

# ON THE VARIABILITY OF SYNTAX: SOME THEORETICAL REMARKS

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## RESUMEN

En este artículo tratamos de revisar los aspectos teóricos y metodológicos básicos de la variación sintáctica centrándonos en varios fenómenos: las estructuras condicionales, los puntadores y marcadores discursivos, la alternancia entre el pretérito indefinido y pretérito perfecto y la expresión de sujeto. Relacionaremos los propósitos comunicativos individuales con determinados valores sociales y la expresión lingüística, valoraremos el tipo de significado que debe utilizarse como metodológicamente apropiado y estudiaremos el tipo de contexto en el que cada forma se inserta, para poder así abordar un adecuado análisis de las variantes sintácticas.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Variación Sintáctica, Sociolingüística, Sintaxis, Análisis del Discurso, Significado, Sinonimia

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to review of syntactic variation basic issues focusing on several phenomena: conditionals, punctors and discursive markers, alternance between present perfect and indefinite in Spanish, and subject expression. It is important to relate significative individual purpose with social meanings and linguistic forms wherefore we deal with the definition of syntactic variable and also with the kind of meaning that should be stated to define it according to the communicative purpose and to the analysis of context in each case, whereupon one would be able to make a right syntactic variation research.

**KEY WORDS**

Syntactic Variation, Sociolinguistics, Syntax, Discourse Analysis, Meaning, Synonymy

**RÉSUMÉ**

Avec cet article on prétend réfléchir sur la question de la Variation Syntactique en plusieurs structures: les conditionnels, les marqueurs discursives et les *puntores*, le passé composé et le passé simple, et l'expression du sujet. On analyse le rôle que jouent le contexte et le type de signification pour ajouter quelque chose de nouveau à la description de variantes syntactiques.

**MOTS-CLÉ**

Variation Syntactique, Sociolinguistique, Syntaxe, Analyse du Discours, Signification, Synonymie

In the light of Lavandera's sound critiques (1978), it is very difficult to provide any really meaningful contribution to the problem of syntactic variation. Subsequent contributions of note make it even more difficult to discuss the subject nowadays. In the present paper we will endeavour to review the issue and put forward what we consider to be a correct approach to syntactic variation research.

1. REVIEW OF BASIC ISSUES

Precursory variationist works discovered in phonology the ideal field for the analysis of variables (underlying segment) and variants (surface realizations), since these are easily delimited and recognizable in that they are discreet units with a high frequency of appearance. Being devoid of meaning, the phonological variant adapts itself perfectly to one of the basic postulates of sociolinguistics which stipulates that variants must differ only in their social or stylistic value (Labov 1972/1983). Two variants of a phonological variable serve equally well

for the same communicative purpose, they designate the same set of equivalents and in no case alter the truth value.

This explains the success of sociolinguistic methodology in phonology, but it does not lend support to the view that the methodology cannot be applied to other levels. If the intended purpose is to study, analyze and understand language in direct interrelationship with extralinguistic phenomena, it is not coherent to concentrate on the phonological level only, given that to do so would contradict the unity of language. The scant influence which the method has had outside these margins can be explained by the various difficulties which are present in phonology. Once notice was drawn to this by the majority of sociolinguists, a well-known and wide-ranging debate was opened on the subject. The earliest and indeed strongest criticism came from Lavandera (1978) and was directed against the first proposal by Gillian Sankoff based on the analysis of the future marker in 'tok pisin' (1972), and also against Laberge (1977) and his work on definite and indefinite subject pronouns. Lavandera also raised serious objections against works by Sankoff, Sarrasin & Cedergren (1971) on the elision of the *que* in French spoken in Montreal and against the study by Labov & Weiner (1977/1983) of the agentless passive.

However, she appears to have failed in her goal to compare syntax with phonology because of the meaning: taking account of the meaningful differences that variants may carry, she then proposes that such data requires an additional interpretation in order that the meaning is not affected. Her reasoning is important in that she draws attention to two obstacles which do not, however, seem interrelated: on the one hand, the fact that variables are carriers of social and/or stylistic meaning and, on the other, that the reference is not affected since the supposed variants must be treated using the criterion of functional comparability with a subsequent weakening of the meaning (1984). It would be better to try to unify both tendencies (meaning according to the context and to the speaker's social conditionings).

