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VARIATION AND 'INVARIANTES' - IS UTTERER-CENTRED THEORY EQUIPPED TO DEAL WITH LANGUAGE VARIATION?

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Preamble

What follows is an attempt to articulate some of the problems encountered by a sociolinguist of an Anglo-Saxon linguistic background when trying to deal with, understand and teach utterer-centred linguistics (henceforth UC-Linguistics)¹. That a sociolinguist should be writing on the subject of UC Linguistics may initially seem rather surprising. It might be argued by some that, to put it rather bluntly, a sociolinguist has little business writing about, and still less criticising, a theory in which he or she was not brought up, so to speak. However, this paper should be seen as a constructive attempt to pinpoint areas of divergence between two distinct linguistic outlooks and, more importantly, possible paths of convergence. In other words, I shall be looking to see whether UC linguistics as currently practised in France has anything to learn from taking a sideways glance at sociolinguistic endeavours.

Any critical comments made of dominant theories in the pages that follow have been made in a constructive spirit. Criticism of some aspects of UC linguistics must not be equated with rejection. UC linguistics has over the years, thanks to its numerous practitioners, produced an impressive array of analyses of contemporary English (or preferably, given the points I shall be making below, of a particular variety of contemporary English) and a host of powerful insights into its structure, or maybe better, the reasons for its structure. There are chinks, though, in its armour. One of these, which I hope to demonstrate here, is the difficulty faced by UC linguistics when faced with variation in English.

The question I wish to address here is whether those difficulties, as I perceive them, are caused by an unwillingness to deal with them, caused perhaps by the institutional

¹ I use the term 'UC-linguistics' extremely cautiously. It is intended merely as a convenient catch-all term to cover a whole series of approaches to the study of language prevalent in France, which while differing in many important ways, all stress the central importance of utterer context and choice in understanding linguistics structure.

weakness of sociolinguistics in France, or by gaps in the theoretical edifice. In order to examine this question, I am going to concentrate on 2 separate phenomena.

I - The variation between the modals WILL and SHALL with 1st person pronouns. This choice has manifold motivation. First of all, it is quite clear that with the modal verbs, UC linguistics is at its strongest. Debate may be pursued as to the exact nature of the utterer's leeway in selecting certain forms in -ING, for example, as opposed to the verbal base, when comparing forms such as *I love swimming* and *I love to swim*, or the import of a choice of EVERYBODY rather than EVERYONE in an utterance such as *Everyone/everybody knows that pigs cannot fly*, but it hardly seems plausible, for even the most hardened structuralist or functionalist, to deny that the utterer's role in selecting between the various modals is central.² A critique of UC linguistics using a modal therefore presents a particular challenge.

Secondly, no doubt as a direct corollary of the first point, questions about modal verbs are a staple of the "faits de langue" exercises in the CAPES and Agrégation exams, whether written or oral.

Thirdly, the tortured histories of the verbs WILL and SHALL, which will form a brief part of the discussion below, will enable me to use them as a foundation on which to build a more extensive and generalist second part of the discussion, introduced below.

II - Dialectal variety. This section will build, in part, upon the first. One frequently encounters statements to the effect that the use of "I shall" is much more frequent in England than it is in the USA, Scotland or Ireland. For example, Zandvoort (1949, §185) says: "En Amérique, de même qu'en Écosse et en Irlande, WILL s'emploie à toutes les personnes du futur." Roggero (1979, 58) adds another linguistic community to the roll call, thus: "La situation [with regard to the use of WILL and SHALL] est différente dans le reste du monde anglophone, notamment aux États-Unis et l'Australie, où le futur à alternance [i.e. SHALL used in 1st person, according to the author's terminology] est exceptionnel."³ The issue of

² Cervoni (1987, 25) describes modality as one of the three sources of utterer-centred theory, alongside deixis and speech acts.

³ A frequency study (Pura, 1998) which compared the Brown Corpus for American usage and the LOB Corpus for British usage, seems to confirm this impression, at least partially. It would appear that SHALL is indeed used less in the USA than in the UK, especially in fiction, where SHALL appears four times as frequently in the UK. However, the reverse is not true of WILL, which has an approximately equal distribution throughout both corpora. It is to be noted, with reference to points made below, that the use of SHALL is overwhelmingly to be

WILL and SHALL, then, is a useful starting point for an examination of the wider implications of language variation in general.

