



## FROM CHAMELEON TO TYRANOSAURUS REX - THE SOCIOLINGUIST AS A PREDATOR<sup>1</sup>

*Emilio Pagotto*<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The article discusses the relationship amongst the Theory of Variation and Change and models such as Structuralism and Generative Theory. Against the backdrop of the major controversies that inaugurated the Theory of Variation and Change itself, as well as those surrounding the work of Fernando Tarallo in Brazil, the text addresses the epistemological problem of incorporating hypotheses from other models. It assumes that these theories are incommensurable, and thus non-competing. However, it proposes an epistemological path to overcome the immobility that would result, within the scope of Variationist studies, from the awareness of this incommensurability. Basically, this path consists of taking the portions of language functioning that support the empiricism of such theoretical frameworks – common to the Variationist description – and re-signifying the relationship proposed within the Structural or Generative framework of origin not as the effect of a rule that responds to abstract concepts that only make sense within each frame, but as a force that acts within the scope of the functioning of language.

**KEYWORDS:** Linguistic Variation; Incommensurable Theories; Variable Rule.

### RESUMO

O artigo discute a relação entre a Teoria da Variação e da Mudança e modelos como o do Estruturalismo e da Teoria Gerativa. Tendo como pano de fundo as grandes polêmicas que inauguraram a própria Teoria da Variação e da Mudança, bem como aquelas cercaram o trabalho de Fernando Tarallo no Brasil, o texto aborda o problema epistemológico de incorporar ao quadro descritivo dos processos de variação hipóteses oriundas de outros modelos. Parte do princípio de que estamos diante de teorias não concorrentes, uma vez que são incomensuráveis. Propõe, porém, um caminho epistemológico para superar o imobilismo que resultaria, no âmbito dos estudos variacionistas, da constatação desta incomensurabilidade. Basicamente esse caminho consiste em tomar as porções do funcionamento linguístico que sustentam a empiria de tais quadros teóricos – comuns à descrição variacionista – e ressignificar a relação proposta no interior dos quadros de origem (estruturalista ou gerativista) não como o efeito de uma regra que responde a conceitos abstratos que só fazem sentido no interior de cada quadro, mas como força que age no âmbito do funcionamento da língua.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Variação Linguística; Teorias Incomensuráveis; Regra Variável.

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1 This article was first printed in *Laços – Revista da Associação de Estudos da Linguagem* v. 1 (1), 49-62, Jan /Dec. 2000 (available in Portuguese at [www.nemp-rj.com](http://www.nemp-rj.com)), when the author was a professor at UFSC. Twenty-two years later, it proves to raise an important discussion on the place of the Theory of Language Variation and Change and its necessary dialogue with a linguistic theory, since they are not in competition. They are in completely different worlds, using Pagotto's words, and occupy different spaces.

2 Emilio Pagotto is professor of linguistics at the Language Studies Institute and at the Postgraduate Program in Linguistics of the State University of Campinas. E-mail: [gozzeem@gmail.com](mailto:gozzeem@gmail.com).

## Introduction

There are numerous ways of thinking about what constitutes doing Science. In this century, the Theory of Science, which derives from Epistemology or Theory of Knowledge, has been concerned with discussing how scientific knowledge comes about, whether it evolves and, if it evolves, how it does so. I do not intend to revisit the debate between Variationist Sociolinguistics and Immanent Linguistics from each of these ways of conceiving Science, not least for lack of space and my own ability. What I do intend to do is to look at this debate to try to see the issues much more from the viewpoint of the Theory of Variation and Change than of Structural or Generative Linguistics.

By revealing how the Theory of Variation works and making some adjustments to it, we can evade the – apparently insoluble – dilemma thrown up by its use of the discoveries of Non-Variationist Linguistics and thus escape the immobility that rigid observance of scientific procedure can impose.

One major problem for the Theory of Science is the relationship between theory and empirical evidence. In one way or another, this relationship is the Achilles heel of theory validation, because it would be outlandish to produce Science whose assertions were unrelated to the world. They do bear some relationship; the question is how that relationship is conceived, that is, how it is possible to relate theoretical entities – in principle, the result of reasoning and thus unobservable – with observable entities.