Lavandera's arguments met with response from Labov (1978), who, despite having postulated that a variable necessarily had to involve two different forms of saying the same thing, considers that, as a heuristic procedure, it should and must be studied in the context of syntax. Further response came from Romaine (1981), who pointed to the need for an adequate definition of the syntactic variable so that the same state of affairs or truth value is not altered.

In Scandinavian countries the perspective is rather less skeptical and the study of syntactic variation, sponsored by Jakobson (editor of the proceedings of three symposia held to date (1980, 1983, 1986)) focuses mainly on meaning, with particular emphasis on how to approach a type of meaning which is appropriate for syntactic variants. This represented major progress in dealing with meaning, whether analyzed widely and intuitively, and distinguishing between several meaning types: cognitive, connotative, stylistic, affective and pragmatic (1989: 381-394). With such a variation of 'meaning acceptances' it would be easy to tackle syntactic variants, and the entire concept of meaning would also be clearer and innovative.

However, not all the problems are rooted in meaning; there is also the difficulty of identifying contexts and the extremely low frequency of occurrence of this type of variant, as Silva-Corvalán suggests (1990). The nature of the variable (linguistic or sociolinguistic) has also given rise to controversy (Lavandera 1984). One might also include the difficulty in creating syntactic variables and variants, the interrelationship between the elements of discourse and the lack of variable unity, aspects which have not received too much attention up to now.

## 2. SYNTACTIC VARIABLES AND VARIANTS

The nature of the non-phonological variable is an important issue in discussion of syntactic variation. Some scholars have based their critiques on 'variable' and 'variants' as methodological tools. The most essential issue centres on whether these elements are really part of linguistic theory; in this regard, Romaine states categorically that analytical devices are in a very real sense part of the theoretical assumptions one makes about the nature of the problem in hand and the methods relevant to its description (1981: 6). In this way, we have to consider all linguistic elements as analytical and heuristical devices, as indeed they are, given that phoneme, subject and variant are all elements of the heuristic linguistic description. Hence, we think that Cheshire's assertion that 'sociolinguistics has failed to provide us with a coherent model of language use' (1987: 257) is somewhat exaggerated. It was necessary to establish a method that yields the correlations between the linguistic and extralinguistic phenomena. In that sense, variable rule has been a useful tool. However, it needs to be adjusted according to the aim of the study, although this does not mean that variation theory is erroneous. It is quite

obvious that the syntactic variable concept requires redefinition, or even definition, if one accepts that no proper definition of what syntactic variable really is or what its main features are has been given. The types of variables have been defined accurately by Romaine (1981) and Winford (1984), although they merely describe the relations between the linguistic levels (morphophonetic, morphosyntactic, pure syntactic, etc). We are therefore dealing with heuristic devices, from very well-known subjects. It is not as important to list the different types of variables possible as it is to try and formulate what a variant actually is, in whatever context it might occur, and review our position as regards what constitutes a syntactic variable. As Cheshire has indicated (1987: 263), there are no clear grounds for distinguishing between the various variable types. In that sense, non-phonological variation cannot receive the same treatment since we are dealing with different linguistic levels. We have to be aware of such distinctions in order to better understand the problems surrounding syntactic variable; moreover, we should not consider the variable as being the sole analytic tool regardless of the nature of the phenomenon, as Garcia argues (1986 b: 193).

No consideration has been given to the possibility of a less strict description of what a linguistic variable might be: as it cannot be held that variants 'be in some way the same' (Cheshire 1987: 267). This assertion cannot be viewed as scientifically sound, so in that sense it has been settled that 'in this way it would be of course pointless to try to extend the use of variable rules to the analysis of syntax' (1987: 268).

We will analyze some variation examples which include several elements in order to answer certain questions as what a variant should be understood as being: conditionals, punctors and discursive markers, the present perfect and indefinite in Spanish, and subject expression.

