in different speech tempos and different registers. Cravens points to similar variation in medieval documents, and suggests that variation in the surface realization of these segments, partially overlapping the surface realizations of underlying voiced obstruents, may have led to speakers differing in the underlying phonemes they abstracted for

each lexical item. The medieval evidence suggests that this process has been ongoing in Tuscan since at least its earliest documentation.

The next authors, Geiger and Salmons, trace a "trajectory of change" in the Wisconsin German dialect Kölsch involving the aspiration and voicing of /t/ and /d/. By examining recordings of different speakers made in the mid 1940s, in 1970, and in 1999, Geiger and Salmons identify variation in the VOT of the coronal stops; they note that over time the VOT of the aspirated coronal stop has dropped to below the VOT normally associated with a voiceless stop; /d/ has also decreased its VOT over time, though less dramatically that /t/. This result is surprising, since it suggests that in this one feature Kölsch is becoming less similar to English, even as it becomes more similar morphologically

The next author, Harris-Northall, looks at Castilian Spanish around 1500, the time when the language is often said to have "reached maturity" or to have "entered its golden age." That point is also when the first grammars of the language were written; previous scholars have argued that these grammars constitute evidence of the "maturity" of the language. Harris-Northall argues that, on the contrary, the grammars did not reflect the standardization of the language but rather shaped the language by elevating some variants and suppressing others. Harris-Northall examines two versions of the *Gran Conquista de Ultramar*, one dated to the end of the 13th century and one printed in 1503, which illustrate this suppression of variation. He demonstrates that variation still persisted in the spoken language by examining New World Spanish documents from the same period, so that the reduction in variation seen in *Gran Conquista de Ultramar* must have been deliberate. This codification of the language resulted in some variants being stigmatized as rustic or uncouth, driving variation "underground" by weeding it out of the standard language.

The next paper, by Goss and Howell, focuses on the writings of thirteen immigrants to The Hague from the end of the 16th century until the 1670s, using these texts to trace the development of /ei/ diphthongs and diminutive endings. Goss and Howell classify diminutive endings into those starting with a velar versus those starting with a palatal; because palatal endings existed in more of the dialects spoken by immigrants to the city, they argue, velar suffixes became marked and hence disfavored. The textual evidence supports this, showing a shift across three generations to the palatal form. The collapse of Middle Dutch *î* and *ei* into [ɛi], they argue, similarly shows that forms present in more dialects tend to win out over forms present only in single

dialects; in addition, the collapse supports the claim that simpler systems tend to win out over more complex ones.

Joseph's paper primarily focuses on the relationship between reconstructions based on the Comparative Method and variation. This relationship is problematic at best. In some cases, the application of the Comparative Method reduces variation across the daughter languages to a single form in the proto-language, as the correspondence between f in Germanic and p elsewhere is resolved by reconstructing *p and positing the action of Grimm's Law. In other cases, however, it is less clear whether the best solution is to posit variation, invoke some form of phonological conditioning, or seek some other solution. Joseph concludes by suggesting that reconstructing variation might be a way of accounting for the phenomenon known as "drift," in which related languages show similar developments which nevertheless seem to be dated after the languages had diverged.

Miller looks at the distribution of two direct speech complementizers in Aramaic during the fifth century B.C.E. Such forms frequently occur in legal documents; since such documents also contain the names of the parties involved as well as sociolinguistic information such as their professions and cities of origin. In addition, the material on which the text was written correlates with register, with informal texts written on ostraca (potsherds) and more formal texts written on papyrus or leather. Choice of complementizer may correlate somewhat with register. Miller determines that the most important factor was stylistic; one variant was used exclusively in the portion of the documents known as the *praescriptio*, which gives the date and identifies the parties involved in the legal action.

Milroy discusses the debate over the role of the speaker in sound change. He suggests that the conventional discourse of historical linguistics, in which languages are spoken of as agents able to bring about change in themselves (for example in formulations such as "*p changed to *f in Germanic") obscures the fact that it is speakers changing their habits that brings about change in language. Milroy goes on to discuss the varying realizations of /t/ in Newcastle; the segment is normally heavily glottalized in this dialect, but at the end of conversational turns, is realized instead as an aspirated stop with no glottalization. This allophonic variation has thus been pressed into service as a turn-taking marker. When, however, the end to a conversational turn is marked by some other device such as a sentence tag, the phoneme may variably be glottalized as it would be in other positions. In this case variation represents a change in progress: glottalization has been

spreading through the dialect, with the position at the end of a conversational turn exhibiting the last remnants of the older form.