## Labovian Sociolinguistics

Labovian Sociolinguistics can be summarised by the following statements:

- 1) language has a structure that is at the same time autonomous from, and governed by, social structure;
- 2) language comprises both categorical and non-categorical rules;
- 3) the whole process of variation is governed in such a way that both categorical and non-categorical rules are regulated.

Now, Labovian Sociolinguistics seeks to hold the middle ground between Structural or Generative Linguistics and a social perspective on the study of language as regards the way structural relations overlap with each other (and less as regards their ontology, as with Generative Theory, which places Linguistics in Biology).

Labov has been much criticised for not offering a scientific theory for language, as normally conceived; that is, the Theory of Variation is not predictive. It is impossible to know, *a priori*, what to expect from a process of variation, nor when it will begin or end, nor even what structural properties are important to the phenomena of variation. Moreover, if the theory

is not predictive, it cannot be explanatory either, since prediction and explanation overlap in a logical system that endeavours to model the world, assuming interrelations among observed behaviours and between these and the properties and laws described in the model. That is why Labovian Sociolinguistics can be written into the empirical branch of science sponsored by Bacon. First, look at the data and build generalisations about generalisations. Taking the route from Weinreich, Herzog, Labov (1968), through Labov (1981) to Labov (1994), one finds the discoveries being constantly reassessed to find the generalisations that make it possible to formulate more accurate hypotheses about how language functions as regards variation.

However, while that is the path generally taken, discoveries from the field of Non-Variationist Linguistics or even of cognitive psychology are also used, implicitly or explicitly, in formulating specific research and in raising hypotheses that support data observation and treatment. Moreover, in many cases, the descriptive arsenal of these theories is used and is placed on an equal footing with the description of the variation process.

The question that arises is: are variationist and non-variationist linguists talking about the same entities? In other words, are they commensurable? Does that actually produce knowledge or just relate entities that are not relatable and thus not actually produce knowledge? Can the Theory of Variation present itself as a theory in competition with those of Non-Variationist Linguistics (and therefore endeavour to refute such theories) or does the incommensurability between them make that impossible?

I think it is possible to answer some of these questions affirmatively, but others, negatively. Let us start with the latter question.

### **Incommensurable Theories**

The Labovian programme is largely coherent as regards constructing generalisations from various empirical endeavours pursued within the scope of the Theory of Variation and Change. On the other hand, however, there is major oscillation with regard to the theoretical status of these findings. Labov (1972) situated Sociolinguistics within the scope of Theoretical Linguistics, as an extension of it, and proposed only a more refined methodology for confirming hypotheses, as pointed out by Figueroa (1994). Labov (1994) seemed to distance itself from theoretical linguistics, as made explicit by Labov himself, who believed it was not worth investing in theoretical revisions carried out by Non-Variationist Linguistics on the same data, but rather that progress would be made only by discovering new facts. This oscillation in the status of Variationist Sociolinguistics itself has to do precisely with the challenge it proposes, which is nothing less than to challenge the Saussurean dichotomies *langue/parole* and *synchrony/diachrony* at their core. This is an impossible task, in the same way that it is impossible to decide positively what is cultural and what is natural in any phenomenon within the scope of Anthropology. The structuralist solution aims precisely to put the solution on hold, setting itself to discover only those relationships that are accessible. Labov, on the contrary, as pointed out by Figueroa (1994), takes the realistic stance that it is possible to describe the entities of the world,

that is, it is possible to arrive at the truth, at some point, by successive advances.