#### a) *Conditionals*

As we have already stated, delimiting a phonological variable poses no problems. Conversely, recognizing a grammatical variable calls for something more in the way of observation and analysis: the ideas overlap and, in many instances, the clauses, in terms of the standard notion of them as 'groups of words with a complete meaning', seem incomplete and as a result context identification also becomes more complex. Note the text:

'Si tuviera un hijo pequeño, pues a lo mejor *estaba* en mi casa con mi hijo, me *gustaría* más..., no *tuviera* la tristeza que tengo, aunque

tengo mis hijas que son muy buenas y todo, pero tú sola... porque ellas salen por la mañana, llegan tarde... si tuviera ese hijo pequeño, pues lo *esperaría* que llegaba como niño'. ('If I had a little boy, I would probably be at home with my son, I would be happier..., I would not be as sad as I am now, even though I have my daughters who are very good and all that, but you alone...because they go off in the morning and come home late...if I had that little boy, well I would wait for him to come home like a little boy')

Let us take the above text. We can extract four unreal enunciated conditionals which do not refer to the past:

- 1) 'Si tuviera un hijo pequeño, *estaba* en mi casa con mi hijo.' ('If I had a little boy, I would be at home with my son.')
- 2) 'Si tuviera un hijo pequeño, me *gustaría* más.' ('If I had a little boy, I would be happier.')
- 3) 'Si tuviera un hijo pequeño, no *tuviera* la tristeza que tengo.' ('If I had a little boy, I would not be as sad as I am now.')
- 4) 'Si tuviera un hijo pequeño, lo *esperaría* que llegaba como niño.' ('If I had a little boy, I would wait for him to come home like a little boy.')

In (1) the appearance of the indicative is conditioned by the whole discourse because the point of departure is the basic implications of the conversation, which in turn are based on an unreal context (the speaker does not have a little boy). The speaker is responding in unreal terms. The indicative is traditionally the appropriate (although not necessary) way to express reality; however, here it actualizes its meaning for the unreal context.

(2) and (4) take as their starting point an implication (the previous context) and thus the sentence continues in an unreal context. The conditional appears in the second half in the same circumstances as the indicative does.

In (3) the presence of the subjunctive is also conditional on the previous real context, but the discursive connection with the previous sentences is reduced, given that it is enunciated afterwards. The appearance of the subjunctive constitutes the same meaning option as the conditional and the indicative. Consequently, basic meanings have been actualized at this communicative moment and they may thus be considered as being variants. In other communicative situations the three modes may possibly denote, for example, different degrees of probability, of reality, etc., or two of them may appear to be alternate forms while the third does not. This means that the potentiality of meaning of

the forms is very varied; hence it is a case here of actualization of meaning and not of functional comparability, as Lavandera proposes (1984), an issue which we have already addressed elsewhere (Serrano 1992). This functional comparability is not feasible in the treatment of syntactic variants since the 'functionality' of the forms which alternate in the context does not stem from chance: if they alternate it is because, conceptually, it is possible for two forms to be used to refer to the same thing. In this sense, Lavandera's proposal is not developed and indeed -once we analyze the verbal forms of the conditional sentences from a variationist perspective- it might be said to be contradictory.

About variation in conditional sentences in Spanish we may establish a variable definition: *the actualized meaning shared between variants* (Serrano 1994, 1996).

#### b) *Punctors and discursive markers*

Punctors (particles that usually appear at the end of an utterance) and discursive markers have been analyzed by some scholars. They are structures produced very often in discourse and for which one can establish comparison between frequency and speaker, so it seems possible that the use may be correlated with social factors. According to the traditional variable concept, it seems impossible to undertake a 'traditional' or 'serious' study as to whether there is no underlying segment, but merely surface realizations. Vincent and Sankoff, however, consider that 'at functional level, we can say that they (punctors) are interchangeable, even if they are constrained by etymological or contextual factors' (1992: 206). To delimit the context they analyzed the prosodic phrase value, thus enabling a variationist approach of the use of punctors to be carried out. They occur in four prosodic contexts:

- Regulation— vous savez ('you know'), là ('there')
- Demarcation— n'est-ce pas ('don't we), là ('there')
- Segmentation—là ('there')
- Discourse— vous savez ('you know')

The prosodic context is the constrainer of variants and of the different uses they can acquire as isolated units in discourse.

In a similar way, Oliveira e Silva & Tavares de Macedo (1992) analysed the discursive markers in spoken Brazilian Portuguese according to contextual function (wish to be polite, express subjectivity, outline personal opinions, etc) and were able to correlate them with external fac-

tors, concluding that 'the holistic approach of discourse analysis allows us to perceive specialized functions that had not been yet observed when their description was limited to the sentential level' (1992: 248).