1. A case study: WILL & SHALL

On page 93 of Henri Adamczewski and Jean-Pierre Gabilan's 1996 *Déchiffrer la Grammaire Anglaise*, we encounter a discussion of the abbreviated form 'LL, which is introduced using the following example:

I'll be seventeen next month.

We are informed that this form is, and can only be, a reduction of WILL and not SHALL. The authors seek to prove that we have a hidden WILL, so to speak, as follows: "Outre le fait que SHALL est tout à fait impossible ici, cet énoncé est un bon exemple du rôle de WILL. Pourquoi? On fait bien plus ici que parler de l'avenir: "avoir 17 ans le mois prochain" est dans la logique des choses, compte tenu de ma date de naissance."

What is important here is not so much to decide upon the status of 'LL. It might well be possible to argue that 'LL is a reduced SHALL, a reduced WILL or indeed that it is a kind of intermediate entity, and as such must be opposed to, rather than confounded with, WILL and SHALL. Such discussions are valid and are not without interest, but they are not the central concern here. What is more important, if we are to understand the problems posed by variation, is to take a close look at the justification proposed by the authors. There are two remarks to be made, it seems to me, and I shall deal with each one in turn. The two, however, are closely linked, and there will inevitably be a certain amount of seepage between them.

The first, and most obvious remark, is that this statement is simply wrong. However, so stark a statement would be doing myself a disavour, so I shall qualify this by saying that it is empirically wrong, though theoretically possibly correct, given a certain conception of the notion of 'theory'. Let me concentrate on the first part, the empirical inaccuracy of the statement.

associated with 1st person usage. Note that in the above study, no attempt is made to separate English usage from Scottish or Irish Englishes. I am indeed unaware of any similar study having been undertaken for Scottish and/or Irish speech, largely I suspect to the absence of specialised corpora (CHECK). It would appear, then, that such statements are largely impressionistic, which does not stop them becoming 'common knowledge'.

I shall be seventeen next month is, despite what Adamczewski and Gabilan claim, perfectly possible. It is acceptable to me as a native speaker and, more important from an empirical standpoint, it is acceptable to almost every other native speaker I have been able to question on the subject. I enquired of colleagues on the American Dialect Society mailing list, and the English Dialect Society mailing list, and only found one person out of over 25 who regarded the example as ill-formed. That is not to say that everybody else regarded it as ideal, but my question, like Adamczewski and Gabilan's comment, was explicitly about whether it was an acceptable form. In addition to that, I conducted two small scale corpus studies, one of which is more anecdotal than the other. The anecdotal one was carried out on the Internet, where I ran a search on Alta Vista using the string "I shall be" and the Boolean operator NEAR, followed by the string "next month" (unfortunately, given its superior search capacities, Google does not permit the use of NEAR). The reason I refer to this as an anecdotal study is because frequently on the Internet, it is impossible to judge the origin of the tokens discovered, and the results must only be seen as indicative, rather than explicative. Nevertheless, there are some interesting examples. I received a total of 119 hits, but I was particularly looking for strings such as "I shall be X years old next month". The list of such examples is given in appendix 1. There were others, but their origin was suspected of being from non-native speakers, and they were therefore rejected. The first five are the most interesting: they are all explicitly contemporary, because they feature on chat sites or forums. The last three are included for illustrative purposes, but can be rejected, due to their 19th century origin.⁴

The second, less anecdotal survey, was conducted using the BNC corpus, the results of which, again, are reproduced in appendix 2. There are a total of 9 tokens, involving both oral and written material, though of course in all the examples taken from written material, we are dealing with the transcription of dialogue. The intention here is not to examine the results in

⁴ Number 5 does not refer to an age, but to an impending "divorce". However, we might suppose that given the nature of the legal proceedings involved, and the apparently irrevocable breakdown of relations between husband and wife referred to, the outcome is as ineluctable as a forthcoming birthday (see below for an explanation of the importance of ineluctability in Adamczewski and Gabilan's analysis).

details, but simply to illustrate that Adamczewski and Gabilan's statement is erroneous, in an empirical sense. *I shall be x years old* is perfectly possible, if rare.

