

VARIATION AND IDIOSYNCRASY IN GERMANIC AND ROMANCE

WHAT IS IDIOSYNCRATIC VARIATION AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

DIFFERENT NAMES FOR SIMILAR PHENOMENA

free variation (Weber and Kopf, 2023)

random variability (Ellis, 1985: 136,)

individual differences (McKenzie, 2019)

intraspeaker variation (Guy et al., 2022);

idiosyncratic variation (Dorian, 2010);

intra-individual variation (Bülow & Pfenninger, 2021).

morphological overabundance (Hasse 2023, in press; Thornton 2012, 2019)

MORPHOLOGICAL OVERABUNDANCE

German

Fehringer (2004)

GEN.SG	Option A	Option B
word	Wortes	Worts
year	Jahres	Jahrs
God	Gottes	Gotts
dust	Staubes	Staubs
empire	Reiches	Reichs
leg	Beines	Beins

Brazilian Portuguese

(O'Neill and Ugartemendía 2026)

1SG.PRS.IND	Option A	Option B
read!	lê!	leia!
ask!	pergunte!	pergunta!
drink!	bebe!	beba!
have!	tem!	tenha!
do	faz!	faça!
eat!	come!	coma!

Idiosyncratic variation assumes that different speakers can show different patterns of usage and can have different degrees of sensitivity to different grammatical, social and geographic factors. It does NOT assume that:

- two forms are in entirely free variation at the population-level and therefore are equally predictable. German forms have different ratios depending on the lexeme (e.g. Staub-es ~ Staub-s 'dust-gen.sg' = 1.1 but Gott-es-Gott-s 'god-gen.sg' = 131.5:1)
- That there is no grammatical or social conditioning factors at all (Ptg. Option B shows tendencies to occur more in the North East of Brazil and in negative contexts, non-immediate contexts and formal contexts).

WHY IS IDIOSYNCRATIC VARIATION CONTROVERSIAL?

1. IT HIGHLIGHTS THE INDIVIDUAL INSTEAD OF THE GROUP:

- “the individual does not exist as a linguistic object” (Labov 2001: 34) - 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).
- “individual speakers are crucial to analysis, but primarily in the aggregate as representatives of those macro-demographic categories that pattern with linguistic usage (age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status)” (Becker 2016: 88)

Ergodicity concerns the relationship between individuals and populations.

A system is ergodic if observing one individual for long enough produces the same statistical picture as observing many individuals at one moment.

Many biological, psychological and social systems appear to be non-ergodic. Individuals retain their own histories.

Idiosyncratic variation contradicts the belief that individuals figure only "in the aggregate as representatives of demographic groups," because within-speaker and between-group patterns can point in opposite directions, making the aggregate a representative of no one. (TYPING EXAMPLE)



WHY IS IDIOSYNCRATIC VARIATION CONTROVERSIAL?

2. ALLOWS THE POSSIBILITY FOR NON-SYSTEMATIC OR FREE VARIATION AT THE INDIVIDUAL AND POPULATION LEVEL

A NUMBER OF LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES DIRECTLY MILITATE AGAINST FREE VARIATION/COMPETING FORMS

Syntax: Full interpretation principle (Chomsky 1995); principle of no synonymy (Goldberg 1995: 67)) variation in form (e.g. word orders, pronoun choices) must correspond to some difference in meaning or interpretation (e.g. information structure, pragmatics)

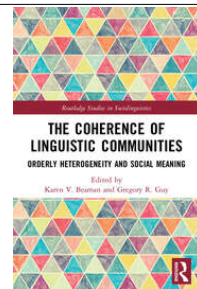
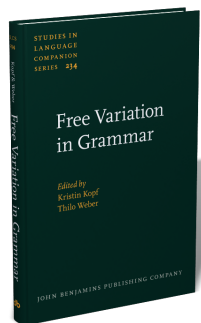
Morphology: Isomorphism/one form – one meaning principle (Anttila 1977; Bolinger 1977; Haiman (1980: 515)); the Law of Differentiation (Bréal 1900: 27–38) the Principle of Contrast (cf. Clark 1987:2); the paradigm economy principle (Carstairs 1983) the pāṇini principle/elsewhere condition (Kiparsky, 1982))

FREE VARIATION = NOT AS YET EXPLAINED VARIATION

Free variation: Fact or fiction?

(Weber and Kopf 2023:

- “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).