If the authors have not given a definition of what the variable is for their important research, one can suppose that it is not always necessary to set out what the 'underlying segment' is. Although there is no variation in its most usual sense (as has been established for the phonological level), there is variation in a new sense. It could be established that there is variation at discourse level. Such a study shows that certain variable units need not originate from a previous definition of the 'variable'.

c) *Present perfect and indefinite*

García is correct in saying that 'it is important to integrate the qualitative judgements with quantitative data' (1985: 218). It is necessary to make an accurate qualitative examination of the linguistic data that appears to alternate, isolate the context, and finally to decide if quantitative analysis is possible. This has to be fully supported by serious theoretical tools and aided by Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics tools. Only in this way is wider variation analysis possible.

In Canarian Spanish we find alternative ways of expressing the same reference: present perfect (PP) and indefinite (IN) when event time and real time is very short, namely when reference is located close to the time of communication (TOC) (to use the term of King, 1992: 23). Examples are as follows:

5) Esta mañana **me levanté/me he levantado** a las siete y **me fui/he ido** a la oficina temprano (This morning I got up/I have got up at seven and I went/I have gone to office early)

6) **Me puse/he puesto** la chaqueta porque tenía frío pero **me la quité/he quitado** porque tenía calor (I put/I have put my jacket on because I was cold, but I took it off/I have taken it off because I was so hot)

The compound form (I have got up, I have put on) can be stated nowadays as the Spanish standard form after a grammaticalization process of the anterior (representing an action with current relevance or an action which initiated in the past and continues into the present) to past perfective function (Schwenter 1994). In Canarian Spanish, as in the majority of American dialects, such grammaticalization process has not



taken place yet, and present perfect is the less used form in this speech community. Spanish Grammar states that PP is used to refer to an action that has taken place in the near present. Conversely, IN is used, as in other languages, to refer to actions which occurred at a specific past point in time:

7) Me **casé** libremente porque quise (I got married because I wanted to) (It was a long time ago)

8) **Me operé** y aquí estoy (I had an operation and here I am) (It was many years ago)

The special feature of Canarian Spanish, unlike standard Spanish, is that IN is used in contexts where PP would be expected, that is, to refer an action which has taken place close to speech TOC, thus both being variants of each other. IN fits in this context by acquiring the pragmatic function of Relevance (Sperber y Wilson 1986) in the present. Although formal features of IN are correlated with a reference that connects with the past, it is capable of referring to an immediate communicative situation by means of Relevance. 'Being relevant' means producing contextual effects (Sperber y Wilson 1986, Wilson y Sperber 1993)).

In this way, through a pragmatic function, IN can constitute a variant of PP for this reference in Canarian Spanish (Serrano, 1995 a, 1995 b). We have in this study, therefore, the alternance of different forms in a unique context, where variable definition could be the expression of a 'reference close to TOC expression'.

Our aim here is to state the importance of establishing the function that a form acquires in discourse, by means of any device (in this case, the pragmatic function of Relevance) which makes it feasible for two forms to perform the same function. Such a function can be exposed by discursive and pragmatic devices.

#### b) *Subject expression*

The study of subject expression is already traditional in Sociolinguistics and has been analyzed in several speech communities and from different theoretical perspectives. The definition of subject expression variable has been given as 'absence vs. presence of subject', its constrainers are similar: subject absence is correlated with non-ambiguous form, with identical reference and when there are two 'constituents'.

Semantic-pragmatic factors show that subject frequency is less categorical when the referent can be identified without ambiguity and when there is no 'orational or discourse topic', whereas subject expression is correlated when there is a 'focus of contrast' (Silva-Corvalán 1982, Morales 1986, Bentivoglio 1987). Subject omission is usually correlated with discursive factors.

