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Making language variation possible: insights from social cognitive psychology

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One of the youngest branches on the linguistic family tree is that of Cognitive Linguistics. That field itself has seen several off-shoots but they all share the basic premise that language processing in the mind is no different from the processing of other input (Langacker 2007). Add to this stance a socio-psychological dimension where also social information and psychological reactions are considered part of a cognitive whole (Clopper and Pisoni 2005) and language as it has been described within the generative framework is turned upside-down. Ultimately, this means that there are no longer so-called 'internal' and 'external' factors governing language. Instead, considering socio-psychological theories of how input processing takes place in the mind could yield valuable insights into how language processing works, not least into the perception of variable forms.

One of the newest theories from psychology to be tested in linguistics is exemplar theory (Pierrehumbert 2001; Hay, Warren and Drager 2006) which makes up the ultimate usage-based model of speech perception and supports a socio-cognitive approach to language. According to Foulkes and Docherty (2006:419), "the interweaving of sociophonetic and linguistic information in speech is so complete that no natural human utterance can offer linguistic information without simultaneously indexing one or more social factor" and so it seems imperative for theories of language in the mind to incorporate social and psychological aspects as well.

The paper will discuss the theoretical outlines of social cognitive psychology and how it can be used in linguistics with a particular focus on the study of language variation.

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