The Theory of Variation and Change, Structural Linguistics and Generative Theory are incommensurable. As a result, the former cannot position itself as a competitor with the others, so as to prove itself to be truer, because they speak of different entities. This means that language is not the same to a variationist as to a structuralist and it is not the same as to a generativist. To structuralists, language is a system of relationships between abstract entities, which are constructed by the theory itself and are supposed to have correlates in the real world. Generative Theory, meanwhile, is a modelling of the speaker's brain, confirmation of which is unattainable; what makes the theory plausible is its fit with a certain set of data, which are predicted by the theory itself and which, if confirmed, are conceived in a broader explanatory system. Both cases involve a set of unobservable entities and a system in which they are engendered that guarantees the explanatory nature of the theory (this applies more to Generative Theory, as it is questionable whether Structuralism is explanatory in nature). The entities that the Theory of Variation works with are, to begin with, those observable by perception and by technological devices. This is not to say that the Theory of Variation does not operate with idealisations and a structuralist notion of language. Labovian variation is structurally conceived and, just as in Structuralism, the speaking subject is constrained by the system, much more than an agent of it. Labovian Structuralism even comprises unobservable entities – variables – whose status is very difficult to specify. In the same way as phonemes in Structuralism, variables are the invariants of the sociolinguistic system, as the place where observable entities – variants – are equal. This structuralising view is what allows the Theory of Variation to position itself in the intermediate space between Structural Linguistics or Generative Theory and a social perspective on the study of language. To variationists, the system varies, but it is a system of invariants (without the latter notion, the phenomenon of variation as conceived by the theory would be inconceivable).

These theories – the Theory of Variation and Linguistic Structuralism – are very close then (the case of Generative Theory is more complicated, because the distance is much greater). The incommensurability resides particularly in the fact that, in the former, the variables are two-sided – linguistic and social – entities. As such, they are necessarily different from the entities of Structuralism, which are only linguistic. The notion of *phoneme*, for instance, is not co-extensive with that of *variable*. If it were, then the Theory of Variation would be a linguistics of *parole*, while Structural Linguistics would continue with its object, *langue*. But it is not this complementary view that Labov wants; on the contrary, he insists on liquefying the dichotomy. To do so, he has to deal with entities of another kind. The incommensurability is such that, when it comes to opposing structuralist or generativist hypotheses to a certain set of data found by variationists, all that structuralist or generativist theorists have to do is remake some aspects of the model and their theory is preserved. Accordingly, it is impossible for the Theory of Variation and Change to compete with either Structuralism or Generative Theory. They inhabit different worlds.

## **Where we are talking about the same things**

The previous section leaves a certain unease, because it entails that any attempt at dialogue between the immanent Linguistics and the Theory of Variation is doomed to failure. Moreover, that endeavour would produce no knowledge, because it would be like saying phrases such as *Money is a word that causes great social differences*, meaning that ‘Money causes great social differences’. Here, I would like to invest in the opposite direction, that is, to escape the immobility imposed by incommensurability, to a position where it is possible to make sense dealing with incommensurable theories. I will not be talking about the possibility of the Theory of Variation and Change surpassing the immanentist theories of language, because they are incommensurable, but of the Theory of Variation’s appropriation of knowledge accumulated by those theories – or, more specifically, parts of that knowledge.

This takes practical form when variationists transform properties discovered by these theories into hypotheses to be examined against the dataset they are analysing – or, more properly, in their formulating groups of factors to be tested as possibly conditioning the variation process.

Firstly, I would say that the biggest mistake is to think that the work of the variationist confirms or does not confirm the theory from which they originated. The variationist does not “confirm” Clements’ Feature Geometry or Generative Theory’s Prodrop Parameter or “prove them to be untrue”. Appropriation of these hypotheses rests on a resignification of some property discovered by these theories, without which the work of the variationist would make no sense. This gesture comprises perhaps three very important steps:

Recognising, at the observable level, which predicted entities are the same for both Non-Variationist Linguistics and the Theory of Variation;

Being clear that a rule postulated by a theory such as Generative Theory is not a real-world entity, but an abstraction of the model;

Transforming a property described by a rule of one or another theory into a *conditioning factor*. This entails a completely different view of the property and accordingly a different kind of entity.