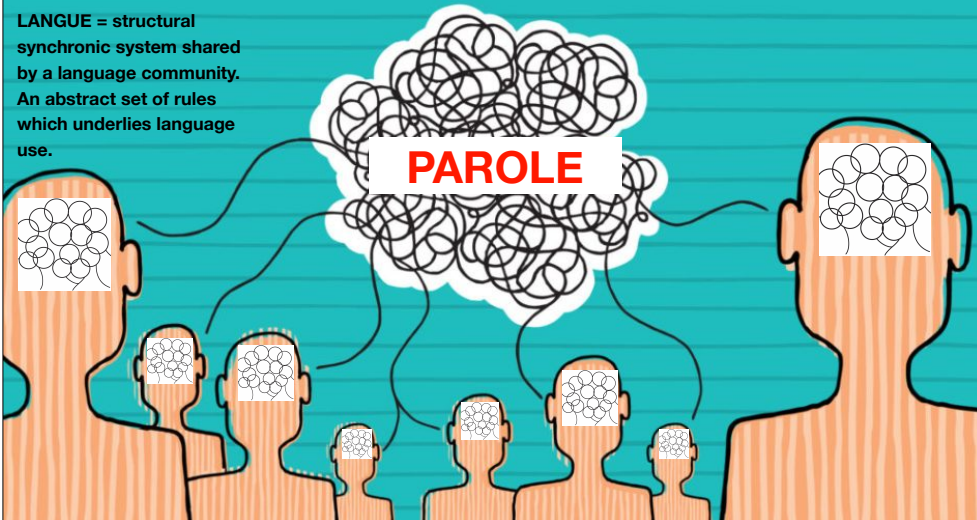
- Section 3: “Free variation? Look harder!” (Kopf and Weber (2023)

WHY IS IDIOSYNCRATIC VARIATION IMPORTANT?

1. CHALLENGES ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING THE INDIVIDUAL VS. THE GROUP

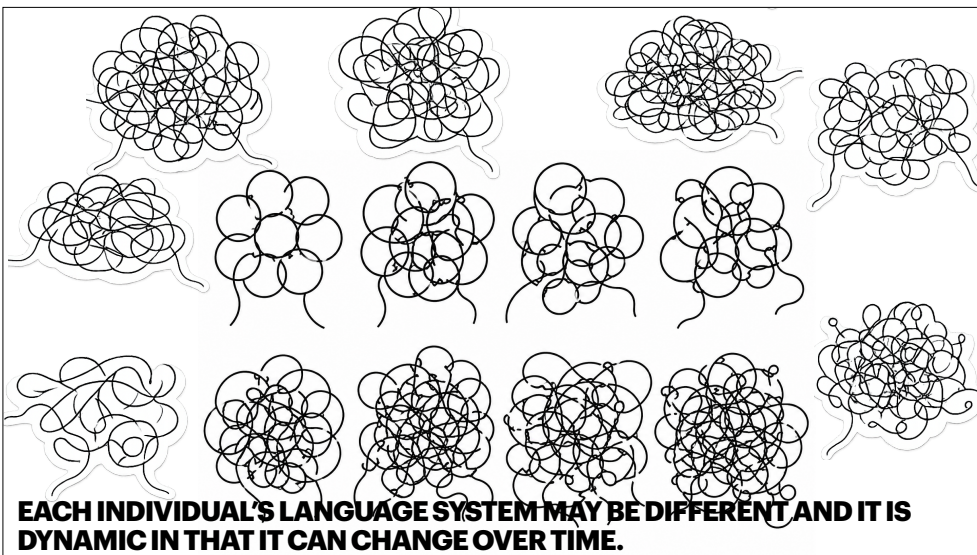
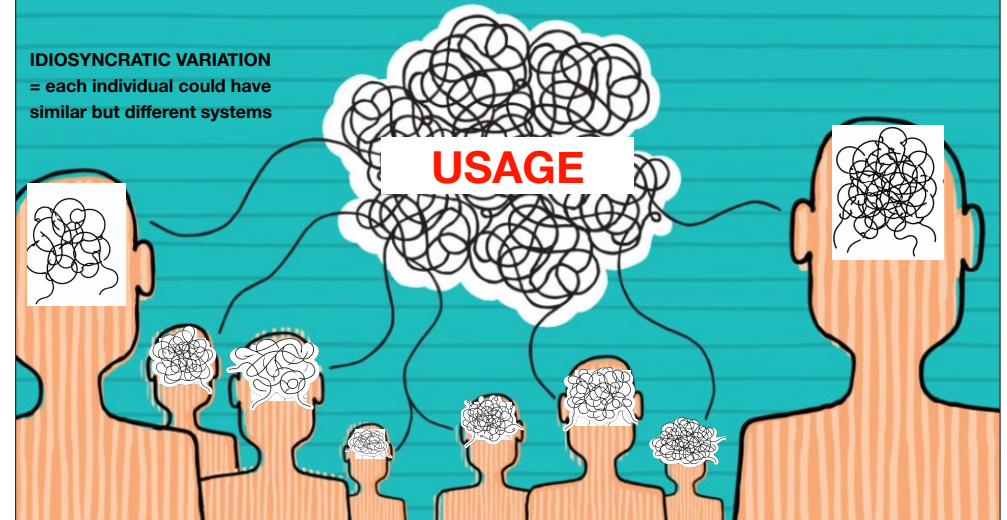
LANGUAGE = structural
synchronic system shared
by a language community.
An abstract set of rules
which underlies language
use.