One further indication that this is indeed the case is found in Berland-Delépine's *La Grammaire Anglaise de l'Étudiant*. While this particular grammar is not without its detractors for a number of reasons, it remains almost without doubt the most widely recommended grammar sold in France today. In paragraph 297 (p. 144), there is a discussion on the status of will and shall as modal verbs, in which we read:

"Par exemple, dans *I shall be 25 next week*, 'shall' est moins un modal exprimant le caractère inéluctable de l'action qu'un auxiliaire du futur; il est évident que dans *She will be 25 next week*, 'will' n'exprime en rien une notion de volonté"

Many other modern French authors use similar examples. Souesme (1992, 142) says: "A la forme affirmative [...], on ne fait plus guère de distinction en anglais contemporain entre *I shall be 20 next week* et *I will be 20 next week*." and Bouscaren and Chuquet (1987, 53) use as an example *I shall be 25 next month*, although they do not, as in the case of the two previously cited works, make explicit the comparison with a hypothetical *I will be 25 next month*.

Once again, my intention in using these examples is not to explore the theoretical bases of Adamczewski and Gabilan's statement, but to highlight the example used, and the fact that the statement cannot be taken at face value.⁵

The example from Adamczewski and Gabilan is not the only one of its kind. In his *Grammaire Linguistique de l'Anglais*, Adamczewski makes a similar claim about another example of SHALL, though this time the reasoning is a little more complex, and the contextualisation more extensive. On p.151 of the 4th edition⁶, we are given the following contextual information for an utterance:

"On vient vous dire que vous êtes invité à venir faire un bridge à neuf heures."

⁵ Incidentally, on the same page as the above example, p.144, Berland-Delépine states that 'LL can be considered a reduction both of WILL and SHALL

⁶ It has been put to me that the *Grammaire Linguistique de l'Anglais* was originally written in the early 1980s and that much water has flowed under the linguistic bridge since then. This is why I have been careful to use the latest edition available to me, because this would seem to indicate that Adamczewski has maintained his position on the matter.

followed by the utterance itself, the response to the invitation:

All right, I will come at nine"

On the following page, we read: "Le prédicat *come at nine*" n'est pas rhématique puisque l'invitation était pour neuf heures. *I shall come at nine* était donc exclu ici".

Even given the context provided by the author, the verb SHALL is not excluded here for me. Because of the nature of the example provided, and in particular the necessity of providing a context for the utterance or similar utterances, it was much more difficult to support my native speaker intuition with corpus-based examples, so no such attempt was made.

Empirically, then, Adamczewski's declarations are incorrect, but they were not made gratuitously, of course, but within the framework of a theory that needs to be examined briefly here, if only to render a little justice to Adamczewski, because the declarations, while troublesome, are wholly coherent within his thinking.

The essential difference between WILL and SHALL for Adamczewski is that the former is a marker of inherency (inhérence), and the latter a marker of a lack of inherency (non-inhérence)⁷. The difference between inhérence and non-inhérence is well put in *Déchiffrer la Grammaire Anglaise*, (Adamczewski, 1996, 92): "A la différence de *shall, will* signale grammaticalement que le sujet et le groupe verbal sont faits l'un pour l'autre, soit parce que le sujet est favorable à cette union, soit parce que la situation s'y prête".

Given this distinction, it should come as no surprise that Adamczewski should wish to preclude SHALL from appearing in the utterances quoted above. *I shall be 17 next month* is ill-formed, in this analysis, because the very nature of the ageing process dictates that it is something from which one cannot escape, and is therefore, by definition, inherent. Becoming seventeen on a certain date is something over which the utterer has no control, and therefore incompatible with SHALL.

⁷ I shall prefer to use these expressions, rather than those of *rhématique* and *thématique*, which appear in the quotation above. The reason for this is that Adamczewski's use of the terms *rhème* and *thème* is not entirely clear to me. They are not dealt with sufficiently in **GLA**, and as A himself points out on his website, "my rhematic/thematic vector has nothing in common with the traditional theme-rheme couple, which is based on extralinguistic factors."

I shall come at nine is "impossible" for similar reasons. The context provided determines that, since the invitation was for nine o'clock, an arrival at this time is by definition inherent, and SHALL is ill-formed. The author might even have added that the utterer's use of "all right", because it indicates that the invitation has been accepted, makes an arrival at 9 o'clock inevitable. Within the framework of Adamczewski's hypothesis on the matter, this would have been a further argument for the preclusion of SHALL in this utterance. However, once again, this conclusion does not stand the test of native speaker intuition.