More recent studies, however, have analyzed the interrelation between phonetic deletion 'devices' and the presence of a grammatical category. Such studies aim to support the Functionalist Hypothesis of Kiparsky (1982), which states that 'there is a tendency for semantically relevant information to be retained in surface structure' (Kiparsky 1982: 87). This 'saliency' enables certain elements which do not appear in surface structure to be compensated with other elements so that communicative purpose is not affected. Such a hypothesis has explained several linguistic change processes: 'loss of verbal concordance of 3rd person in Brazilian Portuguese (Eles comem—eles come)' (Naro 1981) due to 'denasalisation of final vowels'. As a functional device, third person plural subject expression contributes to 'resolving' possible the ambiguity that singular carries. In Puerto Rican Spanish, Hochberg (1986) and Paredes Silva (1993) both found significant relationship between final /s/ deletion and (Tú/él) subject expression. More recently, Ranson (1992, 1993) in her analysis of /s/ deletion in Andalusian Spanish proposes a modification of this hypothesis, considering that the tendency to maintain relevant information on the surface is dependent not just on linguistic factors but on contextual ones also.

In these studies variation analysis evidences that determining a 'pure' non-phonological variable (as suggested by Romaine 1984 and Winford 1984) is an extremely difficult matter, since a compensating device promotes variation existence. In my opinion, the most interesting analysis is that by Ranson, who demonstrates that compensating devices are not only linguistic but also contextual, such as pronoun expression in /s/ deletion or contextual expression of grammatical person. In the following example, the listener's knowledge -that only men work in the fields and that the speaker has two daughters and one son- allows him to interpret the subject of *dos hijos que tiene* as the brother and not the speaker, mentioned more recently by the pronoun *yo*:

7) Allí trabaja un hermano mío que tengo yo, y dos hijos que *tiene*, y hombres de la calle que están allí colocados trabajando también ('A brother of mine that I have works there, and two sons that *he has*, and men from the street are placed working too') (From Ranson 1991: 143)

All this means that linguistic forms are not only conditioned by linguistic elements but also by others which are inferred from communicative interaction between listener and speaker. Here we have proof of the existence of another form of defining syntactic variables; taking account of their interrelation with other linguistic elements such as a compensating device or a deleting or expressed form conditioned by external factors of the linguistic system. As Lavandera suggests (1988: 24), it is important to take account of the interpersonal or interactional context.

In the light of these non-phonological elements one can discuss what might be defined as being a variable and thus examine how analytic tools can be related to linguistic reality.

It is quite obvious that in order to delimit the field of grammatical variables and variants it is first necessary to acknowledge that the phonological variable in most cases is clearly perceptible and, consequently, the variants are also easily distinguishable. This is not only because, as Lavandera says (1984: 43), they do not have referential meaning, but because in the spoken chain even a non-expert could discern whether a certain phoneme is being produced in different ways. If, at a given moment, a speaker produces the aspirated variant of (r) in *carne* (*meat*), it is easy to tell that it is a different pronunciation of the same phoneme. Conversely, if someone says '*Si lo había visto, me había gustado*' (*If I had seen it, I would have liked it*), recognizing that the pluperfect of the indicative is a variant of the pluperfect of the subjunctive in hypothetical-potential or unreal contexts, requires, at the very least, a certain observation of and familiarity with linguistic data. Delimiting a syntactic variable entails considerably greater difficulty, if we want to do it in the same sense as it is done at phonological level, since it is obvious that there is interrelationship of elements of discourse. Given that our aim here is not to study the bonsais of syntax, to use Stubbs' expression (1987:20), the disorder of the concepts may well confuse us. In these cases it is important to turn to the pragmatics of linguistics and discourse analysis in order to achieve our objective. Moreover, the lack of variable unity is associated with the concept thereof found in phonology: minimum, discrete and easily divisible units. This is not possible in grammar. Whereas in phonology variables are phonemes, in syntax the concept of variable cannot be limited to a particular element. It is neither a verbal form, a noun or an adverb. Rather there are certain elements that may vary in the context of the spoken chain, in which the possibilities are extremely wide. Logically, this is due to the fact that what varies at the grammati-

cal level is much more complex. For that reason one may ask: What can be defined as a syntactic variable?

From the above examples one can infer that many things can be defined as 'variable' and also that in many cases it is quite difficult to establish a definition of what is varying. It can be an actualized meaning (as in conditionals), a pragmatic function (indefinite verb form), a discursive function (as in punctors or subject expression), a compensating device (as in subject expression also), an agreement function (as in subject expression in Old French (Dupuis, Lemieux & Gosselin 1992).

What one could establish therefore is that a new variable concept has to be settled, one which is different from the traditional view.