PAROLE



IDIOSYNCRATIC VARIATION
= each individual could have
similar but different systems

USAGE



THE PROBLEM WITH NON-SYSTEMATIC INDIVIDUAL VARIATION

If language variation can be individually idiosyncratic then do speakers of the same community have different systems?

If language variation is not systematic then does this constitute a potential threat to the claim that languages are systems? (Ellis 1999: 461)

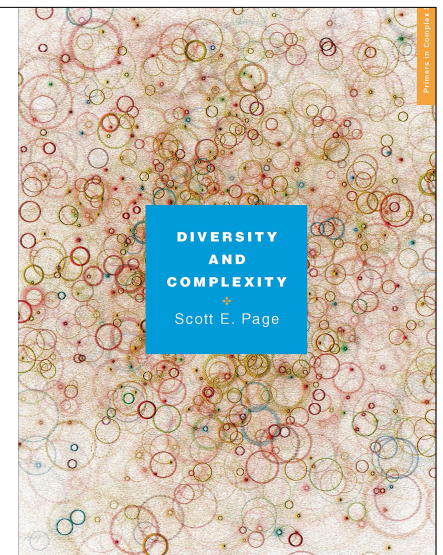
Depends how one defines a system....

an increasing number of linguists are coming to viewing language as a complex adaptive system (Beckner et al. 2009).

The literature outside linguistics on such systems, most notably Page (2011), highlights the links between diversity and complexity and how diversity makes fundamental contributions to the performance of a complex system.

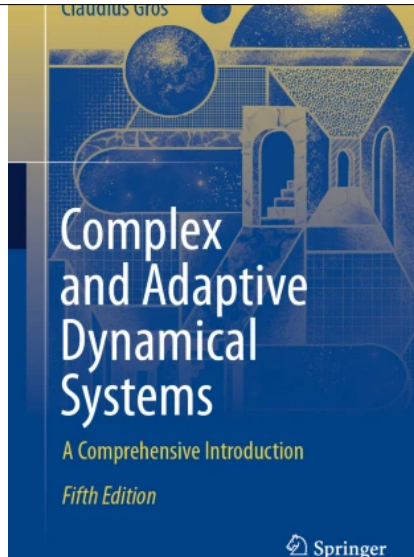
**DIVERSITY
AND
COMPLEXITY**

Scott E. Page



COMPLEXITY THEORY

- complexity science doesn't assume that all individual variation must crystallize into a stable population pattern. It explicitly studies the conditions under which it does, when it doesn't, and why.
- emergence requires certain conditions: sufficient interaction, positive feedback, reinforcement, transmission, memory, network connectivity.
- Many individual behaviours simply remain local - others spread - others disappear - others repeatedly arise without ever stabilising.



SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE SPEECH COMMUNITY

DORIAN (2010: 238) IDENTIFIES THE FOLLOWING FACTORS FOR NON-SYSTEMATIC IDIOSYNCRATIC VARIATION

- Small population
- Absence of socioeconomic differentiation
- A minority language/endangered language used as the traditional means of communication within the home but under pressure from another language for communication
- Lack of a written standard/excluded from the written standard

THIS COULD APPLY TO BAVARIAN BUT NOT BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE

Investigating Variation

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND SOCIAL SETTING

Nancy C. Dorian

LESSONS FROM THEORETICAL NEUROSCIENCE

J. A. SCOTT KELSO

- the brain is not a computer executing fixed programs, but a complex dynamical system whose behaviour emerges from interactions among many components
- Rather than asking:
 - What internal rule or program controls behaviour?
 - Why does behaviour change?
- One should ask
 - How can stable behaviour emerge from a system that is continuously changing?
 - Why does behaviour become stable in the first place?

