

(Apparently) competing motivations in morpho-syntactic variation

With the revived interest in language variation there has been a growing readiness to incorporate competing motivations into linguistic theory-building, and an increasingly large number of (potentially) universal factors conditioning variation have come to the fore. The present paper explores competing motivations in the form of analytic support (i.e. the tendency to resort to analytic rather than synthetic variants in cognitively demanding environments). It bridges the gap between traditionally descriptive variation linguistics and approaches based on typological and psycholinguistic principles, with the primary concern to explain competing motivations governing the choice between functionally equivalent morphological and syntactic structures. Providing a quantitative and qualitative in-depth account of a range of novel and hitherto neglected factors, that shape and design morpho-syntactic alternation, it will be argued that languages retain morpho-syntactic variation in order to optimally exploit the system. What appears to be competing motivations at first glance turns out to be an intricately systematic adaptation to processing demands reflected in an emergent division of labour: Morphology is resorted to more often in comparatively easy-to-process contexts, while syntactic variants are preferred in cognitively more demanding environments. A case in point is comparative alternation in English (i.e. the choice between syntactic *more full* vs. morphological variants *fuller*), which has recently been shown to be subject to at least 24 determinants. An in-depth treatment of several complexity parameters reveals that the underlying force pertaining to all determinants that invoke the analytic comparative is to mitigate increased processing demands – a strategy referred to as *more-support*. A bird's eye view of 24 determinants from all core levels of linguistic analysis illustrates that the different degrees of processing effort mirrored in comparative alternation emanate from structures that are phonologically, morphologically, syntactically, lexically, semantically and pragmatically complex. These factors are also shown to be operative across different language varieties, for instance in the trajectory of diachronic change and the regional variation exhibited in British and American English. The findings offer new and theoretically unaligned explanations for competing motivations in morpho-syntax.