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Sociolinguistic variation in language description and documentation

Monday, 16 January 2023, 2:00 p.m., H80 (Philosophikum)

Research on sociolinguistic variation (SV) and linguistic typology have proceeded largely independently of one another (although see relevant work by Di Garbo et al. 2020, Hildebrandt et al. 2017). Sociolinguists typically focus on variation in a few well-documented languages (Nagy & Meyerhoff 2008). In contrast, grammar-writers typically work on under-documented languages and tend to focus on grammatically predictable variation. In this talk, I address this disconnect from a grammar writer's and language documentary perspective. In the first part, I investigate how SV is currently represented in twenty reference grammars, by tracking where linguistic variation is described in the language and what explanatory social factors grammar writers use to explain non-grammatically conditioned variation. We find that most instances of SV are discussed for phonetic/phonological variables and are often explained as dialectal differences. For other types of linguistic variables, e.g. syntactic, proposed social correlates of non-grammatical variation are vague. In the second part of the talk, I show an example of variation and the challenges of explaining it. Based on data from my own fieldwork on Gyeli, Kwasio, and Bulu (Bantu, Cameroon), I show that there is a high degree of variability with respect to color terms and categories. On the one hand, the variability can be linked to patterns of color innovation in language contact. On the other hand, intra-community variation in color word forms and lexical choices is considerable and leaves the question whether the variation can be explained by sociolinguistic factors or whether colors do not constitute a unitary domain in these languages (Levinson 2001).