It is more clear, however, what a variable is in Creole continua, as Winford (1984) has argued, given that 'its equivalents' are taken from standard language and 'native speakers have at their disposal a rich variety of morphological and syntactic alternants for expressing what appear to be the same meanings (...) and many of these kinds of alternants operate on the borderline of morphology and syntax'. Its variable definition is the form that creole item comes from, although the author considers that 'the nature of variation at the morphological and syntactic levels in creole continua poses substantial difficulties for the concept of linguistic variable, particularly with respect to specifying the basis of equivalence between variants according to the different types of variables (1984: 284).

Linguistic reality is much more complex than our analytic tools and sometimes these do not suffice to describe linguistic variable phenomena. We should not concentrate on the concept of 'choice', and in so doing we can avoid the consideration that, as García puts it (1986 b: 219), the speaker has no choice. I think the speaker does have a choice between the various linguistic forms available and he chooses the one he needs according to the context and the communicative situation. Scholars have devised the concept of variable to study forms that might not be 'the same' and this has been the focus of debate on syntactic variation problems. Determining whether we should continue to view the variable as 'two ways of saying the same thing' (a very poor definition) is a very important step in progress in the study of non-phonological variation.

At this point I might propose an extension of the variable concept when considered at the syntactic level, analyzing contexts in which forms are produced and the acquired function according to communicative purpose. It is at this point that the problem of meaning arises.

## 3) WHAT KIND OF MEANING?

If the examples given above are capable of correlating with socio-linguistic factors, it is obvious that a type of meaning adjusted to variation may be proposed. In our view what is truly important is the nature of meaning which one adopts. The concept of meaning in syntactic variation cannot have the same interpretation as it has in other studies, that is, it cannot be conceived as being a nonvariant entity in its most structuralist aspects, nor in its cognitive aspect given that, if this were the case, obviously no variation of any sort could exist. To limit meaning to its denotative side is to reduce it to a very poor view<sup>1</sup>. It should be possible to establish meaning variants on a level such that all other elements can be taken in account (discursive and pragmatic functions, etc). Since pragmatic realizations are very different depending on each culture, it is possible that these differences may become real in each communicative situation, yielding a different type of meaning each time, thus facilitating variant sameness. Although Cheshire (1987: 270) established that it is complicated to determine pragmatic meaning because of the lack of knowledge of certain discursive traits, and also because of the scarce objectivity that such a determination may imply.

The pragmatic meaning we aim to describe as adequate for the study of non-phonological variation is related to the description of meaning given by Lyons (1971): (cognitive, affective and social), which is meaningful when the three factors are taken together and when contextual and discursive traits are added. It is obvious that the reason why one variant is used is strongly motivated by the communicative context in which it appears and, hence, by pragmatic meaning.

1. The failure to adopt a useful (if not coherent) criterion led Erica Garcia (1986 b) to consider that "*Temo que venga*" and "*Tengo miedo de que venga*" could not be viewed as syntactic variants owing to differences in meaning. From the point of view of the purely cognitive meaning of the lexical and grammatical elements making up the two sentences, it is true that they possess different meanings. If, on the other hand, we limit ourselves to pragmatic circumstances, such as communicative intent, position in the discourse, and other grammatical aspects (in which case the subordinated clause may or may not feature *de*: "*Trata de que piense que lo haga*", as opposed to "*\*Trata de que piense de que lo haga*"), beginning or end of the sentence, expression of the subject, etc., we may conclude that they can be indeed be treated as variation data given that the truth values are the same, ie the same thing is being said. It is true that if the clause is introduced by *de* the relationship of the complement to the verb is different, but this does not transcend to the referential value of the variants.

Type of meaning in syntactic variation was taken into consideration by Jacobson (1980, 1983, 1986) who coined the term *hyponymic meaning* to denote a constant and superior cognitive meaning, which would fall within the margins of the very value of truth. As it is described, the concept of *hyponymy* (which supposes the weakening of the concept of *synonymy*) involves the systematization of a useful type of synonym for works on syntactic variation.

