

Individual Differences in Generative Syntax

Joan Maling
Brandeis University

A widely held belief in generative syntax is that all native speakers converge on more or less the same grammar. However several recent empirical studies suggest that this is not always the case. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) conducted a large nationwide study investigating the on-going development of a new transitive impersonal construction. Results from the 200 adult controls showed that adult speakers, who did not accept the innovative construction, split roughly 50-50 on the control of both bound anaphors and subject-oriented adjuncts with impersonal passives of intransitive verbs, a common construction in the standard language (Icelandic *Það var dansað*; German *Es wurde getanzt*, lit. ‘it_{EXPL} was danced’). Within-subjects analysis showed that these properties are highly correlated, suggesting that the two populations had different grammars. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir argue that impersonal passives are structurally ambiguous; two different syntactic analyses are possible, but the evidence that would choose between them is vanishingly rare. (See Maling & O’Connor 2015 for further discussion).

It seems clear that during periods of major syntactic change, e.g. the change from SOV to SVO in the history of Icelandic or English, different grammars are available. The indeterminacy which produces lively debate among linguists as to whether Old Icelandic was underlyingly verb-final or verb-initial surely played out as well in the minds of speakers. For some period during the transition, the input available to the learner does not determine a unique grammar. What is not clear is whether the individual speaker during a transition acquires both grammars, or only one. That issue is addressed by recent experimental work on Korean.

Han, Lidz & Musolino (2007) reported individual differences in scope judgments in Korean. In their study of scope interaction between argument QPs and negation, they found that roughly half of their subjects allowed only the interpretation where the universal takes scope over negation, and roughly half allowed the interpretation where negation takes scope over the universal. This was true for both long and short negation, and for both adults and children aged 4. In recent follow-up studies, they show that speakers were consistent in their judgments across multiple testing sessions and that they were consistent in their scope assignments for both kinds of negation in Korean. This pattern supports the view that each speaker controls only one grammar, with the variability in scope judgments following from which grammar that is. Like Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir, Han et al. argue that this variability results from a sparseness of relevant evidence: given the paucity in input, learners of Korean choose one grammar over the other at random. Data from mother-child dyads shows that children do not necessarily acquire the same grammar as their parent, supporting the claim that the input data underdetermines the grammatical analysis.

I believe that understanding individual differences is an important challenge for generative syntacticians, one that deserves more attention. Dąbrowska (2012) “reviews several recent studies suggesting that – contrary to a widespread belief – adult monolingual native speakers of the same language do not share the same mental Grammar.” (abstract, p.219) Dąbrowska argues that variability in attained grammar is evidence against generative linguistics, but this conclusion

certainly does not follow. Because of her focus on L2 acquisition, Dąbrowska discusses this in terms of the “incomplete acquisition” of certain constructions. There is no reason to believe that the individual differences found in either the Icelandic or the Korean case involves incomplete acquisition. Clearly further research is needed to understand to what extent there are individual differences in the grammars of adult native speakers. There is a growing literature on microcomparative syntax, but the observed syntactic diversity is generally viewed as systematic regional/dialectal rather than random ideolectal variation. The extensive literature in variationist sociolinguistics is not helpful because the outlook in that field is that grammar is a property of the community, not of the individual.

Selected references

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