Ratliff discusses the nominal prefixes of Hmong-Mien, prefixes that generally classify nouns based on semantic features such as animacy, shape, or use. Such prefixes are found across the family; unfortunately, the prefixes found do not exhibit regular sound correspondences. Ratliff demonstrates that the reflexes of particular lexical items differ across the family in the specific prefixes with which they occur. Ratliff suggests that one way of accounting for this is to reconstruct the prefixal slot to the proto-language, and to reconstruct variation among the prefixes. In this analysis, the daughter languages selected different variants, accounting for the variation seen.

Roberge develops a picture of the linguistic continuum that must have existed in Cape Dutch Vernacular, the speech forms which developed into Afrikaans, which was spoken roughly during the time period 1710-1840. The majority of his evidence derives from texts written by speakers at different points along the sociolinguistic continuum during the period in question, and, in the case of the basilectal variant, in reported speech given in a personal diary. Roberge notes that it is not possible to reconstruct a smooth continuum, with each speaker situated at a precise point on the continuum and each linguistic feature varying in a linear way; in fact, he argues that such a system is not to be expected because basilect and acrolect were formed via different contact situations involving different dialects and languages.

Schwink's article focuses on variation in nominal gender across Germanic. After a discussion of methodological issues, he looks at different ways in which gender assignment across the subgroup involves variation. One kind of variation involves classifying the reflexes of a particular lexical item differently in the daughter languages; Schwink argues that this may provide evidence that the gender of the noun varied in the proto-language. He also discusses variation in gender resolution rules, rules used to determine the gender of a plural noun when it describes a mixed-gender group.

Thurgood focuses on data from the Southeast Asian languages Phan Rang Cham and Tsat. He notes that in both of these languages variation is virtually always the result of language contact, and hence should not be reconstructed for the proto-language. He argues that in fact the proto-languages genuinely were simpler, and that such simplicity is not an artifact of the method of reconstruction. He concludes by suggesting that researchers should use irregularities in the data to find evidence for contact patterns rather than focusing on whether those irregularities should be reconstructed for the proto-language.

3. *Naturalness*

One question is to what degree a reconstructed language should be viewed as a real, concrete, natural human language, spoken by genuine human speakers. This issue is by no means settled. In some cases a reconstructed language acquires a degree of artificiality because of the limitations of the comparative method. Schwink notes (this volume) that comparative reconstruction maps multiple systems in daughter languages to a single proto-system, suppressing messy complexity so that the proto-language looks simpler than it was in actual fact. Many researchers have argued that because of this reductionism it is a mistake to compare reconstructed systems to natural languages, either by invoking typological arguments or by arguing that since all observed living languages exhibit variation reconstructed languages should be expected to exhibit it as well. Nevertheless, although the limitations of the comparative method should be kept in mind, scholars should not assume that variation is impossible to reconstruct. Surely the question of whether or not we should reconstruct variation ought to be replaced by the question of how successful and convincing any particular reconstruction is.

4. *Granularity*

One of the most familiar dichotomies in linguistics is the Saussurean split between *langue* and *parole*; as is well known, Saussure asserted that the proper object of study for linguistics is *langue*, not *parole*. He states, "[t]he essential part (of the study of language) takes for its object the language itself, which is social in its essence and independent of the individual" (1986:19). He makes the further claim that "everything which relates to the geographical extension of languages and to their fragmentation into dialects concerns external linguistics [...] In fact geography has nothing to do with the internal structure of language" (1986:22). This dichotomy has been called into question in a number of ways. In synchronic linguistics, many researchers now accept that variation, formerly considered to be part of *parole*, must instead be part of *langue*; theories of grammar must then be able to structure the grammar to produce variation, whether through variable rules or through differential ranking of constraints in a constraint hierarchy (Anttila 1997; McMahon 2000). In diachronic linguistics, it may be useful to conceive of the difference between the behavior of speakers and the behavior of languages as a difference in *granularity*; rather than excluding one or the other of these from linguistics proper, it may be more productive to recognize that each of these involves looking for patterns of behavior at different levels. This approach then raises the question of how behavior at the microlevel,

involving specific choices made by specific individuals, maps to patterns seen at the macrolevel, with languages shaped by the consequences of these individual choices. In historical linguistics, as in economic theory, this behavior is described as the consequence of an "invisible hand" (Keller 1994).