In order to preserve the Labovian principle of 'same meaning', it seems vital to treat meaning in such a way that the conditions of truth are not altered. However, it is erroneous to describe syntactic variants by means of truth conditions. 'Truth value' is neither a linguistic nor a communicative issue; it may be a gesture, a signic motivation, etc but in any case it may be a concrete value that could be considered as being 'meaning'. Syntax and semantics certainly have a limit and one should not to go too far with truth value conditions. For this reason, 'meaning' cannot 'be in some way the sense' as Cheshire has put it (1987: 267), because such a definition would be similar to the definition of 'truth value'. Neither should it be considered, as Romaine has proposed (1981: 22-23,) that no conflict exists between a contextual and a truth conditional theory of meaning. A contextual meaning is quite different to 'truth value conditions' and is produced in a concrete communicative situation, linguistically codified, a function derived from the form (such as preterite and indefinite or conditionals, as mentioned previously). I do not think that they are even interrelated, as Romaine argues (1988: 22-23). To delimit the type of meaning at work in variation of forms, one has to observe not the logic conceptualization of what is intended to be said, but rather what is derived from the form. In that sense, 'the same state of affairs' should not be considered either (Weiner y Labov 1983).

No matter what we are endeavouring to study, it is better to define meaning according to the actualization of communicative purpose. This would also represent an advance in Semantics, whereby 'the notion of defining meaning in terms of communicative intent constitutes a radical change in our conception of truth', as Romaine has argued (1981: 19). Thus, defining meaning in this sense implies that there is nothing which prevents us from considering that two forms could have the same (or different) communicative purpose. It is just as arbitrary to say that communicative purpose is the same as it is to contend that it is different; in each case, context should be accurately analyzed. If the same communicative purpose can be expressed through different linguistic meanings that have no phonological, lexical or semantic similarity, variation is clearly

being produced. Two uses can be compared which might have different sociolinguistic interpretations, since both Syntax and Phonology can reflect the sociological characteristics of the speaker.

It is very important to observe which message is carried by linguistic form, given that there is no strict and unique correspondance between form and function. Each linguistic form may acquire a different function in context; the speaker can manipulate the choice the listener makes of the context (Blakemore 1988: 287) since there are links between linguistic form and statement (utterance) interpretation. It is not true, contrary to what Lavandera states (1984: 41), that the forms themselves are what introduce difference of meaning, since this would imply that meaning is unrelated to use. Meaning has to be analyzed according to linguistic use and to communicative purpose, and the relationship between form and function must be taken into account. That has been done by several scholars, such Freed (1994: 634) who concluded that 'the function of a question, that is, the pragmatic or social use to which questions are put by speakers in conversation, is therefore seen in the interactive context in which it occurs'.

It is our aim to postulate here that meaning in variation should be considered as being a pragmatic function, leading to an actualization of meaning according to the specific communicative purpose, analyzing the sense in which the two forms are acting in similar fashion. It is also feasible to observe the 'common function in discourse' (Dines 1980) as a possibility of a semantic tie between variants.

Synonyms acquire therefore another dimension and another structure. If we try to take pragmatic meaning, clearly this concept will not be the same. Winford (1993) analyzes meaning identity according to intradialectal variation (the use of perfect have in Trinidadian English) and also to the synonymous concept established by Lyons (1986: 199). He considered that in this case there is 'sameness of sense'. A synonym may work on different levels; it may be an abstract unit or a very limited unit in which use is not taken into consideration or, conversely, it may be a broader concept within which other elements play a part. Functional differences such as in *sembrare* and *parere* uses in Italian (de Jonge 1993: 534) rule out the existence of synonyms.

From a realistic view of language (Gardenförs 1993: 288) the speaker is not wrong when using a certain meaning since it is used because of the optimal functionality it provides in a given communicative situation. As Guy et al. point out (1986: 46), semantic equivalence becomes relevant in each context, thus acquiring a realistic view of meaning.

The problem is to relate significative individual purpose with social meanings and linguistic forms, for which it is necessary to examine the specific communicative situation, conversation and discourse signs in order to really demonstrate that forms are being used with the same pragmatic function. Hence, account should be taken of the pragmatic purpose within which discourse is framed, not truth values.

This type of meaning ties in also with the semantic potential referred to by Halliday (1978): given that each language has its own way of signifying concepts through forms and of directing said potential functionally, the same capacity is possible also in the context of the same language through its own mechanisms.

