Research Article

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Introduction: What Varies when Language Varies?

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Variation is a universal phenomenon permeating language, culture, and the entire worldview. It characterizes human linguistic ability in the broadest sense. The current edition focuses on language variation which is examined from different angles: concentrating on the stability or variability of different levels and components of language, comparing morphosyntactic and semantic patterns in different languages, examining how mechanisms of human cognition manifest in language, and analyzing language as material for traditional song. Systematic patterns of variation for different levels are outlined.

In linguistics, variation first became a central topic of research, studied systematically and quantifiably, in sociolinguistics (e.g. Labov 1972), with the focus of the study on phonetic and phonological details. The study of variation in grammar, being more complicated, began a decade later in the 1980s. By now, variation has become a central concept in the study of morphosyntax where variation is broadly defined as the use of different linguistic codings for the same functions (Dufter et al. 2009: 2–3). The framework of variation is also applicable to the study of similarities and differences, for example, in prosody, morphology, word formation, semantics, and pragmatics but also in comparing language varieties (see e.g. Lieb 1993).

Variation is also a central concept in folklore whose mechanisms are based on the interaction of invariance and variability. The poetic structure of traditional song is developed from linguistic material, and its variation is restricted by communication type and syncretism with music and performance (see e.g. Metslang 1987, Honko 2000, Babič and Voolaid 2019a).

This special issue is inspired by the conference “Variation in language, literature and folklore” held in Tartu, Estonia, in December 2017. The main organizers of the conference were the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies and the working group of Estonian Research Council research project PUT475 (and of the next project PRG341). The topics discussed at the conference included specific and common in variation in language, literature, folklore, and music, and the confluences and connections between different variations (see also Babič and Voolaid 2019b). This issue contains contributions based on conference presentations on linguistic variation as well as new studies.

The issue contains nine studies focusing on (1) the general concept of variation (Moravcsik), (2) morphosyntactic variation (Sahkai and Tamm; Irimia; Norvik), semantic variation (Kalda and Uusküla; Prieto Mendoza); rhythmical variability in sung oral poetry (Bravi and Proto; Oras).

Edith Moravcsik in her study “Accounting for variation in language” uses examples from different languages and levels of language to analyze the concept of variation in general, distinguishing between

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different approaches to similar phenomena: when are similar phenomena considered to be subtypes of the same general type and when does one of them gain the status of a type. The factors of different approaches are examined and comparisons made with similar examples in other disciplines and in everyday life. The study thereby contributes to the general theoretical characterization of variation.

Heete Sahkai and Anne Tamm's "Verb placement and accentuation: Does prosody constrain the Estonian V2?" explores variation in word order in Estonian sentences and its relation to sentence prosody. Estonian is a verb-second language but V2 is more of a tendency and the study analyses one type of divergence from the tendency, verb placement further from the second position. The research material includes both a written corpus and a spoken production study. To study the potential prosody of the written corpus the authors used an algorithm based on a sentence accent assignment model proposed by Caroline Féry (2011). The study shows the relation between verb position and verb accent: while clause-medial verbs tend to bear a nuclear pitch accent, second-position verbs don't.

Monica Alexandrina Irimia's "Variation on differential object marking: on some differences between Spanish and Romanian" investigates morphosyntactic variation between two closely related languages. Differential object marking, like differential argument marking in general, has remained a central topic of interest for syntax researchers during the recent decades. Irimia's analysis, which is based on a generative approach (minimalism), shows that while differential object marking has many similarities in the languages and is mainly associated with the same factors, there are nonetheless several differences in the selection and hierarchy of factors.

Miina Norvik's "The expression of change-of-state in the Finnic languages" also discusses variation in the morphosyntax of closely related languages. Norvik examines verbs and constructions expressing change in Finnic languages belonging to the Uralic language group. The research material consists of data sets compiled from various collections of texts and results of previous studies. Verbs that develop into predicates of change by grammaticalization and/or borrowing include the concepts COME, GO, REMAIN/STAY, GET, WILL BE, MAKE/DO, and BE BORN/GIVE BIRTH as their source meaning. The study shows that each Finnic language uses several verbs of change; some languages have developed a general change verb that also functions as a future copula.

Anu Kalda and Mari Uusküla's "The role of context in translating colour metaphors: an experiment on English into Estonian translation" explores variation in translation equivalents and translation strategies for metaphoric expressions and the factors that influence it, thus belonging to both the fields of translation and metaphor study. A cognitive empirical study of the translation of 21 color metaphors revealed the tendency to interpret the color metaphors depending on culture and context, especially in the case of newer expressions that have not yet become lexicalized.

Alejandro Prieto Mendoza's "Semantic parallelism in traditional Kakataibo chants" also concentrates on semantics but in this study, as in the two following studies, the focus is on poetic structures functioning under the conditions of syncretism. Kakataibo is a Panoan language spoken in the Peruvian Amazon, in the regions of Huánuco and Ucayali, Peru. The study is based on chants collected during fieldwork. The author sees semantic parallelism as a compositional strategy of the chants, analyzes the stable and variable component of the structure of parallelism, and provides a model for the comparative typological study of parallelism present in the traditional creation of many cultures.

Janika Oras in her study "Individual Rhythmic Variation in Oral Poetry: The Runosong Performances of Seto Singers" reports Seto runosongs, traditional sung oral poetry belonging to the Finnic oral singing tradition, in order to identify and analyze the individual differences in rhythmic variation. The research material for the study consists of sound recordings from the Estonian Folklore Archives. Rhythm variation develops simultaneously in lyrics and music with the aid of accented syllables, the choice of rhythm differs by singer as well as between the lead singer and the choir, possibly depending on subjective factors.

Paolo Bravi and Teresa Proto's "Intra-line and inter-individual variation in Sardinian *arrepentina*" investigates variation in linguistic and musical rhythm in *arrepentina*, a genre of extemporaneous poetry performed by semi-professional poets in south-central Sardinia. *Arrepentinas* are performed by improvising to the rhythm of accordion either in a smaller group or at public events. The research material contains recordings from public events. For the analysis, both the verbal line and the melodic line were divided into

smaller units and correspondences between them were identified. Several factors of rhythm variation were found, e.g., the unit's position in the stanza, alignment of text and music, techniques of the singer's individual style.

The studies in this volume reveal the common human nature and wide array of language variation. The studies show a balance between stability and variation in both everyday language and folklore, in collective and personal usage and in the languages of the Amazon, the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Baltic Sea regions.

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