The papers in this volume examine variation at both the microscopic level and the macroscopic level. The paper by Goss and Howell, for example, involves examining the response to variation seen within the writings of specific, named individuals, as does the paper by Roberge. Similarly, Miller's detailed study of the variation exhibited by two direct speech comple-mentizers in 5th century B.C.E. Egypt involves identifying the linguistic preferences of specific, named individuals. In spite of the significant difference in the time depths of these cases, all look at choices made by specific individuals, and how those choices had consequences for the linguistic system as a whole. For example, Goss and Howell look at specific choices made by speakers within the broad range of potential diminutive forms. They determine that speakers tended to prefer forms belonging to several dialects rather than those belonging to one specific dialect. At first glance, this suggests that speakers somehow keep track of the diminutive suffixes used by each dialect so as to identify those that are most common. Such an analysis would be, of course, ludicrous. Instead, Goss and Howell point out that forms belonging to a single dialect have the greatest possibility of being identified with that dialect, and, hence, stigmatized. Unsurprisingly, stigmatized forms are chosen less frequently than non-stigmatized forms, and tend to fall out of the language much more. Choices made by individual speakers at the microlevel, with the goal of avoiding stigmatized forms, have an effect at the macrolevel: the Middle Dutch diminutive suffix *-kîn* develops into the Modern Dutch diminutive *-(t)je,* with the initial segment changing from a velar to a palatal.

Schwink's article, on the other hand, looks at the linguistic macrolevel. Evidence for gender variability in Germanic is discussed independent of the value of variability to a specific speaker. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that the variation being reconstructed must have existed so long ago that individual behaviors simply are not accessible to the present-day linguist. Even in Schwink's analysis, though, the microlevel plays a role, albeit a speculative one: Schwink suggests that variability in gender assignment might be due in some cases to a conflict between morphological and semantic principles for assigning gender. This suggests a scenario in which an individual speaker is able to make the choice between adhering to one

principle of gender assignment or another. Again, the consequences of choices at the microlevel ultimately are reflected at the macrolevel, with different daughter languages assigning nouns to different genders.

5. *Methodologies for reconstructing variation*

Different authors in this book adopt different methodologies for reconstructing variation. Both Ratliff and Schwink use the comparative method to some degree; in each case it is the failure of the comparative method to produce unambiguous results that leads them to reconstruct variation. Geiger and Salmons, on the other hand, use recordings collected at different times to trace backwards the trajectory of a sound change in Kölsch and suggest that it might be possible to similarly use European recordings to ultimately triangulate back towards the European base dialects that gave rise to both systems. Geiger and Salmons note that without the evidence from studies taken at different time depths, the trend affect the VOT of the coronal stops would have gone unnoticed.

Harris-Northall, in his analysis of the development of a standard written dialect of Castilian Spanish around 1500, also traces a developmental trajectory. To take one example, he demonstrates that the grammatical structures involved in these changes, such as the replacement of *ser* with *haber* as an auxiliary in compound tenses of intransitive verbs, must have involved the deliberate choice of one variant over another. Since the forms found in the 13th century text are still found in New World Spanish throughout the entire 15th century, the changes in the text cannot be explained as simply the normal replacement of archaic forms with contemporary forms. Instead, variants suppressed in the later text must have been stigmatized. Harris-Northall concludes that Renaissance Spanish, rather than simply replacing medieval Spanish and the variation it exhibited, in fact stigmatized certain variants and hence drove them "underground."

Joseph discusses the possibility of using comparative evidence to reconstruct variation as a way of explaining some cases of the phenomenon known as "drift." One such case he discusses in detail is the development of initial clusters consisting of *h* followed by a sonorant R in both English and German. With the exception of the cluster *hw-*, and, to a more limited degree, *hy-*, the other clusters lost the initial *h-* in Middle English. Joseph cites evidence of variation involving these clusters as early as the Mercian gloss in the *Rushworth Gospels* and the Northumbrian gloss to the *Lindisfarne Gospels*; in these two sources, *h-* was most likely to be lost before *n* and least likely to be lost before *w*. In Old High German, too, evidence points to variability during late Old High German. Joseph suggests that if the loss of

initial *h* in these clusters exhibits the same variability in Old High German as in Old English, then there would be evidence for reconstructing that variability to Proto-West-Germanic. Joseph notes as problematic the fact that *hw* was simplified relatively early in Old High German, but variation in this cluster has persisted until the present day in English.