So, where does the problem come from? Adamczewski's inherency polarity is a seductive idea, and it seems to work for a great many of the examples he gives. And yet it makes false predictions. Why?

The answer, I feel, lies not so much with a lack in the theory, but in a fact which by nature some forms of utterer-centred linguistics, with their incessant search for "les invariants" simply cannot account for. I shall first expose the nature of this fact, and then try to draw some theoretical conclusions.

The root of this particular problem is to be found, quite clearly, in a long prescriptive description which needs to be looked at briefly. It would appear (Arnovick 1989) that it was Bishop John Wallis, in his 1653 *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*, who first formulated the rule governing the "conjugation" of the auxiliaries *will* and *shall*, whereby *shall* is only used with the first persons for future reference, and *will* in the other persons. This pattern is reversed for making a promise, as Wallis says (quoted by Arnovick 1989, 150):

"I shall burn', 'you will burn' all simply predict what will happen; whereas 'I will', 'you shall' ('thou shalt'), 'he shall', 'we will', 'you shall', 'they shall', 'burn' are used for guarantees or pledges of what will happen."

So enduring and influential was this formulation that it has been handed down through the ages as the 'Wallis Rule'. As Michaels (1970, *passim*) shows, this very same paradigm was maintained by the vast majority of 18th and 19th century grammarians, most notably by the hugely popular *Short Introduction to English Grammar* written by the Bishop of London, Robert Lowth, in 1762. It is this very paradigm which has been inculcated to many a generation of schoolchildren. As Quirk et al. (1979, 87) put it: "*Shall* in the sense of future is

restricted to 1st person in British English [...] Prescriptive usage has exerted considerable influence in the direction of using *shall*" and later in the same book (213-214) "A strong teaching tradition, especially in British English, has upheld the use of "shall" as the correct form, in preference to "will", with a first person subject in formal style."

Quirk mentions British English, but it is worth noting, especially in view of the frequency study referred to in n. 3 above that the rule was given one of its clearest exposures by the great American lexicographer Noah Webster, who wrote, on the subject of WILL: "This is also a sign of the future tense, but for the most part, is directly the reverse of shall; that is, it has the same force or meaning as shall, but indifferent persons. In the first person, it promises, as in "I will write". In the 2nd and 3rd, it simply foretells, as "you will or he will go to Philadelphia" (BARON, 1982, 133-4). It is also worth noting that all my correspondents at the American Dialect Society, mentioned above, referred to The Rule, as they called it, which they had learnt at school.

The repercussions of this tradition are still to be felt in more modern grammar books, such as Zandvoort (1949, §185), who writes: "Une action ou un état qui se situe dans l'avenir peut s'exprimer à la première personne par SHALL [...] aux deuxième et troisième personnes par WILL...", and GORGIEVSKI 1999 (93), "Au XVIIIe siècle, on a tendance à préférer SHALL pour la première personne au singulier et au pluriel et WILL pour les autres personnes. En anglais contemporain, l'emploi grammatical varie selon que la phrase est déclarative (WILL à toutes les personnes) ou interrogative (1 sg./pl.: SHALL; WILL aux autres personnes)", which I think we can safely claim is quite simply inaccurate⁸, empirically speaking.

The point I wish to make is clear. Given the influence of the Wallis Rule, and in light of the fact that it is still mentioned by modern grammarians and contemporary speakers of English, is it really possible to sweep these two and a half centuries of pedagogical grammatical practice under the carpet, and claim that they have no influence on our use of

⁸ The author indeed goes on to give a series of counter examples.

language? Or, more precisely, is it possible for any analytical approach to language to ignore these facts?

Leech writes the following: "With the first person pronouns [...], many English speakers feel that "shall" is the correct form, and so "I will" and "we will" are avoided in situations where people are on their best linguistic behaviour". Now, whether it suits us or not, this "best linguistic behaviour" is part of "linguistic behaviour". It is true, of course, that this 'rule' is troublesome, scholarly, ill-suited, pernicious. We as linguists can argue until we are blue in the face that this form of prescriptive rule goes against natural tendencies, but we will be unable to argue that they have no influence on the way we use language, that this tradition, like that regarding the split infinitive, has left no trace in our more grammatically enlightened times. Two and a half centuries of grammar lessons in schools are the reason that I, and almost every other English speaker I know, accept "I shall be 17 next month", not because of any deep-rooted invariant in the semantics of "shall", but more mundanely, I would contend, because it's a first person pronoun.