The first stage concerns a kind of established convention – that is not made explicit and, if you like, goes back to the Greeks. All contemporary linguistics of whatever cast works by recognising that speech can be segmented on the phonic, morphological and syntactic levels. In that regard, we are all talking about the same things. You may operate with the idea that morphology is subordinated to syntax or not. This will make you see morphemes in one way or another, but you would hardly deny that words have meaning-bearing parts. You may, like Generative Phonology, work with the idea that features are the first entities of the system or, like Feature Geometry, that these features are hierarchical, but any of these theories will have to make room somewhere for phonic units, because they exist. Recognising these entities that

are common to all the theories does not necessarily mean that they have the same empirical basis. A theory's empirical basis – or the observable statements and entities that corroborate it – will vary according to the predictions each one makes – which, once again, contributes to the incommensurability of the theories, especially as regards Variationist Sociolinguistics and Structuralism and, to a greater extent, Generative Theory.

However, the fact that some of these entities do coincide leads to the belief that, at least in some respects, we are trying to describe the same entities that exist in language. It is the system they form that will not be the same.

Secondly are the laws that these theories postulate to account for certain behaviour by these observable entities. When linguists formulate a law or a rule, they are first highlighting a relationship that is not immediately observable, formulating a working model of the world in which a certain property is stated as plausibly existing. To that end, they postulate both unobservable entities (phonemes, features) and properties that relate these entities (assimilation of a feature, agreement relationship), which predict correlated behaviour in their empirical base. When variationists take this law to be a group of factors, they assume, in the first place, that the observable entities are the same (the acoustic segment realisation, for example, or, in the case of morphosyntax, one morphological form and not another). Secondly, they are admitting that there is a certain property involved in the behaviour of these observable entities that relates them to one another.

From there, it is then necessary to re-signify this property. Firstly, deriving from a theoretical framework within which it was conceived, it arises from the more general laws postulated by that framework. The Theory of Variation and Change is not – and cannot be – committed to this larger picture. If the law is taken as it is formulated and believe in the empirical reality of the unobservable entities and in the exact way the property is stated, its work of interpretation is rendered meaningless. In other words, we need to establish precisely what we mean when we say that such a property constitutes a *group of conditioning factors*, which is usually interpreted as a kind of **force** that impels the variant forms. The concept of **force** or pressure is incompatible with the concept of **rule** in Generative Theory or Structuralist Linguistics. **Force** relates to dynamic processes; **rule**, to static relationships. Perhaps we should shy from the notion of force and think about function, on a mathematical view (which, incidentally, is the view of the mathematical model used as a tool for the work of description), but that is not clear to me at the moment.

That clarity is necessary, especially because groups of factors from different theoretical frameworks tend to be listed for the same process of variation. If the relations described by these theoretical frameworks are taken literally, we are condemned not to make any sense or come to a dead end, because the unobservable entities and the rules postulated by these frameworks are different. When we take such hypotheses and apply them to the data, what we recognise is that

there is a property relating the observable entities that we take – and they are the same, but we don't know where this property is nor what it actually is.

Because of this, it is obvious that the Theory of Variation needs to advance somewhat in its theoretical formulation and to specify the status of the groups of factors more clearly, so that the explanatory level of the theory advances ‘in relation to the descriptive level. Otherwise, others will do this in the future.

### **Final remarks**

In an article that caused considerable controversy a few years ago, Fernando Tarallo (1986) compared the sociolinguist to Zelig, the chameleon (a Woody Allen character inspired in a famous psychiatric patient, who assimilated the personality of whoever he engaged with. Tarallo said that the sociolinguist is half-chameleon, needing to assume the most diverse shades of theory in order to account for the phenomenon of variation. His stance was heavily criticised for a certain levity that occasioned a lack of scientific rigor and the irrationality that it betrayed (cf. Borges Neto and Paula Muller, 1987). In a more recent article, Rajagopalan (1993), commenting on this position set out by Tarallo (1986), called attention to the fact that there could be something worthwhile to this non-orthodoxy, if considered in the light of “casuistry”, according to Josen and Toulmin (1988), because it made allowance for the hesitations that are necessary when addressing the mysteries of language.

I do not think the chameleon image is the most appropriate. Variationist sociolinguists are not beings who take on the personality of one theorist or another. The sociolinguist is a predator – a tyrannosaurus rex – that devours and metabolises its prey theory, recasting and resignifying its precious flesh, transforming matter into energy, in the endeavour to perceive, albeit intuitively, that matter and energy can be the same “thing”.

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