The evidence for the variability of *hw* at an earlier stage in English, however, may be better than Joseph thinks. Spellings with <w> in place of <hw> or <wh> are found throughout the Middle English period; they occur as early as the 12th century in the southern part of the country. Some scholars have attributed this spelling simplification to French influence; Mossé, in fact, suggests that this spelling is found among Anglo-Norman scribes, probably because the Normans had difficulty in pronouncing *hw*. Mossé also, however, notes, "[t]his may also indicate an early tendency to reduce [hw] to [w] such as developed later on" (1952:43).

Attributing the simplification to Anglo-Norman influence becomes less plausible, however, when evidence from the early Middle English text *Brut* is considered. The *Brut*, written by an author who gives his name as Lawman (*Laȝamon*), and who describes himself as a priest, was probably written at the end of the 12th century or the beginning of the 13th century. The earliest version of the text is found in the manuscript Cotton Caligula A 9, dated to about 1250. The spelling of the interrogative pronouns and forms derived from them consistently show variation between the spellings <wh> and <w>; as an example, line 8 contains the forms *wat* 'what' and *wonene* 'whence' (Madden 1847:2). Lawman's dialect was a mixed dialect of the South West Midland (Mossé 1952:347), but what is most striking about the *Brut* is how free of Norman influence the text is, though the author clearly was acquainted with the Anglo-Norman poem *Roman de Brut*, completed by its author, Wace, in 1155. In spite of this familiarity, the text is extremely conservative in all aspects of the language. The lexicon is remarkably free of French loan words: Madden asserts that the entire text found in the Cotton manuscript, more than 16,000 lines, contains fewer than fifty borrowings from French, with a number of those forms having already been present in Old English. The spelling is fairly conservative, with the graphemes <ð> and <þ> used predominantly, and Old English spelling conventions such as <sc> for /ʃ/ preserved (though the spelling <qu> has replaced the earlier <cw>). Interestingly, the text varies in its representation of the labial fricative in initial position, sometimes showing <v> and sometimes <f>, suggesting that the Southern voicing of initial fricative may have been going on at this time.

Whether Lawman was writing in the language of his time is debatable. Allen (1992) notes that the Cotton manuscript version of the text "preserves with reasonable accuracy declined forms of the definite article, and strong adjectives, with traces of grammatical gender in nouns, features which had been leveled in most parts of the country by the early thirteenth century" but attributes this to Lawman's using "a self-consciously archaic spelling and grammar, perhaps to give an 'antique flavor' to his history" (Allen 1992:xx-xxi). At the very least, Lawman's command of English, his spelling of his name (*Laʒamon*, based on the Old English word *laʒu* "law" rather than the Middle English *lawe*), and the overall archaic nature of the text make it highly unlikely that he substituted <w> for <hw> because of difficulty with English phonology. In light of all these facts about the manuscript, attributing the variation to Anglo-Norman influence seems implausible. Instead, I suggest, the text shows evidence of early variation between *hw* and *w*.

Other texts from other parts of the country also show sporadic spellings with <w>; for example, the *OED* cites the spelling *watt* as occurring in the *Ormulum*, a text written in the Northeast Midlands at the end of the twelfth century. Unfortunately, most of the manuscripts we have from Old English were written in the same dialect, West Saxon, so that if the variation between *w* and *hw* were a feature of one of the other dialects, it would be very difficult to find evidence for it in the existing texts. In this respect, although the Middle English texts are later, they might give a more accurate picture of earlier variation in the language than the Old English texts do, since so much more of the dialectal picture of the language has been preserved from the Middle English period than from the earlier period. Certainly the possibility that orthographic variants in medieval texts represent variation in the spoken language should be taken more seriously than it has; in 1847 Madden noted that "it is impossible to collate together Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, without being struck with the occasional use of anomalous forms, which are termed by grammarians — rather too arbitrarily, perhaps — corruptions" (Madden 1847:xxvii). Nearly 160 years later, Madden's statement is, unfortunately, still accurate.

Whether the early Middle English variation between *hw* and *w* can be connected to the variation going on in Present Day English is unclear. It is possible that the development of a standard dialect in late Middle English coupled with the codification of the spelling system in Early Modern English had the effect of eliminating variation in the spoken language. It is also possible that these forces merely forced the variation "underground," as