A moment or two ago, I begged a question which I should now like to address. I hinted that 250 years of grammatical tradition had been ignored, but this may be unfair. It has been ignored, in my view, in the particular example which has formed the basis of my presentation thus far, but is it ignored, AS A RULE, by utterer-centred linguists?

Adamczewski has this to say at one point in his *Grammaire Linguistique de l'Anglais* (1993, 149): "La grammaire scolaire a singulièrement compliqué l'acquisition de SHALL et WILL par les non-anglophones", but this is more a criticism of traditional habits of referring to WILL & SHALL as future auxiliaries than a comment on prescriptivism. A little later (p.153), however, we read: "Quant à *We*, il contient nécessairement *I* [...] Or on sait que le paradigme scolaire et prescriptiviste présente SHALL justement avec *I* and *We*." This was the only mention I found of this matter.

Lapaire and Rotgé have an analysis of WILL and SHALL which in many respects is similar to that offered by Adamczewski, with the term 'congruence' replacing that of 'inhérence'. To my knowledge, neither in their *Linguistique et Grammaire de l'Anglais* nor in their *Séminaire Pratique de Linguistique Anglaise* is there any reference to the potential

influence of historical tradition on utterer choice. There is only a brief mention in the latter work (LAPAIRE & ROTGÉ, 1993, 163) that "SHALL est de moins en moins usité en tant qu'auxiliaire du futur." Nor is there any such reference in Delmas et al. (1993), writing in an Adamczewskian tradition of one single invariant, and nor is there in Bouscaren (1998), who has a different approach to the question of will and shall, allowing for a combination of two invariant features.

What, then, are we to make of this silence? One possibility is that this type of phenomenon is wilfully disregarded, for perfectly valid epistemological reasons. While the comparison is rarely made in the literature, it seems to me that what we have here is something of a parallel with a Chomskyan "ideal speaker-listener". We have an utterer who remains impervious to extraneous, or external attitudinal influences, such as prescriptivism. Idealisation of this kind, it must be made clear, is an absolutely valid intellectual tool. It is essential, however, to keep sight of the fact that it is just that, an idealisation and we must not allow ourselves to draw hard and fast conclusions about real language use from our idealised thought experiments, in particular if we have not taken the precaution of informing readers that this is indeed the case.

Another possibility goes right to the heart of UC linguistic theory. It is the contention that any theoretical approach based on the use of invariant core semantic features is unable to deal with linguistic features which show chaotic, unpredictable variation, such as is the case in the prescriptively influenced use of will and shall. I use the word 'chaotic' guidedly, because in his *Clefs pour Babel*, on page 87, Adamczewski writes: "C'est ou bien un invariant, ou bien le chaos", a strong statement indeed. If it was intended as a guiding principle, a programmatic statement for future research, then it is perfectly legitimate. It is reminiscent of the positing of language universals or of an LAD, which have generated a huge body of research. I believe that it is misguided, however, because chaos is a part of language. Chaos in language is caused by events and phenomena external to language, and it is possible that no theory, however comprehensive, will be able to fully account for this chaotic aspect. The use of SHALL with the 1st person, because for so long we have been instructed to do so, because we believe it somehow to be right, is a case in point.

In order to expand on this first question, and explore further the contention that UC linguistics does not deal adequately with the question of variation, I shall now turn my attention to other matters, less amenable to a treatment in terms of traditional prescriptive grammar. This, together with what has been said in the first section, will enable me to conclude with a few general reflections on some of the fundamentals of UC linguistics which may need reinforcing or rethinking.

If sociolinguistics has achieved one major aim over the last few decades, it is in teaching us that variability is inherent in language. This variability may be diachronic, stylistic, geographic, sociological and so on. Given the importance of variation in language, it seems reasonable to require any major theory of language to at the very least address it, and to account for it in some way within the bounds of its theoretical framework. UC-linguistic theory is a case in point - we have just seen that it seems to have shied away from dealing with irregular variation in the case of WILL and SHALL. To what extent can this timidity be said to be characteristic of UC-linguistics as a whole? To address this question, I made a selection of salient, frequently observed and relatively more regular dialectal differences between British and American usage, and reviewed a number of UC text books and exercise books to see how they were handled. The dialectal differences in question were:

1. the British use of the present perfect after "just/recently/ever" as opposed to what is often seen as an American tendency to use the preterit;

2. the use of SHOULD in British English after adjectives such as *important* or verbs such as *insist* (He insists you should come) as opposed to an American tendency to use simply the verbal base⁹.