We have seen that it is necessary to actualize meaning at the precise communicative moment. In this way alone is it possible to solve problems derived from possible differences in meaning. To weaken the concept of meaning, as Lavandera (1984) proposes, would be to take a step backwards, since our aim is to establish that meaning in variation has the same potential possibilities as in any other communicative situation, except that it acts in a different way in that specific context. Its significance must not be lessened, but rather we must select the sense which it has acquired at that particular moment according to the type of meaning chosen (pragmatic as opposed to cognitive, possible adoption of the concept of hyponymy, analysis of the context in all its dimensions, analysis of the communicative situation, etc.).

We have endeavoured to demonstrate here that it is essential to delimit the context in which supposed variants alternate in order to be able to ascertain that the bounds of meaning of each unit leave room for no doubt whatsoever as regards their identity in a given context. In this way, the study of true syntactic variants may be viable.

#### 4. THE LINGUISTIC OR SOCIOLINGUISTIC NATURE OF THE VARIABLE

Demonstrating whether variants are sociolinguistic in nature poses a new difficulty resulting from the previous ones; if it cannot be demonstrated that variation exists in the terms just outlined, it is clear that no truly authentic sociolinguistic interpretation is possible, since this requires certainty that variants are present. This difficulty was addressed by Lavandera (1984:39), when she asked whether variables which did not have social or stylistic incidence were sociolinguistic in nature or not. Labov and Weiner (1977) studied the *passive/active voice* variable and



concluded that it did not co-vary with social facts, and hence it was classified as a linguistic variable only. If it can be established that no social stratification of the phoneme exists, it can be concluded that the variable is linguistic and not sociolinguistic, which would demonstrate that there are grammatical areas or questions which do not co-vary with social phenomena, a situation which occurs also in phonology.

The problem is whether, when account is taken of the special circumstances surrounding syntactic variation, the denomination of sociolinguistic variable is possible in the same sense as its phonological counterpart. The particular features alluded to earlier (the interrelationship between the elements of discourse and the lack of variable unity) make it more difficult to establish some type of social co-variation. However, the further we go in our investigation of a particular linguistic phenomenon the greater our intuition (albeit using a method recognized as being unscientific) that certain forms, certain uses, are being employed by certain people and in certain contexts. This consideration can be arrived at following the appropriate methodology. Labov for example postulated (1983:36) the selection of the linguistic variable: this should be an element which is present frequently throughout discourse, should be structured in a higher unit system and should be able to be stratified. According to López Morales (1989:107), the key issue is the frequency with which each speaker uses the variable, given that there no speaker never or always uses the same variant. Lavandera, however, adopts a more cautious approach to frequency, since two variants may possibly alternate according to a given situational context and, consequently, they might not be meaningful either socially or stylistically. In the units given by Lavandera, *reventado/exhausto* (wiped out *vs exhausted*), to which she refuses to attribute the quality, the same occurs; they are indeed not synonymous nor do they appear in the same contexts. However, we also know -intuitively- that there may be speakers who never or almost never use one of the two terms, and indeed they might be unfamiliar with their meaning. Thus, it is paradoxical to state, as Lavandera does, that the forms themselves are what introduce changes of meaning and that we have here a language mechanism for manifesting stylistic or social information and not a frequency relationship derived from the compatibility between the meanings. These would be compatible to the extent that they serve to denote the same reality, but they would differ as regards their social and/or stylistic consideration.

López Morales' belief (1989:108) that Lavandera's proposal, that elements whose social or stylistic definition is already determined a priori

cannot be considered as being sociolinguistic variables, stems from circular reasoning: because we know that a variant corresponds to a particular social group usage or style, which is more 'familiar' or 'vulgar', we expect that after treating them quantitatively their frequencies will be in accordance with such prejudices. Contrary to what this author thinks, and without taking those prejudices too far, we prefer to consider that it is obvious that the social connotations are contained within the language and, given that the choice of different forms motivates frequencies, these should and can be studied as sociolinguistic variables without reservations. Otherwise, most of the connections between language and society would remain outside the scope of research of any type.

The syntactic variable, then, has important relevance in studies of this type. Calculating whether its value is sociolinguistic is the job of the researcher who, after using the procedures common to the methodology, will be in a position to recognize whether or not a linguistic phenomenon is co-variable with social factors.

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