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Revisiting the binary distinction of competence vs. performance or grammar vs. usage: A sociolinguistic response to Newmeyer (2003)

Keywords: grammar, usage, sociolinguistics

Binary linguistic distinctions of *langue* vs. *parole* or competence vs. performance parallel representation as internal and practice as external. Newmeyer's (2003) defense of "grammar" versus "usage" falls within this lineage. Though ultimately more postulate than theory, particular claims from Newmeyer may be tested. For instance, Newmeyer (p. 687) identified three "basic aspects of grammar, such as long-distance dependencies, category-sensitive processes, structure-dependence, and so on." Prediction:

If "there is a world of difference between what a grammar is and what we do" as Newmeyer argued (p. 695), these basic aspects of grammar should not characterize usage. However, if patterns of usage display parallels to these aspects of grammar, this will give us cause to rethink the "world of difference" between them. I start with **(1)** structure dependence, **(2)** move to category-sensitive processes, and then **(3)** long-distance dependencies. When discussing structure dependence, I explore Adjacency Pairs and the concept of "significant silence" from Conversation Analysis. Significant silence occurs when speech in the second pair part of an Adjacency Pair is relevantly absent. Interpretation of this silence is, then, structure dependent. For discussion of category-sensitive processes and long-distance dependencies, I draw on Variationist Sociolinguistic treatments of linguistic constraints on English (ing) and Spanish null/pronominal subject alternations. English (ing) is constrained by lexical categories such as Nouns versus Verbs. Here, I report on a study of 30 children where the [ŋ]-variant occurs with Nouns at a rate of 90% but at 55% with Verbs. Thus, (ing) displays category-sensitivity. For long distance dependencies, I revisit a variationist analysis of pronominal and null subject expression in Spanish that has the flavor of a long-distance dependency across multiple sentences. Specifically, I construe a dependency between the choice of subject type in plural subjects and their antecedents at varying degrees of distance back in the discourse. For instance, in the speech of ten speakers from San Juan, Puerto Rico, plural subjects with antecedents within 5 preceding clauses occur with pronouns at a rate of 14% whereas those with antecedents between 6 to 10 display a rate of 44% and those with antecedents beyond 10 preceding clauses display a rate of 67%. Nonetheless, some aspects of long-distance dependencies, such as island constraints, do seem very grammar internal. This leads to the proposal that grammar and usage are not worlds apart. They are parallel worlds that raggedly overlap in ways that a binary distinction cannot adequately represent.

References

Newmeyer, F. 2003. Grammar is grammar and usage is usage. *Language*. 79: 682-707.