2 - More general examples of variation

a. JUST + ED

Most of the texts examined mentioned that a dialectal difference is at work here. Bouscaren et al. (1998, 80) note: "En anglais britannique, *recently* fonctionne de préférence

⁹ I initially selected a third variable, the American use of epistemic HAVE TO in lieu of MUST, as in examples such as *You have to be kidding*. However, I found no examples of this difference in any of the text books studied.

avec le present perfect, car cet adverbe est l'équivalent de *over the last few years, months, weeks or days*, selon les contextes [...] De toute façon, cela signifie "not long ago" - d'où l'emploi possible du prétérit en anglais américain." There is, therefore, an indication that US usage is understandable, or logical, so to speak, but no attempt is made to explain why Americans might opt for one use over another.

Similarly, Delmas et al (1993, 43), in an explanation of the utterance "We just dumped your two pals", taken from an American comic strip, also speak of "un fait bien connu de l'usage oral américain, dans la conversation courante", and later, of "[un] choix (possible mais en aucune manière nécessaire) fait par les Américains." The authors respond to the necessity of explaining how the American usage is to be understood and why it should frequently differ from British usage, and refer to the history of the English language in order to do so, and yet there is an almost palpable feeling that the authors are at a loss to explain why the Americans should have opted for this choice. We read (p. 44): "Diachroniquement, la construction du prétérit s'est donc appuyée sur une stratégie originellement perfective (participe passé). A tout moment, pour peu que les locuteurs d'une aire anglophone déterminée le souhaitent (inconsciemment), cette dimension perfective peut être réveillée."

We are some way from a convincing explanation here, and is reminiscent of a point made by Bouscaren et al (1998, 141) on a similar dialectal difference, the use of the preterit with EVER in US English (the example discussed is "Did you ever feel..." as opposed to "Have you ever felt..."). The authors say: "On peut noter une différence de valeur entre les deux formes, même si celle-ci n'est pas toujours exploitée à des fins de communication." This recourse to non-exploitation, whatever is to be understood by that, is something of a 'get out of jail card', and offers no explanation as to why the Americans should prefer one particular linguistic operation to another.

b. SHOULD vs. Ø

With regard to the alternation between SHOULD and Ø, Bouscaren et al. (p. 238) do mention that there is a difference between the two forms, but this is not attributed to anything dialectal. Delmas et al attempt less in the way of explanation. There are three exercises

(92, 109 and 120) on this matter, and at no point is any mention made of a possible dialectal difference.

It is Souesme (1992, 295 ff.) who provides perhaps the fullest analysis of this alternation, and yet we are still left without knowing whether variation can be accounted for. Souesme notes the dialectal variation using examples such as *The Supreme Court has decided that he be sentenced to death* and *I ran up and demanded that he take me up and kiss me*, and comments thus: "Il n'y a donc pas lieu de considérer qu'il s'agit d'une preuve de laxisme de l'américain en matière de correction grammaticale. La modalité *should* indiquant le parcours du domaine notionnel est effectivement inutile puisque ne se pose pas dans ce contexte le problème du choix [de prédicat]". That may well be the case, and is an explanation as to the absence of *should* in American English. But if *should* is unnecessary, why do the British continue to use it so faithfully?

The essential point is this: it is somewhat surprising that a grammatical approach that sets so much store, and rightly so, by its efforts to explain linguistic structure rather than just describe it (another point, incidentally, where UC linguistics and Chomskyan linguistics meet, quite explicitly) should fall short of attempting to explain dialectal and stylistic variation, not to mention historical developments, in a similar fashion. We are in danger of being left with the impression that UC-linguistics can produce luminous insights into the structure of contemporary standard British English, but that beyond that, the horizon is reduced.

It is this observation which leads to the question of whether or not UC linguistics is equipped to deal with these matters. It is an extremely important question to answer, because if UC grammar CAN explain variation, then it will genuinely have proved itself worthy of being described as a theory. If it cannot do so, then to my mind it is not a theory, but a clever analytical tool.

It may of course be, as I intimated earlier, that the reason there is so little attempt to deal with variation is that generally speaking in France, the sociolinguistic tradition is not strong. Let us for the sake of argument, however, assume that this is not the case, and put forward another tentative reason for the failure to deal with variation.

