Project description

This project is focused on a comparative linguistic analysis of variation and idiosyncrasy in Germanic and Romance. The workshop will be focused on varieties of Bavarian and Brazilian Portuguese but applications are welcome from students/researchers looking at the topic of variation in any varieties of Romance and/or Germanic, as well as researchers with an interest in variation within the individual. Despite the obvious differences between Bavarian and Brazilian Portuguese, relating to linguistic typology, number of speakers and status as an official language with an established written tradition, recent research has revealed a particular linguistic similarity: the prevalence of what seems to be idiosyncratic individual variation within and across speakers which is not consistently identifiable with any social meaning (Bülow & Pfenninger 2021; Nickel 2021; O'Neill 2024; O'Neill & Ugartemendía 2026; Vergeiner et al. 2024). Such variation has also been noted for other varieties of Romance and Germanic (e.g Bouard et al. 2024; Entringer 2021; Dufter 2018; Rosemeyer 2023; Thornton 2011, 2012, 2019; Werth et al. 2021).

This particular type of variation is problematic within linguistic theory since the general assumption of both formal and functional theories of language is that variation is a) systematically structured, either grammatically or socially (Weinreich et al., 1968) and (b) individual variation is insignificant (Labov 1966: 412; 2006: 508), unless it aligns with some socially meaningful groupings (age, class etc) or is indicative of how speakers manipulate meaningful variants to construct different personas, styles and identities (Eckert 2012). Non-systematic variation with no clear social and grammatical correlations is generally considered either as symptomatic of a lack of research to undercover the 'true' underlying systematicities (Labov 1966:5) or as insignificant "noise" and irrelevant to linguistic analysis (for an overview see Dufter et al. 2009). The assumption is that individuals of the same speech community share the same systematic and orderly grammar and sociolinguistic information. Thus, linguistic variation is coherently structured to allow for consistent interpretation, social signalling, and communicative effectiveness. The task of the linguist is to make sense of the seemingly erratic and chaotic linguistic data by uncovering the systematic, underlying regularities and rules which define languages as coherent, ordered systems.

Across scientific disciplines, it is a common, reoccurring assumption that the object of study is ordered, coherent and obeys deterministic rules. Scientists initially believed that weather, planetary motion, ecosystems and DNA inheritance could be modelled with perfect precision. However, further research revealed deeper complexity, randomness, or entropy. In Physics, for example, at the end of the 17th century Isaac Newton described the universe as a clockwork mechanism, governed by precise and universal mathematical laws. Such ideas prevailed and shaped research agendas until the early 20th century when quantum physics revealed that, at fundamental levels, nature is governed by probability, uncertainty, and variation rather than fixed laws. Many physicists resisted quantum randomness; Einstein famously stated that "God does not play dice" and argued that hidden variables must exist—some deeper laws that appear random but were actually ordered.

Likewise in linguistics, Chomsky and his disciples described language as a perfect optimal system and the methodologies in many formal models of linguistics employ deterministic rules and reject non-systematic variation since the assumption is that "a fortiori there has to be a unifying, albeit maybe slightly more abstract, overall system in the coherence of language varieties, otherwise we would all be living in an eternal tower of Babel." (Guy & Hinskens , 2016, p. 1). Even usage-based and cognitive models of linguistics, which tend to reject deterministic, categorical rules in favour of probabilistic, gradient, and experience-driven patterns, have issues with this type of 'free' variation because their theoretical framework is built on the idea that language use is patterned, meaningful, and cognitively motivated. Witness the chapter title "Free variation? Look harder!" in Kopf and Weber (2023).

Yet, there is a growing body of research highlighting the prevalence and diachronic stability of variation within and across individuals, which is not correlated with any grammatical or social meaning within language communities. This type of variation, however, has largely been documented for small language communities and minority languages. It has even been proposed that the widespread socially

neutral linguistic variation in these languages stems from the specific social structures and sociocultural conditions present in these small/minority language communities (Dorian 2010: 238). Specifically, the following factors have been identified:

- Small/ decreasing speaker population
- Largely absence of socioeconomic differentiation
- A minority language/endangered language/dialect
- Lack of a written standard

Whilst some of these criteria are applicable to the social contexts in which varieties of Bavarian are spoken, the same is not true of Brazilian Portuguese: the country has notorious social and wealth inequalities and its 217 million inhabitants are mostly native speakers of Portuguese, the sixth most spoken language in the world by number of native speakers and one with a well-established written standard. However, it has also been proposed that the significant linguistic differences between spoken Brazilian Portuguese and the official traditional standard might have caused speakers to become disenfranchised and alienated from the standard (O'Neill and Ugartemendía, 2026), thus bringing the social context of Brazilian Portuguese towards that of varieties of Bavarian with respect of the complex relationship between the spoken language and the standard.

In this project we acknowledge that (a) numerous studies in other languages have proven that variation within and across individuals can be systematically correlated with some grammatical or social function and (b) there is clear scientific value in abstracting from individual speakers to general patterns within the speech community. However, one should not treat other types of variation as either 'noise' to be ignored or as indicative of a lack of research. To do so risks distorting the data and undermining the validity of any subsequent analyses. Moreover, if variation within and across individuals is understood as a form of linguistic diversity, and language is conceptualized as a complex adaptive system (Beckner et al. 2009), then it must be noted that the literature outside linguistics on such systems highlights the links between diversity and complexity. In particular, Page (2011) emphasizes that diversity is not a source of noise or inefficiency in complex systems, but rather a fundamental driver of their performance and adaptability (cf. de Bot et al. 2007; de Bot and Bülow 2020). In such systems, variation among components—whether in strategies, representations, or behaviours—enables flexibility, innovation, and resilience in the face of change.

Applying this to linguistics, no types of variation should be treated as 'noise' to be abstracted away, but as a core feature which makes languages robust, flexible and able to continually evolve and change. Note also that experimental work has revealed the irresistible urge people have to individualise their speech (Johnstone , 1996), which highlights how language is not only referential or used to reaffirm group membership but is also 'crucially self-expressive' (Dorian 2010: 186) and thus related to a person's individual style. Style is difficult to analyse with reference to socially meaningful groupings (age, class, gender) since it is inherently a 'local intra-and inter-personal processes' (Coupland 2001:191–92) and may not conform to common meanings and interpretations held by the speech community.

This project is situated within the field of comparative sociolinguistics, which examines how patterns of language variation and change manifest across different linguistic and social contexts. Drawing on the work of Tagliamonte (2013), who emphasizes the value of systematic cross-varietal comparison for uncovering both universal principles and local particularities in language variation, this project adopts a comparative lens to explore idiosyncratic variation comparing Germanic and Romance. By doing so, it contributes to broader sociolinguistic inquiries into how variation operates across diverse speech communities, while challenging long-standing assumptions about the structure and function of such variation.

Specific aims of workshops:

- make young researchers aware of more recent trends in theoretical and empirical linguistics which are questioning long-held assumptions
- highlight how data from Bavarian and Brazilian Portuguese can be extremely relevant to important international debates in linguistics

- introduce researchers to advanced quantitative techniques and variationist methods and thus equip young scholars with the analytical tools necessary to engage critically with non-canonical data and to contribute meaningfully to ongoing theoretical discussions in linguistics
- establish links for future cooperation between Universities in Bavaria and Brazil by foregrounding the similarities that exist in the seemingly typologically different data
- highlight the potential benefits and impact of collaborative research across diverse linguistic contexts to broaden theoretical, empirical, and methodological perspectives, and contribute to rethinking foundational models in linguistics.

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