A few years ago, when freshly arrived on French university soil, so to speak, and first grappling with the issues of UC linguistics, I put the question to a senior colleague of mine at the university I was then working at. If British and American usage differs, I said, or, put differently, if the operators used by Americans are not the same as those used by the British in similar circumstances, then logically this means that the underlying operations are different. Does this then mean that the British and American peoples THINK differently? The answer I received was "Why not?", which rather than informing me, served only to plunge me into a textbook case of circularity. They think differently - we know that, because their language use is different. But why is their language use different? Because they think differently. All of this, of course, takes as read a Sapir-Whorfian assumption that different language communities do have different world views.

Here, of course, I am guilty of simplifying the notion of operation rather considerably, and making it roughly synonymous with that of thinking. However, it is true that one of the most interesting aspects of much of UC linguistics thinking is the lack of theorisation of the central notion of 'operation', what Lapaire (1993, 71) calls a "vide définitoire préoccupant", going on to say that "peu d'auteurs semblent aujourd'hui éprouver le besoin de s'expliquer sur le bien-fondé de la notion d'opération, comme si son hégémonie actuelle était, en soi, la preuve insigne de sa puissance explicative."

There seems to be little consensus as to whether the operations are to be seen as merely elements of a model of linguistic construction, or as something considerably more psychologically real. Adamczewski (1982, 142) even goes so far as to talk about operations in the brain, such that operations are attributed a cerebral, if not neurological status which other authors seem to deny them.

The status of operations is important with regard to the variation problem just quoted, as indeed it is to the similar case I shall turn to in a moment. If, crudely speaking, the operation is in the mind, then in effect, we are positing that the Briton and the American, in the above example, have different minds or ways of thinking - not as individuals, but collectively. Even if we wish to take that path, the question of why this should be is left unanswered.

A similar, and concluding case, is also provided from an initially anecdotal source. In a recent paper, Jean-Claude Souesme (2001) presented a fascinating and convincing explanation for the differences which might be said to exist between "everyone" and "everybody" in modern English. The point was made that historically, "everybody" was much more common than "everyone", and that this latter term seemed to have grown in popularity, so to speak, in recent years. When the question was put as to what explanation could be offered for this development, the answer was that it was "one for the sociolinguists". In a sense, of course, this is perfectly true. Sociolinguists can and do interest themselves in this kind of phenomenon. The issue is, however, that in presenting matters in this way, it is covertly deemed impossible for a sociolinguist to work within the framework of operations. To my mind, this does little to strengthen the hand of UC-linguistics. In order to do that, the sociolinguist should be able to make any relevant observations within the framework of UC-linguistics, and he or she has to be convinced that operations lend themselves to explaining variation. If operations are resistant to variation, then there is nothing for the sociolinguist to explain. In other words, it is emphatically not just a question for sociolinguists, it is also a fundamental problem for all linguists working in the UC tradition.

In all of the above, I am well aware that I am laying myself open to the charge, which has been levelled against me before, that I have contented myself with targetting the hypotheses of other scholars and that I have not put forward any theory of my own. It is a charge which I reject, because I see intellectual pursuits of all natures as a collective endeavour. In order to attain some degree of scientific credibility, the hypotheses on offer must be put to the test. Occasionally, it is the proponents of the hypotheses themselves who carry out this important task; more often than not, however, this is not the case, and it is up to other scholars to do the testing. There is nothing unusual about this procedure in any other discipline, and there is no reason why it should be deemed so in linguistics either.

This article, then, should be seen as an appeal from a UC sceptic to those working within the field to work towards allaying the misgivings sketched out above. To do so, to illustrate that variability in language, not to mention diachronic change, would go some way to making utterer-centred grammatical analysis a more coherent and convincing framework.

As matters stand, I remain unconvinced by the explanatory power of UC linguistics, and am much more amenable to a vision such as that presented by Alessandro Duranti (1997, 397), when he explains: "The conventionality of linguistic systems and their arbitrary nature has often obfuscated their historicity [...] Having a language is like having access to a canvas and thousands of colours. But the canvas and the colours come from the past. They are hand-me-downs." In other words, I am not sure we can ignore the force of history, tradition or what we might call a collective linguistic habitus in explaining the dialectal differences mentioned above.

APPENDIX 1: WEB SITES WITH *I SHALL BE x YEARS OLD...*

1. <http://neuro-www.mgh.harvard.edu/neurowebforum/MoebiusSyndromeArticles/HellofromCanada.html>

My name is Viktoria, and I shall be seventeen next month. I am also affected with Moebius Syndrome, although I was not correctly diagnosed until I was thirteen years old.

on a Moebius Syndrom forum

2. <http://boards2.parentsplace.com/messages/get/ppplayjan99n136/6.html>

The next one (total eclipse) here in England will be in 2081 so I shall be old by then.

on a Parents Forum, newsletter "written" by 7-month old child

3. <http://ag.arizona.edu/classes/aed539/seniors.htm>

I feel that is it is never to late in life to acquire new skills. I shall be seventy-five years next month and hope to be taking classes for the rest of my life, if my health will allow it.

in an interview with an old lady called Joan on a "seniors" site

4. <http://gametz.com/forum/General/topic/8987.html>

I shall be 21 next Month

on a video games site

5. <http://affirmation.org/guestbook1997a.htm>

Last year I informed my husband that I was involved with another woman and found this experience very fulfilling and wanted to continue on this path. I shall be divorced next month, & I am sure excommunication is not far away

in a Guest Book for Gay and Lesbian Mormons (eh, oui!)

6. <http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/c/l/o/Ellen-F-Cloud/FILE/0024page.html?Welcome=987080121>

We have both lived to good old age it can not be long before I shall be laid a long side of your mother the 19th of next month I shall be seventy five years old I am as well as can be expected

in letter written 1826 between members of an Alabaman family

7. <http://www.scholtz.org/bill/ira/remch2.htm>

Let me see, how old are you?" "If I live to see the 25th of next month I shall be 38 years old," was the reply

from "Reminiscences from The Life of a Pioneer by Ira Ayer I

8. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/HOMELIBR/FRANK.TXT>

"Mr. Shelley has become profligate and sensual, owing entirely to Godwin's Political Justice...Next month I shall be confined. He will not be near me.

from suicide note of Harriet Shelley

APPENDIX 2: BRITISH NATIONAL CORPUS RESULTS FOR
I SHALL BE x YEARS OLD...

EEW 212 `Tomorrow I shall be seven.'

In sunshine or in shadow. Bingham, C. London: Bantam (Corgi), 1992, pp. 11-103. 2213 s-units, 29061 words.

CCD 194 Why, by the time Prince Richard is fifteen and considered of an age to really marry, I shall be eighteen.

The child bride. Wiat, Philippa. London: Robert Hale Ltd, 1990, pp. ???. 2669 s-units, 38800 words.

HOF 114 "I shall be seventeen at Christmas, and it's just the hat for Kew."

The green behind the glass. Geras, Adele. UK: Lions Teen Tracks, 1989, pp. 1-118. 4151 s-units, 39999 words.

KE5 396 I shall be forty nine this July

4 conversations recorded by `Wayne' (PS0X2) between 20 and 22 February 1992 with 6 interlocutors, totalling 5118 words, 608 utterances (duration not recorded).

G0Y 2825 `Next year I shall be fifty years old.

Passing on. Lively, P. London: Penguin Group, 1990, pp. 58-178. 3730 s-units, 41781 words.

FYD 388 Yes I shall be eighty one next month.

Nottinghamshire Oral History Project: interview (Leisure). Recorded on [date unknown] with 2 participants, totalling 7491 words, 146 utterances (duration not recorded).

HDK 286 you see and like eighty six, now this year, I shall be eighty seven but you see when it comes to the end of the year, the turn of the year, I'll still be eighty seven

Suffolk Sound Archive: interview (Leisure). Recorded on ?? ?? 1986 with 2 participants, totalling 6445 words, 373 utterances (duration not recorded).

ADI 1861 `In August,' she said suddenly, without changing the direction of her gaze, `next August, I shall be ninety years old.'

Gentleman and ladies. Hill, Susan. London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1969, pp. 5-138. 3417 s-units, 40265 words.

F8N 5 Now I, I often gives in, in schools, and I particularly show that slide because as you can see it goes up to the year twenty forty er now I shall be a hundred and four in the year twenty forty I won't ask you to calculate what age you will be in the year twenty forty it might be quite large erm

Atomic engineering: after-dinner speech (Leisure). Recorded on 11 January 1993 with 6 participants, totalling 5540 words, 37 utterances (duration not recorded).

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